

Tips for Parents: Easing Your Student's Transition from College

Johanna E. Soet, Ph.D.

Graduation from college is an exciting and stressful time for any student. It may involve saying goodbye to a way of life, a familiar place, financial dependence on parents, and good friends and family. Your graduate may also be saying hello to new responsibilities, moving to a new location, new friends, or a challenging graduate program. Graduation may mean that your son or daughter is spending some of the transition time at home, which may intensify some of the challenges for you and her or him. As you watch your graduate wrestle with these changes, it may be helpful to understand that graduation is a process, not just an outcome. Graduation is a rite of passage that marks a transition from an undergraduate student to "adult" however you or your son or daughter might define it.

As a rite of passage, graduation may have features that are common to other rites. There are three phases that have been described. The first phase involves identification of an individual as ready to go through a transition. For a college student this means earning enough credits and fulfilling all the requirements for a degree. The second phase involves isolation or taking time to prepare for the transition. This may mean spending the summer looking for a job, taking time off, moving home, or traveling through Europe. During this time it may be important for the graduate to have plenty of time and space to grieve losses, get used to new surroundings, feel excited about the changes, and adjust to shifting relationships in your family. In the final stage the individual emerges, and enters into the community with a new status. Your graduate's emerging may happen when he or she begins that first job, moves to a new city, or starts graduate school.

Because graduation is a rite of passage it may be helpful for your college student to take part in meaningful ceremonies and rituals. You may be able to help them by creating some of these events together or participating in whatever ways they may wish. As you have probably learned during your student's college career, you may need to wait for her or him to ask for help, or provide some indirect guidance, especially since this time represents a new push towards independence. Some of the ways that parents and family might mark this transition are: attending graduation, planning a family party, taking the graduate to dinner, and gifts or other forms of help in getting a new life started (assistance in buying new work clothes, getting a new "professional" look, finding an apartment in a new city). Your student may also create rituals of their own with friends: planning a goodbye dinner or party, selling old books, burning old notes, spending time being in nature, praying, or meditating.

However you and your graduate choose to mark this rite of passage, it will be important to leave plenty of space for you both to experience those natural high and lows, fears and doubts, and excitement and thrill that occur during time of transition.