

Top Ten for Mental Health Brain Protection for College Students Julie Kosnik Hersh

Mental illness, like many diseases, is a prime example of “what comes first?” Do genetics cause mental illness or does the environment breed it? The answer is both. How we react to our environment determines our mental health, oftentimes more than the environment itself. We’ve all seen one person devastated by failure or disappointment, while another person uses that same situation as motivation for future success. As Charles Darwin said: “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is that one that is the most adaptable to change.”

When I arrived a freshman at the University of Notre Dame in 1978, I was frightened I might flunk out or gain 15 pounds. Depression or mental illness didn’t blip on my radar of concerns. During January of 1979, because of a series of issues, I plunged into a depression that caused my GPA to drop from a 3.4 to 2.2, and left me feeling miserable for most of my first two years in college. Knowing myself now, over 30 years later, I’ve developed a list of my list of the top ten things I could have done to preserve my mental and physical health. This list may not work for everyone, but it can be used as a catalyst to create a wellness list of your own.

1. **Sleep.** As a college freshman, I skimmed on sleep. Late night studies, parties and anxiety eroded sleep until insomnia became a problem. During sleep, the more abstract, primitive portion of the brain is more highly engaged than when awake. Without sleep, a person may be tossing aside a natural power tool for solving emotional and complex problems. Ironically, an all-nighter to cram for a test makes the brain less flexible to handle that unique twist in an exam that most college professors use to assess knowledge. 90% of people with Major Depressive Disorder report sleep issues. Chronic insomnia is common among those who have attempted suicide. In [A Lifelong Journey](#), Sarah Russell identified habits of people who had successfully managed bipolar disease for over three years. First on the list for healthy behavior: sleep.
2. **Nutrition. If needed, take a vitamin D supplement.** Gluten and sugar have been cited as contributors to depression, often staples in a college diet. Sudden weight gain or loss can indicate depression, as well as loss of appetite. I’m convinced that Seasonal Affect Disorder (SAD - caused by lack of sunlight and a Vitamin D deficiency) played a part in my depression. I try to get 15 minutes of unprotected sunlight every day. SAD lamps or Vitamin D supplements can be helpful, but always check with a physician first. Overuse of either lamps or supplements can cause other unintended problems.
3. **Exercise.** Studies by Dr. Madhukar Trivedi from UT Southwestern show that even a small amount of exercise (150 minutes per week) can reduce or sometimes eliminate depression. Exercise also increases the effectiveness of antidepressants and those who maintain an exercise program relapse at half the rate of those who do not exercise. When I was in school, due to an injury, I abandoned running which fed my depressive spiral. Now if I’m injured, I compensate with another form of exercise. Even a brisk walk every day helps. [Spark](#) by John Ratey provides more information on exercise and brain function.
4. **Be aware the impact of alcohol/drugs or other medications on your brain. If psychiatric medication is prescribed, take it regularly.** Not everyone needs medication for mental health, but everyone needs to understand the impact of alcohol and drugs on brain function. Alcohol is a depressant, impacting dopamine in the brain. If you have a tendency to be depressed, alcohol or illegal drugs only compounds the impact of depression.

During my freshman and sophomore year of college, alcohol played a large role every weekend. Despite my small size, I attempted to match my male counterparts drink for drink. My junior year, I began dating a young man who was a recovered alcoholic. I still drank occasionally, but never at the levels of my earlier college experience. My depression completely disappeared for the remainder of college. Coincidence? Knowing what I know now about my body’s challenge with dopamine, I have little doubt that reduction of alcohol helped reduce my depression.

Many college students take medications for acne treatment, weight loss or smoking cessation. These medications can cause a quick and severe drop into depression. These problems are indicated in the fine print of these products, but often overlooked. If someone has

recently started a medication (especially one containing steroids) and sees a dramatic shift of mood, consult a physician immediately. Oftentimes, just stopping the medication can immediately eliminate depression.

In 1979, effective antidepressants weren't available. Psychiatry has made huge advances in the past 30 years, and often even severe forms of mental illness can be managed with medication. I take an antidepressant (which happens to be dopamine-based) on a daily basis. Many people stop their medication as soon as their brains stabilize, only to see their depression reemerge. I did this in 2005. I relapsed and learned the hard way that a small bit of medication (combined with the other actions on this list) creates a preventative buffer against a potentially deadly level of depression.

5. **Feed your brain with courses that excite you.** A happy brain is a more productive brain. Obviously, there are some courses that are difficult and necessary for a specific degree, but try to balance those courses with ones that inspire. My GPA bounced from 2.2 back to Dean's List with a few elective courses. Strangely enough, I aced Quantitative Methods when I struggled with Statistics in the prior year. The difference? I took my electives in areas that ignited my interest (e.g., Poetry Writing, Mysticism). The courses that excited my brain unlocked my overall brain function.
6. **Avoid romantic relationships that exclude friendships.** At ND, I always had a boyfriend. Part of this was survival. With a 5:1 ratio back in those days, a woman felt a little like Bambi at the start of hunting season. A boyfriend provided security and protection, until of course, the relationship ended. I tended to have a boyfriend and adopt his friends. When we broke up, I lost my boyfriend and my social network. If I had a do-over, I would spend more time developing my friendships with other women.
7. **Get a mentor.** Someone 10 years or more older can act as a sounding board when problems are small and easily solved. In college, everyone is about the same age, causing the problems of that age group to escalate out of proportion. An older person could have helped me maintain a sense of humor about the problems I faced. One of my most valued friends today is an 86 year-old man who helps me keep my 54 year-old worries in check.
8. **Allow time for introspection.** Call this prayer, journaling, meditation, or chill time. I never allowed enough time for this. I do best when I spend some time by myself, offline, where I breathe and acknowledge that I am part of a world that extends beyond my own body and needs.
9. **Plan proactively for a health crisis and know the signs of depression.** Store the number for the student counseling center in your phone. Drop by the counseling center when you are well, just so you know where it is. If you wait until you are depressed to find out where you can get help, oftentimes you won't have the energy to find help. Know the signs of depression so you can recognize them in yourself or others. Check out this list from the Grant Halliburton Foundation: <http://www.granthalliburton.org/knowthesigns.html>. Here is a 24-hour number for support: 1-800-873-TALK.
10. **Remember that your value is more than what you do.** High achieving college students don't typically plan for failure. When failure happens, shock sets in. Some of us compound failure by extending the reach of an incident. A simple breakup escalates to "I'm unlovable, I'll never marry" or a bad grade into "I'm stupid, I'll never amount to anything." Often the moments we believe to be the worst in our lives become the turning point to a better path we never imagined. Unfortunately, we often only see the path in retrospect. In the gray period of uncertainty, try to remember that you have value just in being. You might not believe this axiom for a few more decades. I certainly didn't at your age. I wish I had. I would have worried about far less and laughed a lot more. This lesson humbles us, yet frees us to pursue our passions in the same instant.

My university life included 2.5 phenomenal years. For the other 1.5 years, I was okay to miserable. If I had understood myself better then, my depressive episode could have been shorter and less severe. Hopefully this information will help others maximize their college experience.

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