

# COPING WITH THE STRESS OF GRADUATION

## Introduction

### Focus

Graduating from high school and moving on to college or university can be a very stressful experience for many Canadian students. This *News in Review* story looks at the stress of graduation and what can be done about this significant transition in a young person's life.

It's like everything hits you at once in your graduating year: college and university applications, maintaining or improving your grades, earning your diploma, juggling a part-time job, clubs, sports, and wondering where the money is going to come from to pay for your future education. (And we haven't even mentioned the prom and all of the stress that accompanies that event). Couple this with personal issues such as peer pressure, body image worries, and struggles with parents and it becomes pretty clear that graduation year is often very stressful.

The need for good grades is more important than ever, competition to get into certain programs is steeper, and it costs a great deal of money to attend a post-secondary educational institution. The average university tuition fee for Canadian students runs at just over \$5 000 per year (with Ontario students paying close to \$7 000 to go to university). College tuition runs about 30 per cent less than that. But when you add the costs of residence, food, books, and living expenses, today's student is on the hook for up to \$20 000 per school year. Even students living at home can see their costs climb toward the \$10 000 mark, depending on how much their parents chip in. According to Statistics Canada, the average student will owe almost \$19 000 when they graduate from college or university. If a student lives away from home, the Toronto Dominion Bank estimates that the total cost of earning a

diploma or degree will be \$80 000.

But if you talk to most students, it's not the money that stresses them out—it's the competition to get high marks. Students need to earn at least a 70 per cent average to gain admission into most college and university programs. But professional programs such as engineering, architecture, and health science require an average of over 90 per cent to get an offer. The number of students who can achieve these grades is, in the grand scheme of things, miniscule. Most students will struggle to earn an 80 with the knowledge that an 85 will get them into the majority of Canada's post-secondary institutions.

Nonetheless, it appears that most students are finding a way to make the grade. Enrolment at colleges and universities is quite good, with around half of Canada's high school graduates getting into a post-secondary program. However, the dark side of great enrollment numbers is that a shocking number of students are collapsing under the pressure. Campus mental health services have been overwhelmed with students suffering from panic, anxiety, and depression—leaving many to wonder if the pressure to get high marks and succeed has a negative, long-term impact on students.

This situation has left high school, college, and university administrations struggling to help stressed-out teens who are having trouble coping with their lives.

### To Consider

1. Do you think the cost of education is preventing bright students from low-income families from attending university?
2. What is the most stressful issue for today's students in their graduating year?
3. Why do you think there seems to be a higher number of students using mental health services while they are attending college or university?

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## Video Review

### Pre-viewing Activity

List five things that stress you out about leaving high school and going to college or university. Put them in order from most stressful to least stressful. Discuss your list with a partner before watching the video.

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### Viewing Questions

Record your responses in the space provided.

1. According to the students of Glen Forest Secondary School in Mississauga, what was the hardest part about being a high school student?

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2. Besides trying to keep up with his schoolwork, what other challenges does Daniel Tulla have to deal with? Does this put him at a competitive disadvantage?

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3. a) How does Shannon Devereaux plan to pay for the exclusive university program she was accepted into?

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b) How does she plan to get to and from school?

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c) How much will her program cost?

4. Why is Rachel Chen terrified that she might not be able to achieve her goals? Why is her road to success more difficult than that of most of her friends?

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5. What does North Toronto Collegiate student Ashkhan Tabib think is the average mark needed to be considered for most university programs? Do you think he is right?

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6. a) According to Joel Gorenkoff, the principal of North Toronto Collegiate, where is the pressure to succeed coming from?

b) What program did Gorenkoff and his staff introduce to help students deal with their stress?

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c) Why do many people feel the stress-buster program is so important for students?

7. What mental health concerns seem to be popping up more often in secondary schools, according to social worker Jean Middlebrook?

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8. What does Ashkahn Tabib mean when he says, "After getting into university, it's all the scholarships that start haunting you"?

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### Post-viewing Questions

In the video, Glen Forest student Daniel Tulla says the hardest part of moving on is "the fear that I might not make it."

1. Is this a fear that you share with Daniel?

2. If you share this fear, why do you doubt your ability to succeed?

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3. If you don't share this fear, what gives you the confidence to know you are going to make it?

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## Student Concerns

### Before Reading

1. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 1 meaning not concerned at all and 5 meaning extremely concerned) how concerned are you about your marks? Explain your choice.
2. How much do you think college or university is going to cost you? How will you pay for your post-secondary education?
3. What career do you hope to pursue after you have finished school?

### Concern #1 – Grades

Competition to get into certain programs can be fierce:

School	Program	Admission Average
Carleton University	Journalism	85 to 88
McGill University	Architecture	91.3
McMaster University	Health Science	90+
Queen's University	Nursing	87+
University of British Columbia	Arts	Mid to high 80s
University of Calgary	Neurosciences	90
University of Toronto	Engineering Science	Low to mid 90s

Students feel overwhelming pressure to earn high grades to open as many doors as possible when it comes to college and university programs. Some will even go to extreme lengths to make their mark transcript as appealing as possible to the schools they are courting.

In the fall of 2011, the *Toronto Star* published a series of stories on “credit mills.” A credit mill is a provincially certified private school that grants remarkably high grades in high school courses to underachieving students. The *Star* series focused on one Toronto private school that offered a Grade 12 chemistry class to students looking to upgrade their marks over the summer. Working undercover as a student,

reporter Jennifer Yang received a mark of 85 even though she didn’t study, never did her homework, and failed almost all of her tests. In fact, she went into the final exam with a 60 average and, based on the course mark breakdown, could only have earned a maximum of 72 per cent if she was perfect on the final exam. However, when she received her final mark it was an 85 (“Slacking off gets high marks at this ‘high school,’” September 16, 2011).

While the vast majority of students would not turn to credit mills to get high grades, their very existence demonstrates the lengths to which some will go to get the exceptional marks they think they need to get into college and university.

### To Consider

1. What lengths would you go to get higher marks?
2. Do you know anyone who has ever cheated on a test or assignment to get a better grade? Why do you think they did it?
3. Why are credit mills ineffective in getting students ready for the academic challenges of college and university?

## Concern #2 – Tuition

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives studied the rising cost of tuition and managed to summarize how drastically the cost of higher education has escalated over the years. In their report “Under pressure: The impact of rising tuition fees on Ontario families” they claimed, “If tuition fees and other compulsory fees are adjusted for inflation, Ontario students have witnessed a 244 per cent real tuition fee increase between 1990 and 2011”

(Alexandra Pozadski, September 22, 2011).

In the 2010-2011 school year, Ontario university students paid \$6 640, the highest tuition fees in Canada. It seems that the only provinces willing to reign in tuition costs are Quebec (\$2 519) and Newfoundland and Labrador (\$2 649). In 2010, Statistics Canada reported that the ongoing increase in the cost of education would result in an average student debt of \$18 800 upon graduation (*The Daily*, September 16, 2011).

## To Consider

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives claims that if every family was taxed \$100, tuition fees could be rolled back to 1990 levels. Do you think this is a good idea? Is it something the Canadian government should pursue?

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## Concern #3 – Future Employment

The Great Recession has many parents worried about the employment options available to their children after college or university. With an unemployment rate of just over 7 per cent in September 2011, and markets still uncertain, parents hope that the post-secondary programs their children are selecting will lead to fruitful careers. Meanwhile, many students hold a combination of optimism about their future and an underlying fear that they won't be able to get a job.

That's why it is important for students to determine the relationship between the program they are taking in college or university and their potential career options. According to Lindsey Pollak, the author of *Getting from College to Career: 90 Things to Do Before You Join the Real World*, here are some of the most common mistakes people make when choosing a career:

1. Saying “I Can't.”: Make sure you have solid, verifiable reasons to demonstrate why you can or cannot do something. Never say you can't when you really can.
2. Expecting Too Much Money: Don't pick a job just for the money. Many seasoned professionals leave well-paying jobs for work that is more personally fulfilling.
3. Doing What Others Expect: Try to make your own career decision and not the one your parents either want or you think they want.
4. Going It Alone: Ask for help when you need it. Don't ask people to solve your problems but ask them for help so that you can solve your own problems. You will need advice.

Source: “Proceed with caution: Mistakes to avoid in career planning,” by Mark Rowh. *Career World*, April-May 2008.

## To Consider

Which of the common mistakes do you think most people make? Why do you think that they are more apt to make this mistake?

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## **Generation Stressed!!!**

### **Did you know . . .**

You can reduce the negative impacts of stress through physical activity.

### **To Consider**

There are positive and negative ways to deal with stress. Positive strategies include breathing exercises or using time management techniques. Negative strategies include eating junk food or smoking. What types of strategies do you use to deal with stress? Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies that you use.

### **Coping with Transitions**

Any life transition can be stressful, but the transition from high school to college or university seems to be creating very high levels of stress for today's teens. Recent studies have demonstrated that one of every four students who visits college and university campus health clinics is showing symptoms of clinical depression and experiencing suicidal thoughts. But are these students more stressed than those of the past? Or are they just more willing to talk about their anxiety and depression?

The problem starts well before young people transition into post-secondary education. Many students feel they are under constant pressure in high school. This pressure seems to come from a desire to be popular and successful and, more specifically, to achieve high grades.

Some observers believe that part of this stress is a result of parenting styles today—in particular, “over-parenting,” where parents micro-manage every aspect of their kids lives. In an interview with *The Hamilton Spectator*, author Don Peck outlined the negative effects of over-parenting: “Trained since childhood to disconnect performance from reward, and told repeatedly that they are destined for great things, many [young people] are quick to place blame elsewhere when something goes wrong and inclined to believe that bad situations will sort themselves out—or will be sorted out by parents or other helpers” (August 15, 2011). Peck is worried that “helicopter

parenting”—where parents swoop in and make every conceivable decision for their children—is damaging kids to the point where even the smallest life choice is seen as overwhelming.

He's not alone in his beliefs. In her book *The Price of Privilege*, psychologist Madeline Levine maintains that kids who grow up in homes where their lives are micromanaged by their parents leave the nest virtually paralyzed when it comes to making their own decisions. In essence, their highly scheduled lives negate the opportunity for downtime and introspection, leading to a heightened state of anxiety and depression. San Diego State University's Jean Twenge agrees with this position in her book *Generation Me*. She claims that over-parenting shelters kids from reality, leading to the development of false optimism in young people. As a result, “When things don't happen the way they expect, they can hit anxiety and depression” (*Maclean's*, April 2011).

This seems to be the case when many students reach college and university and have a significant amount of trouble coping with the pressures of post-secondary education. The mental health clinic at McGill University in Montreal was swamped with 18 000 visitors in the 2010-2011 school year. The University of Western Ontario in London reported a 20 per cent increase in counselling appointments over an 18-month period starting in 2010. Meanwhile, Queen's University in Kingston reported

being overwhelmed with requests for psychological and stress-related counselling in the aftermath of six student deaths in a 14-month span (four to suicide, two to alcohol-related incidents).

### **Self-Imposed Stress?**

So what's the problem? In an article for *Toronto Life* focusing on the deaths at Queen's, Jan Wong mused that kids going to post-secondary institutions today feel they are entitled to an A in every course. The reality is that few get straight As. And when this happens, many students do not have the coping strategies to handle their disappointment (September 2011).

Wong identifies self-imposed stress and perfectionism working in tandem with the false optimism created by helicopter parenting. In effect, when

young people make it out of high school and into college or university, they are faced with the regular academic and social stress that accompanies this transition. But because they are not used to dealing with stress on their own, this regular stress proves overwhelming. Some even turn to their parents to sort out their problems with the college or university—which is shocking to many post-secondary administrators because legally they are obligated to deal with the adult student (not their parents).

It doesn't matter if problems are surfacing because of a surge in stress, over-parenting, or some other societal factor. What does matter is that colleges and universities are struggling to keep up with the demand for mental health services. In a sense, they are not quite sure what to do about "generation stressed."

### **Follow-up**

1. Do you think the transition from high school to post-secondary education is as overwhelming as everybody keeps saying? Or are people just allowing themselves to get psyched out?
2. Whose opinion do you most agree with: Don Peck, Madeline Levine, Jean Twenge, or Jan Wong? Why?
3. Do you believe that over-parenting is a problem contributing to student stress?
4. How should colleges and universities respond to the growing demand for mental health services? What if expanding these service would mean a tuition hike?



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## *Advice from Your Teachers*

### Focus for Reading

Create a chart like the one below into your notebook, leaving space for your thoughts and comments. Fill in the chart as you read the article.

Advice	Summary	How the Advice Applies to Me
1. Know your strengths and weaknesses		
2. Work hard, skip the excuses		
3. Knowledge is power		
4. Always have a Plan B		
5. Remember: It's your future		

Teachers have an extensive background in post-secondary education and know what needs to be done to be successful after high school. Here's a summary of advice from teachers:

#### **1. Know your strengths and weaknesses**

Your grades are an indicator of your strengths and weaknesses. So is the verbal feedback you get from teachers and parents regarding the things you are good at and those you are not. Take these indicators seriously. Don't get too full of yourself regarding your strengths and don't beat yourself up over your weaknesses.

As a general rule, if you tend to do well in math and science (and you enjoy those courses), consider pursuing a post-secondary program that features one of those subject areas. Similarly, if you struggle with math and science, it wouldn't be a good idea to pursue these subjects beyond high school. There are a surprisingly large number of students who enrol in programs based on the

advice of well-meaning parents and friends that have no bearing on what a particular student is good at or enjoys.

#### **2. Work hard, skip the excuses**

Teachers often say, "If students spent as much time doing their homework as they do making excuses, they would all have incredible marks." This is a facetious way of encouraging you to work hard to get good grades and avoid a "dog ate my homework" mentality. School gets progressively more difficult from grade 9 through to grade 12. The curriculum is designed to build on previous knowledge so that you have a strong foundation established before you head off to college or university. Students with poor work habits will likely see their marks drop—often most dramatically in grade 12. Believing that you can slack off in grades 9, 10, and 11 and then suddenly pull one out of the hat in grade 12 is tantamount to dreaming.

Typically, student marks tend to stay the same or go up or down by around three per cent from one school year to



the next. In other words, if you earned a 65 in grade 11, you are likely to either stay at 65 or move to a 62 or a 68 (with an outside chance of hitting 70) in grade 12. It is hard work—not magic or miracles—that is going to get you what you want. And if your marks are lower than you might like, get help from your teacher or get a tutor. That said, make sure you apply to schools that fit your academic average. For example, students with a 70 average should not apply for a program with an acceptance average of 95 per cent.

This information is not given to discourage you if your marks are on the low side. Instead it is designed to encourage you to devote the time to improve your skills so that post-secondary education is not overwhelming. Education is a process. There is no magic pill that allows a person to instantly get high marks. Encouraging students to work hard, avoid excuses, and overcome gaps in skill is simply solid, realistic advice.

### **3. Knowledge is power**

While your friends are a valuable source of some information, they are often among the worst when it comes to accurate information concerning post-secondary education. If a friend starts a sentence with, “Well, I heard . . .” be very cautious about believing what they say next. If you want accurate information about education beyond high school, the best place to start is with your guidance counsellor. Ask questions, seek clarification, show initiative—and your guidance counsellor can help you as you go.

Keep a few things in mind: the application process for colleges and universities is usually the same from year to year. Familiarize yourself with the process—especially the deadlines. As a general rule, the opportunity to apply

to a post-secondary institution does not present itself until mid to late fall. Application deadlines tend to happen early in the New Year, with offers being extended in the spring.

In terms of selecting a program, do your research. Find out what a given area of study has to offer. Determine whether or not you have taken (or should take) certain prerequisite courses and whether your marks are high enough to gain acceptance into the program. Go for a campus tour. While you can never be 100 per cent certain that a program is perfect, you will have a reasonably good feeling that a program is a good fit. Apply for that program and, when you accept the school’s offer, don’t second guess your decision.

### **4. Always have a Plan B**

It doesn’t matter if you think you will definitely get into a program, you should always have a Plan B. There is a chance that the school you want to go to may not extend you an offer. This may be the first significant rejection you have experienced in your life; don’t let it crush you! Rejection and failure are a part of life. The sooner you learn to adapt to these setbacks, the better off you’ll be. Michael Jordan, one of the greatest basketball players ever, was cut from his high school basketball team. Instead of wallowing in self pity, he used the disappointment as motivation to improve his game. There are many routes you can take to reach your goals. Have a Plan B ready in the event of a setback so that you can move ahead—just like Michael Jordan did.

### **5. Remember: It’s your future**

Choosing a post-secondary program may be the first major life decision you will make. The bottom line: it needs to be your decision and not the decision of your parents or friends. *This is a decision*

*you need to own.* Often students panic and wonder whether they make the right choice. But can you really make a “wrong decision”? If you pick a program that isn’t for you, you can make a change. Isn’t it better to switch programs after a year or two than to wait and discover 10 years into a job that you hate

that you need a career change? Decide on the program that fits your ambitions, own the decision, and adjust your educational path later if things don’t pan out the way you thought.

Source: “State of unreadiness,” by Sandy Farran (*Maclean’s* November 19, 2007)

## **Analysis**

1. Which piece of advice do you feel is the most valuable? Which is the least valuable? Explain your choices.
2. Did the advice given set your mind at ease or did it only serve to stress you out even more? If it helped, explain how the advice helped. If it stressed you out, describe the source of your stress.

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## **Activity: Focus on You**

### **Step One – What do you want to do?**

Your first task is to figure out what you want to study. Visit the guidance office in your school and gather as much information as you can about the post-secondary options you want to pursue. Look through calendars of various colleges and universities and see what grabs your attention. Find five programs that you think you would like to apply for.

### **Step Two – Narrow your search**

Now get more specific. Consider the courses you have most enjoyed over the course of your high school years as an indicator of a potential area of study for you to pursue. Are these preferences reflected in your program choices? After careful consideration, trim your list to three and proceed to the next step.

### **Step Three – What do I need to do to get into these programs?**

Research the three programs and fill out a chart based on the following sample:

Name of Program	Pre-requisite Courses	Cut-off Average	Other Applications Considerations (e.g., portfolio)

### **Step Four – Pick a program**

Based on your research, determine the top program for you. Now conduct some follow-up research:

- How much will the program cost in tuition? How much will your parents contribute? How much will you contribute? How much will you have to acquire through student loans?
- How much will residence cost if you decide to live on campus? How much will your food and other living expenses cost you?
- How much will it cost to commute to and from school?
- Which courses will you have to take in first year?
- How many hours do you think you will have to spend studying to stay on top of your course work?
- Which books will you have to purchase? How much will they cost?

### **Step Five – Careers**

What career options do you have as a result of the program you selected? What will your income likely be? How long will it take you to pay off your student loans? (If your parents are paying for everything THANK THEM NOW!)

### **Step Six—Evaluation**

This exercise should have relieved some of your stress. Did it help to work your way through the process? Keep in mind: if you were unhappy with the outcome of your research you can go back to step one and find another program. The key is to find the program that fits you best.