

Commentary: A different letter to college freshmen

May 28, 2024

Dear college freshmen:

A [recent opinion article](#) characterized your move to college as exile. I reject that characterization.

Exile is used to remove autonomy from a person—a neutering of their power or influence. College is the opposite. This is where you gain autonomy and stretch your power and influence. Or you don't.

Most of you are entering a stage of your life saturated with new freedoms and autonomy. You've made a lot of choices so far in your life, but brace yourself. You ain't seen nothing yet.

You're about to open a menu of choices wider than you've ever experienced before. This is what makes college and emerging adulthood so fantastic. And you will get to—and have to—experience the consequences of those choices to a degree you've never experienced before. This, too, is what makes college and emerging adulthood so fantastic.

The gateway to this new, critical phase of life is simultaneously sad, scary, fun, exciting, memorable, traumatic, fulfilling ... everything, because it's life to a new degree. It involves every feeling available. And it should. Because while you will make some good choices, you're also going to make some bad choices. And you sense that. And it's good.

Growing in autonomy

The worst thing for you to do over the next few years is to avoid choosing. Ironically, that avoidance itself is a choice.

You're going to hear a lot about forming life habits as you leave home. One of the most important habits to start forming is the habit of being intentional in your actions.

Choose deliberately. Own the consequences of your choices. Don't avoid either. Don't be someone to whom things happen, a person whose influence and power is limited by choices other people make for them.

If college feels exilic, take a look at your experience and your choices, or lack of them. More often than not, that feeling will stem from not making a choice, not from making the wrong choice. Reassert yourself and your Self.

The island you're about to find yourself on is not an exile that will diminish your autonomy, but a new land where it will be amplified.

Mindy Ward is a licensed professional counselor and a licensed marriage and family therapist specializing in preteen, adolescent and young adult therapy. The views expressed in this opinion article are those of the author.