Managing PCSD - "Post Commencement Stress Disorder"
Handling Graduation Blues after Commencement
by Dr. Bernard Luskin in The Media Psychology Effect

Graduation Blues

Commencement preparations are underway for those colleges and universities that follow the traditional May/June academic year. Most students are very excited about getting their degrees and moving on to the next stage of their lives. Many, however, will be even more relieved than excited. Freedom from homework, deadlines, and grades are traditional stressors and commencement generally signals an end to all of that stress. Once those stressors are gone, it may prove difficult at first to adjust to what would then be the graduate’s “new normal.” In today’s world, many college graduates are in their thirties and beyond and the boom in online learning has thrown open the door for adults who would never have had time for those new experiences or the educational and career opportunities. Additional opportunities, however, may also create an environment for added anxiety for a growing graduating population. The growth in online learning is also expanding the number and diversity of graduates. Media centric online learning programs are adding substantial numbers to the degree earning population. Commencement events include larger numbers of graduates and the situations facing many of them are a cause for concern.

Defining Commencement

Commencement is an academic and social custom that symbolizes a rite of passage. Commencement imposes self-expectations of achievement (internal) and societal expectations that one is going to perform satisfactorily in the workplace (external). Fear of failure and inherent shame are several of the consequences if one does not meet the internal or external definitions of “success” after commencement.

The post commencement implications of stress.

Post Commencement Stress Disorder (PCSD) is a condition emerging from a diagnosis of symptoms affecting new graduates facing the task of choosing, changing or pursuing a career
beyond the protective bubble provided by the traditional college campus and now amplified by the variety of different approaches to graduation and commencement that are evolving. Anxiety and stress result from experiencing a mixture of excitement and fear of the unknown. Completing a degree brings both opportunity and insecurity to many new graduates as they pursue a vision and career. The diverse types and venues of commencements have been growing and changing and the frequency and nature of PCSD has not been sufficiently studied and incidents and occurrences’ have been under reported.

*Symptoms of PCSD*

- Feeling you are not in control of your life
- Feeling a lack of support after commencement
- Feelings of failure if the new graduate is unable to find work in their area of specialty in a reasonable length of time
- Sleeplessness and irritability
- Avoidance of normal, everyday activities*

*Please also be aware that these symptoms might not present themselves until some weeks or months after the commencement.*

In short, graduation can be stressful even though it is intended to be a joyous time for graduates. For those insulated by traditional programs, today’s younger graduates are being challenged to put their degrees to work in a world experiencing significant unemployment and significant social change. For the older adults with complicated lives, including families and other obligations, their generation is now experiencing a host of new challenges. Today, the job market is so unstable that it is a primary source of anxiety for those currently employed in addition to those entering the job market.

Whatever the causes of Post Commencement Stress Disorder, the “three easy steps” that can be helpful to any graduate are:

1. **Make a plan**

Just as you would look at road map if you were taking a cross-country trip, I suggest that you map the first six months that follows graduation. (If possible, do this prior to the graduation). You may choose to take a vacation or start an internship for the summer or do something else. No matter what it is you choose to do, having a plan of action can help organize your thoughts and reduce the stress of PCSD.

2. **Keep priorities in perspective**

When it comes to the anxiety over next steps after graduation, remember that you are not alone. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) there will be 1,781,000 students graduating this summer of 2012 and the good news is this year according to the NACE job outlook spring survey, companies will hire 10.2 percent more graduates in 2012/13 than in 2011. Let’s hope that this becomes the case.
While this is good news, it is always important to keep things in perspective while you are looking to grapple with adult life demands. Creating a budget that you follow can also help lessen the stress of not earning what you anticipated and will give you another goal to target. A budget is also key as graduates struggle to answer the variety of questions about “What’s next?” Also, keep in mind that a crowded highway isn’t the only road to your final destination. It may be smarter and faster to take an alternative route. If the dream job doesn’t materialize… working in a position related to that dream can position you to make it come true.

3. Confront the future

Take a mental snapshot of where you are today, where you want to be by the end of the summer, include your hopes and then envision your expectations for the end of the year. You may or may not know what it is you want to do in your career but that should not stop you from making a plan and taking action. If you take action by focusing on a job related to your field of study it is much better than no action at all. Self esteem and self worth are related to behaviors. Generate some positive action and the positive feelings will follow. Stay active by doing such tasks as updating your CV, joining a gym or a club and do the activities that make you happy. This is the best way to proceed.

There was a popular song recorded in 1944 with music by Harold Arlen and lyrics by Johnny Mercer that still holds true and sums up the therapy for managing PCSD. The insightful lyrics are:

1. You’ve got to accentuate the positive,
2. Eliminate the negative,
3. Latch on to the affirmative, and
4. Don’t mess with Mister In Between

Today you are facing a tough and changing job market and your courage and strength is to be commended. For those affected by PCSD, no matter how bad you feel or how discouraged you become, you should do something every day to reach your goal of getting the job you want. A phone call, a connection, a networking event or using social networking are all viable ways to let your friends and associates know what you are looking for and what you are qualified to do. No one will knock on your door and hand you the job of your dreams… that is something that you will have to make happen on your own.

Whatever you choose to do, positive steps bring positive results.

I wrote this piece because “commencement blues” is a common phenomenon among graduates from bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degree programs. It may be even more prevalent upon those earning an advanced degree than it is among undergraduates because the expectations and social pressures are more pronounced. There is little research in this area and it needs to be studied.

I remember feeling somewhat detached and sad when I graduated from my doctoral program. Sound crazy? Wonder why anyone would feel sad after such an achievement? That's just it. After
working toward a goal for nearly 10 years, achieving it can be a letdown. Sometimes you don't feel any different -- even if you thought you would. And, once you achieve a goal, it's time to look ahead for a new goal. Ambiguity, i.e., not having a new goal in mind, can cause the most stress.

**What to do:**

Be comfortable in the knowledge that many graduates both from undergraduate and graduate school feel post commencement anxiety. This reaction is entirely normal and presently common, especially because of the uncertain job market. Take control of your emotions, allow yourself to feel blue, but then work your way out of your blues by focusing on your positive factors, including pride in what you've achieved. Next, consider new goals and a new plan to reach these new goals. Accepting new challenges is the prescription to motivate you out of the graduation blues.

Please remember that *everything you focus on expands.* Focus on the positive and chances are that your commencement blues will change to a happy tune.