

When college kids come home for the winter break, stress and tension can mount

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By Neil Schoenherr

When college students return home for their winter break, it can be an adjustment for the entire family. While parents may have preconceived ideas about how the family will spend the holidays, students are anxious to try out their newfound independence.

"The winter break is the first extended time at home for most freshmen since they left for college in the summer," says Karen Levin Coburn, associate vice chancellor for students and dean of the freshman transition at Washington University in St. Louis. "The first semester at college may have been their first glimpse of freedom. They wonder if it is possible to go home and still maintain their newfound independence."

Coburn is co-author of the acclaimed book, *Letting Go: A Parent's Guide to Understanding the College Years*, which, in its fourth printing, has sold more than 300,000 copies.

She offers several tips for students and parents to keep in mind when the student comes home for the winter break:



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"Parents should not be shocked when students come home with bags under their eyes," Coburn notes. "Most students have just finished finals, they are exhausted and they may sleep a lot the first day or two. Parents who have invested money and energy in their children's education may not understand the zombie re-entering their home."

If there are siblings at home, the family has to reconfigure. However, that usually isn't simple, Coburn says. "For example, the middle sibling has been used to being the eldest, and it may be more of a drag than a delight to have big sister home again." Younger siblings may need support from parents when the returning college student goes off with the family car without consultation or monopolizes the phone hour after hour.

Parents who welcome home an only child or the last to have left the home may realize that they have gotten used to privacy and a clean house, Coburn says. "Though parents enjoy the reinvigorated hustle and bustle of family life, they may have moments of longing for the spontaneity and quiet of life on their own. Actually, that ambivalence is not unlike the ambivalence their child feels about being back home versus being on his or her own."

Be prepared to discuss money issues openly. "Try to find a time when the student is open to discussion and tactfully try to help him or her understand the necessity of budgeting," Coburn says. Because money is tight for most parents of college students, finances may become a dominant theme during the student's first visit home. The high cost of college, coupled with a student's lack of budgeting skills, may spur tension over the topic.

Parents should discuss the student's budget, how much the student is earning and where the student may be spending too much. "Students may come home and announce they spent over their budget," Coburn says. "Pizza is the biggest culprit. First-year students may have as hard a time managing money as they do managing time."

Don't be surprised if time is a potentially explosive topic. Coburn urges parents not to revert automatically to the old rules from their child's high school days when he or she still had a curfew. "They may be going out the door for the evening, as their parents are heading to bed," Coburn says of first-year college students at home on break. To help ease the tension, Coburn suggests parents engage in straightforward discussions and develop mutual expectations with students during the first few days at home.

"It's tough on parents because even though they have grown used to not knowing what time their child comes back to her room when she's away at college, parents can't turn off their 'worry button' when it's 2 a.m. and the car isn't back in the driveway. Parents don't stop being parents. They worry about their child's safety. It helps to come to an agreement that recognizes their child's growing independence, as well as their own need not to worry."

Conversations between parents and students are essential and can be extremely rewarding. "Winter break is an opportunity for students to reflect on the semester — on ways they have changed, on what they have learned and on how their goals are evolving," Coburn says. "Conversations between parents and their college age children about these topics can be extremely rewarding for both parties."

The break also provides students with the opportunity to introduce their parents to some of the ideas, books and disciplines they have discovered during the semester, Coburn adds. "Parents who engage in conversations of this sort with their children, rather than just asking them about grades and professional goals, are likely to find this a very rich experience. It's a great feeling to have your child open up new worlds for you. Listen to their excitement over new ideas without judgment. Ask your child to recommend a favorite book to you."

Make plans early. Since the winter break can last almost a month, it can be a challenge to coordinate family schedules during the busy holiday season. Students can feel pulled between spending time with their friends or their families. Plan ahead and consult your newly returned college student when making plans for family parties, vacations and other family events, Coburn suggests.

Refrain from doing everything for your student. It's easy to fall back on old habits when your child returns home. "Though it may seem easier to do it yourself, encourage your college-age student to continue to take responsibility for the things he or she has been handling in college: medical appointments, finances, communications with the college or university, car and computer maintenance. This helps your child continue to grow self reliant and competent," Coburn says.

Help foster independence in your student. "One of the things we wrote about in the introduction to our newest edition of *Letting Go* is that this generation — the boomer parents of Millennial kids — is used to a very hands-on approach," Coburn says. "So they may be especially challenged to step back when their kids are in their orbit again. They have been used to making plans for their children and orchestrating much in their lives. Their intentions, of course, are to provide help, but doing so can sometimes inhibit their college-age child's growing independence."