

# RealLife

## College with confidence

by **Maureen Tillman**  
Special to NJ Jewish News

**W**hat makes transitioning to college such a great experience for some students and so overwhelming for others?

There is no simple answer. Certainly there are predictors of success, but often teens deemed likely to do well fall by the wayside when they encounter the multitude of stressors common in college settings.

It is clear that being engrossed in the search for the best school possible, parents and teens often neglect to focus on developing the emotional skills that will serve them well in this new environment.

The impetus to develop proactive services to increase the odds of post-high school success grew out of many experiences in my professional career, including counseling parents and their teens after long-anticipated dreams of a wonderful college experience were shattered. My professional commitment to suicide prevention also was a catalyst.

Headlines about suicides at MIT and NYU make us sad and worry us, as does news of binge-drinking deaths, date rape, and the epidemic of eating disorders on campuses. According to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 1,700 students between the ages of 18 and 24 die each year from alcohol-related injuries, including motor vehicle crashes. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention reports that nearly 4,000 people aged 15-24 die each year by suicide, the second leading cause of death among college students.

As parents, such stories and statistics make us feel terribly vulnerable. The knee-jerk reaction may be to become more protective, to stay tightly connected as a way of controlling what we somehow feel we can control. But is that an effective solution?

So what essential *life skills* do we need to foster a confident college experience?

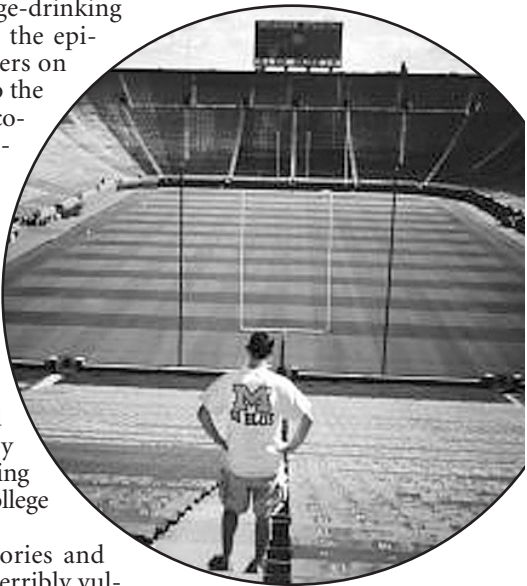
Clearly, effective parenting for the college transition starts years before your teens are picking out comforters at Bed, Bath and Beyond. We need to create a home environment that encourages effective communication, honesty, self-awareness, and the development of coping strategies. Effective parents help their teens develop academic and social assertiveness, time management and problem-solving skills, financial literacy, and a healthy perspective on issues related to sex, drugs, and alcohol. The resulting self-confidence will serve them well

in the challenging college environment of the 21st century as well as life in general.

There are additional factors to consider for teens with learning disabilities and depression. Now there are more effective treatments available, and many colleges are providing appropriate resources. Students with these backgrounds need to research which schools have the quality resources to match their needs. Even with the best services, self-advocacy skills are crucial.

For all students, the parent-child relationship will change. Listen to your teen. Respect their need to be more independent and to find their niche in their new home. Let them know there will be times when you will disagree with them but that you continue to love and be there for them. It may be flattering on some level to be consulted about every detail, but parents should encourage their teens to come up with a solution on their own in the matters that aren't life-changing.

Freshmen who are feeling low in the beginning often feel that they are the only ones who have not found happiness. Parents need to



**First-year college students can feel overwhelmed with their newfound independence.**

normalize their teens' feelings while keeping alert to changes in sleeping, appetite, level of energy, concentration, mood, socialization, and substance use. Have the cell phone numbers of their resident adviser and roommate. Trust your gut reaction and consult a mental health professional on campus or someone you trust locally when you sense a serious adjustment problem is occurring.

**Maureen Tillman, LCSW, has worked as a psychotherapist with adolescents, families, and adults for over 30 years. She developed COLLEGE with CONFIDENCE to help students and families prepare for college. Her Web site is collegewithconfidence.com.**

Maureen Tillman will speak at the National Council of Jewish Women Center for Women in Livingston on Wednesday, Nov. 2, at 7:15 p.m. Register on-line at [www.centerforwomennj.org](http://www.centerforwomennj.org) or call 973-994-4994.

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