

GRADUATION JOIT

NOW WHAT?

How to Survive & Thrive After College Graduation

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The Graduation Jolt

We are not your peers. We are two old guys who have been involved in higher education our entire careers and know that you, the college senior, have already achieved significant accomplishments and possess a wealth of potential. But we also know that too high a percentage of you, upon graduation and for a number of years afterward, struggle socially, emotionally and financially. Many college graduates confess to disappointment about the time it's taking to find their footing in careers, relationships and overall satisfaction. And sadly, some even go off the rails.

We've spent a lot of time studying the situation for college graduates, and we hope you will give us a chance to offer advice, since we're guessing you haven't had the time nor the inclination to contemplate what's really coming next.

As a college senior anticipating graduation, you face exciting opportunities as well as big decisions. Maybe you're looking for a job. If so, that process is probably taking up quite a bit of your time and energy. You might be struggling

to balance your time between planning for life after college, finishing up your final classes and enjoying your last weeks as a student. As eager as you might be to feel free of college life, you know that challenges are ahead.

How concerned are you about these uncertainties?

- A college degree no longer guarantees a smooth or immediate transition to career success.
- The transition to the job market and economic self-support can be daunting.
- The burden of significant debt accumulated from school loans seems insurmountable.
- The emotional challenge of separation from the deep friendships that have been part of the fabric of daily life through college feels unsettling.
- Roommates, classmates and other college acquaintances, close or peripheral, will scatter as summer begins, and there will be no fall semester reunion after vacation.

Understanding the New “Gap” in the Transition to Adulthood

Unfortunately, graduation from college has become a disappointment for too many. Much-anticipated freedom and happiness are taking too long to materialize. And this awakening comes as a surprise, even a jolt. You may have some sense of what’s coming, but if you don’t, take a look

at some grim realities from recent graduating classes. Because we truly believe in the adage that “forewarned is forearmed.”

But we have advice that will give you an edge. Consider this: for probably the first time in your life, there will be no external structure providing a social support network. Now it is *your* responsibility to create a new community of friends and other relationships like the ones you’ve come to depend on in college. This task is essential to your emotional wellbeing, physical health and quality of life. If you don’t rebuild a reasonable facsimile of your family and college social world, your adjustment to life after college will take a long, long time. In fact, we believe that rebuilding that family is the key to dealing with your coming transition.

The New Generation of College Graduates

- Median debt load is \$27,000 after graduation; many graduates owe lots more.
- Nearly 50% will graduate with credit card debt of over \$2,000.
- Nearly 20% of your class will be “underemployed” during the first three years after graduation, and nearly 9% will be unemployed.
- Two years after graduation, about 45% of graduates will be living back home with their parents. That’s a 45% increase over the last decade.
- As members of the “millennial generation” (18-33 years old), 19% will be diagnosed with depression. Anxiety levels are increasing as well.

Sources:

<http://money.cnn.com/2013/05/17/pf/college/student-debt/index.html>

<http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Government/2013/05/01/Poll-41-Of-College-Graduates-Underemployed>

<http://madamenoire.com/261687/the-sad-generation-study-finds-millennials-are-stressed-out-and-depressed/>

Chapter 1

How in the World Did You Get Here?

Let's take a look back. When you boil it down, what shapes the course of a human life? What defining variables have shaped you?

- ✓ Genetics
- ✓ Home Environment
- ✓ School and Neighborhood
- ✓ College

Your Genetics

At this point in life, you realize you were born with unique aptitudes and biological characteristics that lurk deep within your DNA. You've come to know how you're wired

You were born with great gifts.
What are they? Can you name, acknowledge and celebrate them?
After all, this is your basic equipment.

and what your core capacities include.

You realize, for instance, whether you tend to be

extroverted, verbally expressive, musically gifted, analytically inclined or drawn to mathematics, poetry, or painting. You can probably pinpoint which parent or close relative you most closely resemble in temperament and style. Whatever your essential makeup, as for your DNA and pre-wiring, you are all set – that bell has been rung. You are that unique genetic concoction mixing mother, father and a host of ancestors. Congratulations and sympathies.

Your Home Environment

The second shaping variable is just as individually unique and equally complex. It is the home environment that has surrounded you through these first two decades of life. You might have had a dreadful childhood; you might have had an idyllic childhood. For most people, it was somewhere in the middle, and hopefully tipped toward the latter.

Whichever it was, you were in the care of others who dictated the kinds of experiences you had. Others were responsible for defining and managing the culture of your home life. You simply adapted and coped. So here again, as with your genetics, it's done. That ship has sailed; it is what it was.

What happened to you between birth and today has been an incredibly elaborate set of experiences. You have been

dragged across years of physical and emotional development at a staggering pace. Patterns were set in place in these early years. Trying to find yourself, your personal identity and potential emerging from the soup of childhood is no easy task in the best of circumstances. During the early years that helped shape your personality, what was the social environment of your home before you went to elementary school? Were you an only child and the object of doting parents, or one of a brood of siblings elbowing your way to get attention or freedom?

Your preschool childhood experience was the first initiation into the juggling act of managing relationships characterized by power and position, including parents, adult relatives, and other authority figures. You engaged with siblings, neighborhood characters and friends and everyone else you encountered on a daily basis. Your level of expertise as a social creature was formulated early, and social skills developed mostly outside your conscious awareness.

Your School and Neighborhood

At around 4 or 5 years old, you began your trek through an ever-expanding social world. For 12 years you were immersed in school and outside activities where again you encountered a raft of new relationships. Each transition

brought strangers into your world – peers as well as an ever-changing cast of adults. School was social adaptation on steroids. Even if some of the early memories are blurred by now, you can nonetheless recall the characters and personalities that became friends, competitors and antagonists. You learned about yourself through the experiences you had with others. As you gained more social skills, you made vital connections and may still have contact with some of these early friends. These endeavors stretched all your psychological and emotional capacities.

As complex as elementary school was for you, it likely paled in comparison to the caldron of high school. For Americans, high school is a consuming experience. For many it was high anxiety – even depression – more than affirmation and fulfillment. The soap opera of the typical American high school is unforgettable for all involved. Whether you were popular and successful or barely endured the stressful experience, you couldn't escape. You simply had to find a way to cope. The high school experience haunts many. For them – and perhaps for you – it was like serving time in the general population of a prison. Plus, you had to cope with this social pressure cooker while simultaneously managing your home life. And you did this with minimal independence and power. Oh, and one more thing – you probably had no money!

College

The last school phase is the one you're finishing now. It began as a highly anticipated transition: released from high school, on furlough from home and surrounded by equally relieved peers. College was your first experience where adult authority over your behavior receded into the background, only reappearing if you gave it cause to step back in. It also gave a fresh start with new friends with whom you would do everything together in close quarters. It likely was the most profound experience of social bonding with strangers ever imagined. Even after graduation, you will feel connected to some of these people for life. If the high school years were a low point in your social life, college has hopefully been a high point – or at least a relief.

And Now ... Launching Into Independence

So here you are with only one developmental card left to play. As an adult you are finally driving the bus, in charge

From birth through college there have been safety nets to catch you when you needed help.

These nets are no longer.

of this next of many chapters in your hopefully long and fulfilling life. For the first time you can

make choices and change your circumstances, taking advantage of all your gifts to shape your environment for the life you envision.

The common denominator for everything prior to adult independence has been the presence of a complex social safety net that has followed and evolved around you since birth. It has been there at home and in the community, at school and on through college. Even without your conscious awareness, your neighborhood, churches, parks, youth programs, and fire and police departments were looking out for you. If you needed assistance in any crisis, help was near. You learned to negotiate the social culture, to attach to some while eluding others. You *knew* – or perhaps grew to *feel* – who would accept you and who needed to be avoided. Your emotional and even your physical safety was at stake, as strangers were always present and had to be negotiated.

Your capacity to negotiate the social culture is about to be tested in a new way over the coming years. The safety net will soon be gone. In fact, it will be gone as soon as you leave campus.

If we designed this little book to sensitize you to anything, it's this: *After graduation, most of you will face the challenge of finding a new community of friends and acquaintances.*

This community may begin in your new workplace, but it's now *your* job to create the relationships. Unfortunately, the reality of this transition comes as a surprise to so many. Lost in the excitement of completing a degree and hopefully securing a good job, along with the prospect of freedom and movement is the social separation that will be felt every day. Too many are unprepared and suffer the emotional stress of loneliness, even depression and anxiety.

Most people experience their first depressive episode in their mid-20s, with most cases overall occurring between ages 25 and 44.

Source: Physician's Desk Reference -
pdrhealth.com/diseases/depression/symptoms

But it doesn't have to be that way. This is a cautionary tale advising you to take stock of the

decisions made at this critical transition. Your life's story is unique, and you can choose courage by looking with candor at your options.

Let's turn our attention now to the role and impact that ubiquitous technology and media are having on the challenge to connect with others.

"The 20s are a black box, and there is a lot of churning in there. One-third of people in their 20s move to a new residence every year. Forty percent move back home with their parents at least once. They go through an average of seven jobs in their 20s, more job changes than in any other stretch. Two-thirds spend at least some time living with a romantic partner without being married. And marriage occurs later than ever. The median age at first marriage in the early 1970s, when the baby boomers were young, was 21 for women and 23 for men; by 2009 it had climbed to 26 for women and 28 for men, five years in a little more than a generation."

Source: *The New York Times*, 8-18-2010, Robin Marantz Henig

Chapter 2:

The Exciting Technology Revolution

It's no surprise that a significant factor in the coming jolt is wrapped up in technology. While still in its infancy, the gadget world spins with overnight changes, with more wizardry to come. Gone are the days of your grandparents, who landed a job and stayed there for 40 years until retirement. Your first job will be simply that – a first opportunity. Whether you stay one year or five or 20, your work life will be diverse and characterized by multiple changes. You may even be working remotely from your home or apartment, and you will thrive or struggle to the degree that you find your place and your people. In other words, your wellbeing will depend on how you connect. And make no mistake, the same technology that you embrace will bring a significant challenge to your wellbeing.

A major factor in the technology challenge is the matter of relocation. American life enables us to live virtually anywhere we choose, and we are moving fools! Over the course of a typical life most Americans will move a half-

dozen times. Every year, over 40 million of us relocate. The reasons vary from a new job opportunity, a relationship or simply lifestyle preference. If you think about the impact of this phenomenon over the course of the last several decades, it is obvious that our serial mobility has had significant consequences for society. Losing relationships and a sense of place and belonging are important changes that are accompanied by high stress and health risks.

Your generation will not be exempt. In fact, Americans in their 20s are the most mobile demographic group of all. In any given year, one third of you will move, starting when you vacate campus. First careers demand or lure you to new places. This is empowering, since you are personally making these choices.

Once moved away, you and your college friends will use technology more than ever for personal distraction as well as continuing contact with soon distant relationships. You will maintain contact with your college connections using social media to give updates, thoughts and feelings about your life and progress. This luxury offers support, comfort and encouragement during the transition. The question is, how many hours will you spend in contact with absent relationships instead of undertaking the more uncomfortable task of investing in new ones? The emotional connection we feel at the start of a new relationship pales in

comparison to the deep emotional ties we have with old friends. It is a natural temptation to give hours away to mediated contact with well-established, albeit distant, friendships, rather than undertake the awkward endeavor of starting fresh with those around you. Building a social support network is a time-consuming task.

Beyond the life changes of job and location, how much time do you think you will spend next year watching television, gaming and engaging via social media? Have you considered that the time might increase dramatically? The

<p>How many hours will I spend... Passively Watching Media? versus Seeking out Real Relationships?</p>	luxury of having perpetual access to individual entertainment is an almost irresistible lure
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that can rob you of productive time for other activities. As much as you take them for granted, engaging entertainment media threaten to overtake a great deal of your non-work time. Most Americans are engaged with television and other video technologies for well over 30 hours a week. And that's just an average across the general population. For your circumstance in particular, facing distance from close friends, it is a natural temptation to become ever more occupied with the distractions available with engaging media.

Each of these variables – ***relocation and time with social communication and entertainment media*** – is big all by itself. It is in the combination of the two, however, where the real impact is felt. If you think of these twin social phenomena, moving and media, consider that after graduation you could find your time consumed in these distractions. The combination is the perfect formula for fueling a lifestyle of personal isolation. *And isolation is among the greatest risks for your health.* It is isolation from others that underlies much of the depression and anxiety that plagues the demographic of recent college graduates.

$$\left(\text{MOVING} + \text{MEDIA} = \text{ISOLATION} \right)$$

If all this weren't challenging enough, for many of you, the workplace might not offer much relief. The American work environment is becoming more socially isolated than ever. Work tasks frequently involve interacting remotely through media. Even when co-workers are physically nearby, the interactions among you may be limited. Engagement with a computer screen may well consume the vast majority of the hours you spend at your workplace. Even if you enter a profession with active interpersonal engagement, such as teaching or sales, opportunities for growing meaningful peer friendships are often limited. When combined with the isolating effects of moving to a new place and working at a

job that is essentially solitary, it's not hard to see the significant obstacles to forming new relationships.

Think about this:

- How will you respond to this cautionary tale?
- What actions can you take to ensure that next year's endeavor will maximize your emotional wellbeing?
- How will you balance separating from your current friends with the challenge of beginning a new life with new relationships?

Chapter 3:

The Culture of Stress

It's not just you, by the way. Our whole society is practically frothing at the mouth with stress-related problems. Across all age groups and socioeconomic strata, Americans are struggling with record levels of stress, especially depression and anxiety. Part of your coming jolt is that you too will be at risk for this challenge to emotional stability.

What is driving this situation to be so dire for our individual and collective health? Think of it in your most recent context. Your college lifestyle surrounded you with focused distraction and recreation, the two variables at the root of coping with stressors. With college friends, you lived and ate together, and shared classes, sports and entertainment activities.

**A Social Support System Is
Vital to Health and Happiness**

This daily reality was a strong antidote to any of your tendencies for worry and emotional upheaval. You may have had moments of psychological struggle, but in

addition to any professional treatment you sought out, the relationships surrounding you cushioned and ameliorated the symptoms and facilitated a return to equilibrium.

Social support groups provide the groundwork for initiating and expanding the necessary layers of emotional closeness. These are the people who hear when you got a new job, had a child or went into the hospital. They know you had a family wedding or a family death, and they come to the reception and the funeral. They know you and know about you.

People in your daily life are like layers of clothing that keep you warm. You will feel the loss of this support with great suddenness when you graduate. You will join ranks with millions of Americans

for whom this enveloping network of relationships is thinning out and even disappearing. The resulting isolation is, to be blunt, a significant risk for depression. The World Health Organization has formally recognized depression as the number one public health problem in the world. It is likely that you have familiarity with this health challenge.

If you haven't experienced depression yourself, certainly you have been touched by it in your family or among your friends. This illness can affect people with varying intensity. You might be aware, for

Depression is a pull into further isolation.

instance, that some people struggle with a severe, chronic depression that has caused suffering over a long period of their life. In other words, their depression does not seem as directly tied to their life circumstances as it is a condition they live with most of the time. In contrast, you might have been exposed to circumstances that set you back on your heels, followed by a bout of depression. These are common cases of reactive depression as you struggle to regain your footing. Perhaps it was the death of a family member, failing a course, losing a scholarship or rejection by a friend. In

Reactive depression can be a normal response to your next big change that usually eases with time and contact.

Chronic depression is a serious illness that is treatable with medical attention and eased by a strong social support system!

these circumstances you have experienced a predictable reaction to a difficult life situation.

Odd as it may sound, this latter condition is actually an indicator of the health of your body,

in that you are responding predictably, albeit in pain, to a setback in life. Maybe the most significant change you will encounter next year is the risk posed by losing the support necessary for you to cope with the stress of graduation.

Whether your emotional challenge is anxiety or depression, your response to life changes has a measurable, felt impact on your mood. Be it major or minor, we are all called upon

to cope. Obviously the broader and more complete any life change, the more daunting the challenge.

It is an axiom in psychology that change is stressful – not just bad change.
ALL change is stressful!

Whether you felt it as thrilling or intimidating, you might recall your experience arriving on campus freshman year.

Think about those first few hours after you were dropped off and the family left you behind. The initial anxiety of meeting new roommates and classmates, finding the places to eat and congregate and show up at class were all heady challenges. Certainly there's a strong memory about the anticipation, and probably anxiety, about what your new roommates and floor mates would be like. Would you like them? Would they like you?

As you distracted yourself with all the tasks that crashed in on you, the process took care of itself. Busy finding your way around campus, engaging in your classes and being carried along with all the social events mapped out for you by others in orientation, you were swept along in the process of adaptation. The burden of facilitating the process was borne by the college.

The institution set up the process...
all you had to do was adapt.

Next year will not

offer you a custodial institution overseeing a smooth entry into a new social support system. While there may well be an orientation at your job aimed at helping you understand and master the workplace culture, it is assumed that you are a self-starter and ready to go. On the home front, are you ready to establish your new place and live with all the attendant responsibility for setting up the smallest details of daily living? Socially, you will oversee your own orientation. You will be a committee of one. Do you know how to begin, or where to begin?

It's likely that you, like most of your college senior peers, have only thought in broad terms about next year. You will probably turn your full attention to the next chapter in life after you have already been thrown into the deep end of the pool. If it's any consolation, this stark picture represents life for millions of people who have gone before you in this transition. You will be in good company.

Lots of information about coping with life change is readily available in our self-help culture. It is sincere and well-intentioned and frequently offers personal interventions for you, the individual. Everyone will tell you that stress-relief strategies include exercise, diet and even medication to help you cope. This is all solid advice. But we want to emphasize a variable that is frequently marginalized or even ignored. It

is the most often overlooked ingredient to human health: interpersonal connections.

The social science research is clear. Establishing a strong, available network of friendships is often a missing link in the arsenal of emotional coping and wellness.

You will need more than the love of your life or a close college friend to join you on your next adventure.

Human beings are shaped by close relationships, and emotional and physical health is sustained by close relationships. Popular psychology encourages you to look within, but emerging science and the basics of our biology, physiology and psychology make clear that we are relational creatures. We adapt best when we are connected to others.

And being connected to others will inevitably reshape you. Any of your tendencies toward entitlement, spoiled disposition, or unwillingness to work hard are likely to be beaten back naturally by the sorts of close connections we're advocating. You've already seen this process at work in your childhood. Your brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents all helped curb any of your natural inclinations toward a focus that was

Remember this key statistic...
Among Americans between the ages of 20 and 30, **one out of three relocates every year.**

too fixed on yourself. More than anything else, a healthy network helps you regulate your behavior in ways that keep you grounded in reality and focused on serving others in favor of yourself. While looking for inward-focused psychological coping strategies to manage your wellbeing, it is a significant mistake to overlook what you need outwardly.

Chapter 4:

Life Next Year

Overcoming the Crush of Debt

Speaking on behalf of the generations older than you, we have really screwed the pooch when it comes to your experience in higher education. We are worried and angry about the burden of debt so many of you are forced to bear. It's a sad national story that college is beyond the means of so many of you, and that you exit college with debt the equivalent to a loan on a Mercedes. It is the weight of the world that dampens your optimism. In such cases you may be compelled to return home and live with your parents and family for the foreseeable future. We know this can be demoralizing and terribly discouraging. But please don't lose heart. You can make this work for you.

For 16 years the schools have served you. Now you will be serving your employer.

You know that career opportunity is rooted in networking and relationships far more than in your resume or LinkedIn profile. With apologies to those whose hometown is the last

place they want to be, there are advantages to being back on familiar ground. Even if immediate family is of no help and utterly without influence, you did grow up in a community with diverse resources in people and companies and contacts. Given our earlier warning about the underestimated risk of social isolation when moving to a brand new place alone, your hometown base can shield you from these consequences. You have an opportunity to reconnect with long established friends. Such choices can surely ease the transition from campus life to new independence.

A Life Partner?

Then there are those of you who have found a life partner and are eager to make your way together. You may believe this will cushion the coming adjustment challenge we've been talking about. It may help, but there is a caution. In addition to adjusting to relocation, adapting to a new job, and finding yourself economically self-reliant for perhaps the first time, you can now add the emotional challenge of daily living in a significant relationship.

Going forward now involves finding opportunities for two. It means negotiating compromises of geography when one gets a job in a particular location and the trailing partner looks for a career start there as well. Assuming the

transition goes according to plan, a couple faces the same dilemma as most of their classmates – the stark realization that neither one has many, or even any, nearby close friends.

Making this major transition with a partner has unique

（ One person cannot handle the whole emotional load of you! ） advantages, including emotional support and shared labor. Nonetheless, just like your peers moving alone, you too, and you two, need to establish a fully populated social support system. You need gender peers and couple peers for recreation, entertainment and empathy. Further, a social support system also ideally includes those who fill in missing family connections. While rarely adequately considered, your best chance to flourish as a couple also includes connections with those who serve the roles that a healthy family of origin would naturally avail. Too often we fall into the trap of a narrow dependence on one significant other. But this is a formula for disappointment and worse. It is a significant factor in the failure of marriages.

This vision of heading into adult life free from restrictions of place and sharing the experience with the love of your life is relatively recent in American life. It is a consequence of at least two big changes following World War II. One was the surge of economic prosperity for middle-class Americans

that came about in the post-war 1950s. Whether using the GI Bill to get a college education or simply entering the workforce right out of uniform, millions of veterans and their families, like your grandparents or great-grandparents, carved out an economically stable middle class lifestyle that enabled their children to prosper. And prosper they did, as the Baby Boom children enrolled in college in unprecedented numbers. In addition, gender roles were eventually altered as more families sent their daughters to college alongside their sons. The impact has been immeasurable in terms of family life with two career parents.

Along with this educational and economic opportunity came a second social change that is not often referenced. It is the dramatically new way that young adults began to form exclusive romantic relationships. No longer was your significant other found in the vicinity of your hometown; the love of your life was now discovered in the displaced community of your campus. And their place of origin was, like yours, far away. Each of your parents and families were living away from you and from each other. Courtship was never like this before – in most cases, both families either already knew each other, or at least knew about the other. There were strong connections that extended beyond the

couple. And after marriage, the couple was immersed in a strong system of family support.

Now observe the correlation between this changed sociological dynamic and the rise of technology available for finding relationships. Online dating services in particular boast the success of their efforts to facilitate finding a compatible mate through screening. This culture of meeting online might be viewed as an effort to fill the gap left from the time when compatibility and suitability of a potential mate was worked out organically within family and neighborhood life. The current online vetting process attempts to substitute for the lost voices of intimate relationships that express approval, disapproval or ambivalence about a romantic prospect.

In one study in 1943...

Nearly 80% of the young people who married in large metropolitan areas actually grew up within blocks of each other.

Things have certainly changed.

Source: Bossard, J. H.S. (1932). Residential propinquity as a factor in marriage selection. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 38(2), 219-224.

There is an important variable here that is fully relevant to all generations and cultures – an established theoretical

principle in psychology known as *emotional desensitization*. Simply stated, the principle holds that our emotional reactions lose their intensity with repeated exposure to the same thing. That's not good news if we plan to have repeated exposure to our romantic partner. The implication is that overexposure to this one other will soon have the effect of diminishing the emotional charge that was at the root of the initial attraction.

The principle suggests that we can keep the intensity of our romantic feelings if both partners are constantly changing – becoming new each day. We can do that by actively connecting to a rich network of other relationships, some of which are very close. Couples whose lifestyle includes an extended network of diverse connections have the best chance of ensuring their own relationship survives and thrives. In fact, a couple with a lifestyle that involves same gender friendships for each, couples connection for both, and mentoring relationships for each and both keeps the emotional charge active and the desires alive.

Of course, there are still countless couples that did meet in their hometown, and there are many families that are unhealthy and offer more detriment than helpful support for a couple. But in general, the national trend of leaving home and finding adventure in another place means that we meet our partner removed from each of our family roots.

It also means that married life is managed mostly alone, with few family connections nearby. So the maintenance of the relationship is almost exclusively dependent on the resources of the two individuals. And as we have established and emphasized, this is simply inadequate. We do not complete each other. One person cannot manage the emotional load of one other person.

Chapter 5

Think Bigger

Fortunately, there is a way to venture into life after graduation that avoids the practical and emotional pit into which so many young adults repeatedly fall. That way requires managing the relationships you cultivate in your career as well as in your personal life. Being ensconced in an extended family means having connection with parents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and grandparents. This social universe creates the most reliable cushion surrounding your wellbeing.

Have you thought about the urgency of establishing such a life network, whether through biological connections or new ones you create? Have you considered the necessity of repopulating your social network beyond age and situational peers?

The research is clear: Emotional health is dependent on a lifestyle that includes broad elements of a nuclear and extended family. Not only does this network *not* restrict your freedom, it substantially enhances it. And guess what?

Many of your competing peers from collectivistic societies already know and value the advantage of this wisdom. This has become evident in their lower rates of stress-related problems in their early to mid twenties.

Regardless of past experiences with family, a healthy life going forward necessitates building a new family in the place where you land.

It is our sincere hope that by now you are convinced that along with the excitement of graduating and starting an independent life will come the commitment to facing the challenge of forging a healthy

lifestyle. It essentially means reconstituting a family. And perhaps this idea raises some discomfort, given that you are at a critical moment in your life when you're separating from your family of origin. For some this transition is experienced with a bit of sadness; for others it is a great relief.

For so many American adults, a social network is comprised of a few close intimates with whom daily life is shared, and a series of acquaintances who are regularly encountered but rarely in their home. If you think of this visually, it means that your close circle consists of very few others, while the outer circle is abuzz with activity. What is missing in this picture, of course, are the relationships that populate that middle ground between those closest and

those at arm's length. These are the individuals who feel at home in your home.

“Refrigerator Rights” relationships are the people who know you, care about you and forgive you. You know

who they are; you can name them. They can go into your refrigerator without needing permission, and they afford you the same right in their home. Human health and emotional wellness are fundamentally dependent on having this kind of social network. None of these relationships are perfect;

They do not share your space as visitors, but as relatives. They don't need permission to help themselves to your refrigerator. They have “refrigerator rights” in your home. And you have refrigerator rights in their home as well.

none are ideal. But such people lift you up when you are discouraged and are available when you need help. These are your mentors and guides. In most families there are older mentors sharing their wisdom and courage as well as younger admirers who give you the chance to become a mentor. Such is the way the human experience works best.

When you leave campus and begin to settle, the majority of your relational energy will be focused on friendships in your own age group and situation in life. The majority of your time will be spent socializing with these compatible peers.

We are not suggesting for a moment that you divert your energy from this fundamental drive. But the sooner you connect to a greater community of support and caring, the more effective you will find your capacity to cope with the routine, or even the extreme, stressors that are bound to come your way. Coping with life's challenges independently is central but not entirely sufficient. In addition to your own great gifts of self-reliance, you need to be helped by others. Refrigerator rights relationships can help protect you from the coming jolt.

Chapter 6

Strategies for Connection

Engage in activities of interest.

Follow your interests and the people who share them and...
Voila! Friends.

It's quite likely that you have an area of interest that provides recreation and distracting enjoyment.

Maybe you play sports and enjoy pickup basketball or softball. Perhaps you golf or like to jog or bike. You might be into photography, cooking or nature. You can join a church or a gym. Whatever your taste, every community has ample opportunities for you to participate in structured organizations around your interests. In many cases these opportunities will give you exposure to a variety of people, diverse in age and background. And you can begin to fill a void. It's a good rule of thumb that whenever possible, choose live activities over isolating activities.

Consider a faith community.

It has been observed that participating in a religious organization can provide unique opportunities to find a suitable romantic partner. But don't miss the larger opportunity provided by a faith community. At its best, a faith community includes all the elements for finding good family relationships to fill in for who have been left behind. It meets regularly and includes every possible demographic, from infants to great-grandparents and everyone in between. Of course you must feel welcomed and comfortable with the group's ideas and outlook on life, but the great side benefit of engaging in a faith community is the speed with which you can forge connections that are critical to your wellbeing.

Consciously regulate your technology use.

Because of the fantastic advantages that new technology affords in terms of connection, you may be less aware of the downsides that threaten your face-to-face relationships. We offer a simple piece of practical advice: schedule your time on social media, email, and Internet browsing for times when you are ordinarily *alone*. Maybe this is early in the morning; maybe it's the last thing you do at night. The point is that you don't want unregulated time on your devices to infringe on the time you have to make face-to-

face connections with others. Don't let constant monitoring of your phone intrude on casual conversations with potential friends. Put the phone away, turn it off, and take some alone time after the conversation is over to review your messages. If we don't learn to regulate technology, our relational health is going to take a major hit.

Choose activities that elevate your heart rate.

You already know the benefits of exercise. Our advice is consistent with what you've heard, but with a twist. If you find someone who might become a friend, find an activity to do with that person that gets your heart rate up. We're not talking about sex; we're talking about hiking, walking, jogging, bike riding, tennis, basketball, etc. By engaging in these sorts of activities, you can take advantage of a very powerful emotional effect of physical activity. When your heart rate goes up, the added adrenaline in your system has the effect of intensifying your emotions. So if you're happy and your heart rate is elevated, you feel joy. Take advantage of this fact and make it work for you in making new friends. If you're having fun with someone you like, you'll feel more intense positive emotions by doing something together that raises your heart rate. This can provide some extra glue to help cement a close relational bond.

Choose to live in a neighborhood.

If you are moving to a new city or town to begin your post-graduation life, you will naturally spend time and energy making a choice for your new abode. If you are moving to a large urban area where high-rise rentals are the norm, you might choose to live on the outskirts and commute into the city. If you have opted for a smaller community, you might want to live in a place where you can be in close proximity to families, as opposed to neighbors most of whom are also in their twenties. After all, making choices that perpetuate singularity and isolation will exacerbate the already challenging experience of a major life change. Haven't you had your fill of dorm or Greek life?

Instead, make a choice to step outside your comfort zone and avail yourself of the social riches readily available in stable, safe, family neighborhoods. Placing yourself amidst a wider network of people will not only forestall the complications that come with major change, it will pay profound dividends. The built-in advantage of making a choice to immerse yourself in a structured community works whether you are an extrovert who makes friends easily, or an introvert for whom reaching out is difficult or even painful. Even if you are not a person who reaches out to others, those who are near you will reach out to you. It may take a while, but eventually these people will become

part of your life and will feel like your new family. These are the people who before long will be those with whom you share refrigerator rights.

And finally...

Please hear our reassurance. Even if this next chapter in your life is hard, disappointing or even demoralizing, remember, it's just that – a chapter. It will not last forever. With your education, ambition and savvy you will come out of this stronger and more successful than you can imagine right now – even if it's different than the present vision you have for your future.

About the Authors

Dr. Will Miller is a recognized expert in the areas of wellbeing, stress & coping, interpersonal relationships, organizational health and American culture.



For the past 30 years Will has appeared before thousands of people at comedy clubs, theaters as well as hundreds of organizational events in the U.S. and Europe, offering a compelling and entertaining presentation for this country's top corporations and national organizations.

He has five graduate degrees, was the on air spokesman for Nick-at-Night and hosted the NBC daytime talk show "The Other Side." Today he is most well-known for his regular feature on the nationally syndicated Bob & Tom Show (Premiere Radio Networks). A devoted husband and father, Dr. Miller teaches at Purdue University and serves as a police chaplain. Find Dr. Will online at www.drwill.com



Dr. Glenn Sparks has been a professor of Communication at Purdue University since 1986. He served as the Associate Head of what is now the Brian Lamb School of Communication for twelve years (2001-2013). He

conducts research and teaches courses in communication theory, the theory and effects of mass media, relationships in the electronic era and research methods. He has published widely in academic outlets and is highly sought after by national and international media outlets for his opinion and commentary. He is a collaborator with Dr. Will Miller on *Refrigerator Rights: Our Crucial Need for Close Connection* (Willow, 2008) and he has a particular interest in how electronic media are changing the cultural landscape, affecting interpersonal relationships, and having an impact on our overall health and quality of life. He has also published a memoir, *Rolling in Dough: Lessons I Learned in Doughnut Shop* (White River Press), about growing up in a family that operated a doughnut shop for 20-years. He has three adult children. He and his wife, Cheri (a Purdue Ph.D. in Social Psychology and a practicing Developmental Therapist) live in Lafayette, Indiana. Visit his web-page at <http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~sparks>.