

# Students stressed about college? Texting mom or dad can help

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Most of the time, stressed college students didn't tell their parents what was bothering them, but they felt better anyway, Erin Ruppel, UWM associate professor of communication, found in her research. Credit: Thinkstock photo

The secret to helping your children cope with the pressures of college –

without crippling their growth and development – could be tucked in your pocket.

Research by Erin Ruppel, UWM associate professor of communication, suggests that simply exchanging text messages with your children can provide support during their early college days.

Such support is more important than ever. According to the American College Health Association, nearly 40 percent of [college students](#) surveyed in spring 2017 reported feeling so depressed that they found it difficult to function at least once during the previous year.

"A lot of students have trouble transitioning to college, and rates of [mental health problems](#) are increasing," Ruppel said. "We thought parent-child relationships might be important in this transition, so we looked at how students might turn to their [parents](#) for support."

Ruppel and Tricia Burke of Texas State University examined the communication habits and social competence of 155 first-semester college freshmen. They tracked students' self-reported stress and loneliness, as well as the number of phone calls or text messages between students and their parents. They discovered that students who felt a lot of stress one day tended to exchange a flurry of text messages with their parents the next day. Then, the day after that, students' stress levels fell.

"More stress leads to more texting," Ruppel says, "but more texting leads to less stress."

## **Help for vulnerable students**

The finding was especially true for students who struggle with face-to-face communication, as well as making and maintaining friendships. So texting may be a particularly effective way to support more vulnerable

college students.

"People with low [social competence](#) tend to be the ones who struggle more in the transition to college," Ruppel said. She notes that previous research shows they are more susceptible to loneliness, depression and stress.

Ruppel's research didn't dig into the specific content of text messages between students and parents, but the researchers did learn something surprising. "Most of the time," Ruppel said, "students didn't talk to their parents about what was bothering them." Yet they felt better anyway. Additional research is necessary, Ruppel said, to examine the content and frequency of text messaging between parents and [college](#) students over time.

"Popular opinion says that technology is bad for relationships," Ruppel said. "I'm trying to figure out when it helps, why and for whom."

Provided by University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee

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