Campus Activism: Beginning with Self-Care

Mental health issues — anxiety, depression — are huge problems around the country. This is something that a lot of college students can testify to firsthand.

The pressure put on college students is overwhelming. Stress levels at colleges has been increasingly rising (the American Health Association reported this recently), which could be due to rising financial costs among a whole host of things. A lot of people are talking about this because recently a new course at Yale, called “Happiness,” became the most popular course in the history of that school. (UMass does have a course called the “Science of Happiness” that didn’t make The New York Times, but I am excited to take it).

Here at such a big university, you have to be able to advocate for yourself and take steps to get help when it’s needed — and often that is not an easy thing to do. There’s also an enormous amount of obstacles in the way of enjoying your time and “loving yourself more than Kanye loves Kanye,” as you should. This stops you from reaching what everyone tells you that college is here to provide; the cliche epiphany where you “find yourself” and determine who you really want to be. You can’t make a positive impact on the world around you if you aren’t happy.

(Side note: If you watch She’s Gotta Have It on Netflix, or even if you don’t, check out the real artist behind Nola’s artwork — Tatyana Fazlalizadeh)
This past week, me and my roommate have been trying to find ways to readjust to the college lifestyle after being home for a month, meaning getting out of bed at a reasonable hour and preparing ourselves for the upcoming semester. My newest form of self-care is morning yoga classes. Now that the earliest class I have is at 10:00 a.m., I can make it to the Rec Center for morning yoga classes on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. As of now, this plan is only theoretical. I spent all of last week hyping this yoga class up to my friends and convincing them to go, and this morning I refused to get out of bed and they all went without me — reminding me as they left that “This was all your idea, Claire,” so “It really is sad that you're the only one not going, Claire.”

It’s hard in college to balance and navigate your priorities when you constantly seem to have to choose between important things: sleep or exercise, social or academic success, extracurriculars or anything I’ve previously listed. You have to budget your own time, and you have to force yourself to take risks. Lately, all I’ve been wanting to do is lay in bed and rewatch the entire series of Psych, because it just came out on Amazon Prime and my student free trial is about to expire.

Aside from daily time management and course load stress, here are a lot of other serious issues students face, like mounting debt and challenges from their home lives and relationships.

In addition, I can only imagine the additional pressure of being a minority student, international student, or first-gen college student at a PWI. My friends have described walking into their classes as walking into seas of white people. I had a long conversation with a friend of mine the other day about how frustrated she feels not having any teachers of color. I don’t experience this, but I can relay second-hand that this pressure and frustration is hard, and can take it's mental toll on a student.

College students joke about stress and pressure every day, but it can be a very serious weight, especially at such a big state school where campus resources aren't in your face.

**A Couple of Light Suggestions/ Small Things That Have Helped Me:**

- **Exercise:**

  Take my yoga morning classes idea, but don’t beat yourself up if you want to stay in bed. They have night yoga classes too. The Rec Center has awesome classes that would cost so much money anywhere else, but you’re basically already paying for it, so you should take advantage of them.

- **Eat healthy**

- **Carry around a full water bottle**

- **Hype yourself up every once in a while over the small things you do**
• Stay off Netflix:

Netflix is a dark hole I find myself in every time I have other work to do (like now with my *Psych* rerun that I don’t have time for). For me, it’s a way of relieving stress. However, it’s an artificial form of stress relief and at the end of my episodes, none of my stress has been managed in the same way that it would’ve had I completed an assignment, hungout with friends, or gone to the gym.

• Don’t Waste Time on Fake Friends:

Particularly at such a large school, it is easy to find yourself hanging out with people just so you have someone to hangout with, but they may make comments that bug you, and you may feel like you really don’t relate to them in the end. This is the genius of a GIANT university — there are about 5,999 other students in your class and there’s bound to be people you’d get along with better. Join a new club, go to new cool event — or hit up someone like me in yoga.

• Talk to your professors, if they give you respect:

If a professor is belittling or disrespecting you, don’t waste your time. Know your own intelligence and don’t spend time with a professor that makes you feel looked down on; that’s not what they’re here for.

On the flip side, finding a professor to support you and who you can go back to throughout your time at UMass can be a huge asset. So, if you have a class with a professor you click with, seek them out. I’ve had wonderful professors here at UMass so far that have helped me a lot.

• Schedule:

It helps to keep yourself on track if you block out chunks of the day that you are going to work on certain things. I keep a pad of lined paper on my desk and I write out everything I have to do for the upcoming week. It is a little intimidating, but it does help keep me organized.

**Book Recommendations:**

- *The Art of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama
- *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh