



Empowerly's Guide to



STUDENT WELLNESS

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www.empowerly.com

Email us: enrollment@empowerly.edu

Call Us: +1-(800)-491-6920



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Introduction

These days, teaching students about self care is more critical than ever. Therefore, a strong support network includes paying attention to every aspect of a student's life. Today we bring you the first in a two-part series chock full of wellness tips for teens as you navigate the road to college. This guide focuses on **Honing Critical Skills** to help students deepen their understanding and provide tips for success in life. Throughout high school, focusing on student wellness will help you learn more (and faster), thrive in your hobbies, and grow into a well-rounded person. At Empowerly, we want to see all students be able to thrive and become the best version of themselves.

Of course, no small part of the stress you face as a teenager comes from the college applications process itself. College applications can feel like a stressful, competitive race to some far-off finish line. That's why Empowerly is here. Instead, we suggest a slow and steady approach to win college apps (and your life outside school as well). What does that mean? Well, the more steadily you work on your overall goals the better your final product can be.



So, let's get started with what you need to know.

Why does slow and steady matter?

Well, if you rush through your application process, there are all kinds of things you might miss. Rewriting all your writing supplements; submitting an important component of your application; and “sending your test scores on time!” After all, Empowerly expert counselor Jennifer L. points out, “These are mistakes that won’t happen” if you just give yourself enough time.

Why do so many students rush instead?

It’s tempting to feel like you have to be busy all the time in order to keep up. High school students tend to glorify the underslept, overworked, high-achieving condition that leads to disorganization and burnout. When all your friends and peers feel and talk this way, it’s all too easy to let it creep into your habits, too.

Not to mention, it’s often a fault of procrastination! Yes, that plain old problem is back. If you wait too long, suddenly you have a giant pile of work; and probably, Jennifer adds, “thousands of words to write for your college essays.” Even if you do get it done on time, it won’t be your best product. And you tack on a whole lot of stress in the process. If you’re stressed already, you don’t need that extra pressure.



What can I do to keep myself on pace for college apps?

For those of you who are already running behind the clock, take a deep breath. We would recommend considering working with a counselor to help you “work quickly and efficiently through the most critical tasks, to ensure you don’t miss any important deadlines,” Jennifer underscores.

If you know you have time to start slow and steady on your college apps, reach out to Empowerly. We can help you make the absolute most of your time and produce top quality applications. If you decide to do it alone, again, the best thing you can do for yourself is to start early. Stay organized, and make the most of resources and guides like this one!

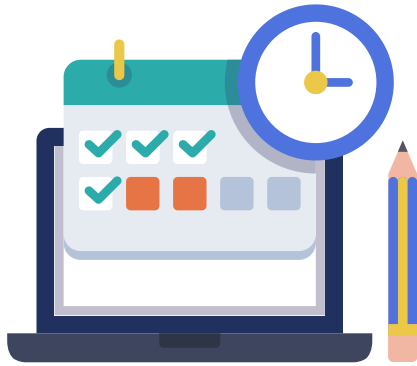
How can this help me win the race?

Not only will you [retain more information](#) by working at this pace, you also give yourself time to ruminate. Some say the hardest part is getting started. If you take small steps and give yourself time to double-check your work, you will be less stressed, more productive, and gain more from the experience.

At Empowerly, we like to emphasize that [the college application process is about introspection](#). If you are able to make the most of this time, you can come out on the other side with more [confidence in yourself and your future plans](#). Not to mention, the skills and life lessons you learn and practice now will come in handy.

Ready to get started? Let’s take the first steps together.





Goal Planning

Ever wished for a way to “hack” your brain into accomplishing your goals? We all have different aspirations, whether it’s getting into your dream school or achieving a certain score on the SAT. But sometimes these big-picture objectives can feel impossible. When your dreams seem to be unattainable, they may only cause [more stress and frustration](#) instead of inspiring progress. Well, you’re in luck, because there’s psychology to help with that! Let’s talk about a few brain hacks to reach your goals.

Tip 1: Be SMART about it.

If your goal is to become an astronaut, it might be hard to find the first steps and get started. (Kudos on picking a cool goal though.) While it’s definitely inspiring to dream big, it’s much easier to track your progress with smaller benchmarks. That’s why it’s important to pick SMART goals. SMART stands for [Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely](#).

To break that down, you want goals that are:

- **Specific.** What exactly do you want to achieve? What are the logistical details? Be as detailed as possible.

- **Measurable.** The more concrete, the better. Instead of thinking in terms of general improvement or just doing “your best,” try to set clear benchmarks you can objectively assess later on.
- **Achievable.** With a little hard work and dedication, are you reasonably able to accomplish your goal? Picking a goal that you believe you can reach will increase your motivation, and kick that defeatist attitude. Once you’ve accomplished this one, you can dream bigger and bigger—for now, pick a goal that is both challenging and exciting.
- **Timely.** Tie your end goal to a specific timeline. This will keep you from getting bogged down in the day-to-day work that leads to change over time. Prevent procrastination by keeping an eye on your calendar.

Tip 2: Visualize your success, you must, young Padawan.

Your imagination is like a superpower: an incredibly powerful tool that can be harnessed for good or evil, depending on your choices. Think about it: all your thoughts are made up of neurons and synapses firing away in that gooey brain jello upstairs. If you spend time imagining all the bad things that can happen, dwelling on harsh feedback you received, or constantly thinking of yourself as “not good enough,” eventually those are the synapse patterns your brain gets comfortable with, and falls back on. If you spend time reinforcing your progress, visualizing your success, reading positive notes-to-self, or intentionally changing your internal dialogue, you will get good at that kind of thinking instead. It’s not magic, just science.

Tip 3: Hold yourself accountable. Literally. Hold something.

The key here is to tangibly commit to your goals. **Write it as a checklist in your planner, use our goal-setting sheets, or download a productivity app.** (While you’re at it, prioritize your goals in order, and keep it simple. Start with one or two goals, then when you’ve gotten a hang of that, you can add more.)



If it helps you to tell a friend or parent about your plan, you can even recruit support to keep you on track!



Whatever method you choose to track your progress, give it some physical evidence this time. This will help you remember and acknowledge your end goal, instead of just letting your idea float around and fade away in a cloud of stress. Even something as small as a few colorful sticky notes on your bathroom mirror that you can look at regularly will remind you of what you want to achieve. Enlist physical cues to keep your brain focused.

Tip 4: Create balance.

It's important to find balance in your work by paying attention to all aspects of a healthy life, such as academics, extracurriculars, character, health, and friendships. When you have your eyes on graduation and college acceptances, you may become wrapped up in academics. Although your grades are important, **it is just as crucial to stay involved in personal enrichment, take care of yourself mentally and physically, and reward yourself for the accomplishments you've already made.** Don't sacrifice every other aspect of your life in order to get ahead—in the long run, that will actually sabotage your progress and set you back even further than where you started.

So now that you have four tricks to get you going...

There's no need to be overwhelmed by your big visions. Just stay focused on the smaller steps that are going to get you there. Take it day by day, and allow yourself to feel the joy of an accomplishment every time you check off a step, no matter how small! Before you know it, you will have formed lasting habits that will bring you to your original dream. And now that you're a goal-setting, goal-accomplishing expert... you can conquer whatever project you choose to set your mind to next.

Wait... what is next? Planning ahead will help you reduce the stress of high school. If you're looking for ways to put goal-planning into action, [this comprehensive infographic provides all the major benchmarks](#) you'll want to hit before college applications roll around. If you're looking for goals to enrich your personal growth, try [these high school rites of passage](#) to make the most of your time. You can use either of these suggestions as a starting point for your goals for the year.

Once you have goals, how do you go about putting them into action?



Time Management Skills

Time management is one of the most important study skills that you can master in high school. If you can manage your time well, you don't need to be the smartest in your class to be competitive. Plus, you'll have way more free time to do what you want and maintain your well-being.

So how do you do it?

Tips and Tricks

1. Keep a calendar.

This can be written or online, but it's important to keep track of your commitments and deadlines, and it's good to get in the habit of managing a calendar. Find one that you can continually reference throughout the semester or year.



2. Break up big things in advance.



For a paper due in a month, this could mean finding your sources in Week 1, making an outline in Week 2, writing a rough draft in Week 3, and editing your final draft in Week 4. For a test next Thursday, this might look like studying a different chapter each day this week, scheduling a study group for next Monday, taking the practice exam next Tuesday, and reviewing your flashcards one last time on Wednesday.

3. At the beginning of each week, figure out what you're doing each day.

Some students like to give themselves three "Most Important Tasks" (MIT) per day, since getting three things done each day feels reasonable, even if some of these things are more time-consuming than others. Try to build some wiggle room into your schedule, and schedule recurring commitments for the same time every week to create a routine.

4. Schedule regular working hours for each weekday and give yourself time off.

One Empowerly mentor described, “When I was in college, I tried to stick to the 8-hour workday schedule, (working until dinnertime), and I was usually able to stay ahead of deadlines this way. I also gave myself evenings and Saturdays off. This often led to lonely weeknights, since most of my peers crammed, but it gave me time to relax and enjoy myself.”



5. Minimize distractions.

Find a quiet place to work, and use an application/website blocker like StayFocusd or SelfControl. Maybe you leave your phone in another room. Whatever helps you stay on track.

6. Cut down on commitments.

Quality is more important than quantity. Figure out what you're the best at and what you enjoy the most. If your commitments are manageable, you're more likely to stick to them.

7. Most importantly, find a time management system that works for you.

The rest of the items on this list are suggestions based on what worked well for one person, but there are plenty of other people who have developed their own effective study skills.

Next, we'll tackle two of the most common obstacles that hold people back from successful study strategies.

Study Breaks

First, remember that it's good to take a study break, and not kill yourself in the process of studying! School is important, but so is your health. Don't study to the point where you are fatigued and losing sleep, or stressed so much your mental health is suffering. If you've been studying for hours and starting to feel tired, take a ten or fifteen-minute break.

What's more, don't feel bad for taking a break; your brain is tired and needs rest in order to function properly. You can push yourself to study for long amounts of time, but retain little information. It is more productive for you to break up the studying into thirty-minute sessions with a small break in between. Trust me, your brain will thank you.

However, sometimes, study breaks can become a rabbit hole. You take a break and the online labyrinth takes you to the unknown. As Empowerly team member Melanie F. explains, well-timed breaks are like pauses in songs: they keep the tempo and a steady pace. Everyone is different, but here are some surefire ways to get to the end of your study session with a feeling of accomplishment. Let's learn to take effective study breaks, starting now!



Plan Your Studying Goals and Break Activities Beforehand

“Before you dive into studying, create an action plan. I like the digital version,” Melanie said. “There, I have annual, monthly, weekly, and daily goals that are each listed in their own box with bolded titles and check boxes next to them. Now, I look at what needs to get done in the big picture and break it down into smaller and smaller pieces until I know what needs to get done today.”

“Once I know that, I break everything into increments of a half hour or an hour. So, if I need to write an essay, I’ll write the intro and two body paragraphs in one hour,” Melanie continued.

“For break activities, I may pick something from my list of goals to work on, such as a creative project or leisurely reading. Or, I may choose something relaxing like a short walk around the block.”

Set Timers

Setting timers is a great psychological trick to get you going. Once you know your study session schedule, set timers accordingly. For a one hour study block, set 60 minutes. Set a timer for your breaks—your breaks shouldn’t exceed 15-20 minutes. Just be honest, any longer and you’re down the rabbit hole. Any shorter, and you might not feel recharged enough. So keep it in this time range, and once the timer goes off, set it again and go right back to studying. This way, you won’t miss a beat!



Do Something Entirely Different



It's usually recommended that you do something physical for your break. Movement increases oxygen to the brain and freshens you up. Sitting down for a long time will do a lot of damage to your back (which is why some people use standing desks). Either way, make sure the activity contrasts with what you're studying (if you're doing math, try reading a book, for instance).

Know When to Stop for Longer

If you're feeling fried, you may be mentally depleted. This is actually a good thing and means you've completely exhausted your potential for the day. If you have a headache, or you're going around in circles, it means it's time to call it quits. You can rest knowing you maximize your super-student potential.

Effective study breaks are key to academic success. Learn these tips, practice them often, and watch your progress soar. We're proud of you! But what about when you just can't get yourself started in the first place?

Procrastination

Ah yes, the familiar evil. Procrastination will forever be the number one enemy of high school students everywhere. It may be hard, but learn to stop being a procrastinator.

- If you have a test coming up, study one chapter of your textbook every day of the week! This way you won't be cramming all the information in your head the night before, losing sleep, and stressing yourself out for no reason.
- If you are assigned a major project, break the project down into small tasks so you are not overwhelmed. Tackle one task at a time. This will allow you to feel a small sense of accomplishment every time you finish a task and make the project seem more doable.
- Another tip to prevent procrastination is to provide a reward or punishment for whatever you do. If you finish your homework on time, you can go watch that new movie with your friends! If you procrastinate and don't do it, don't allow yourself to go out.

So you see? Procrastinating can be a rite of passage, in a way. But, it is very different from a “mental break.” As we just learned in the previous section, a mental break happens after the work is done, or quickly recharges you to get back to it.

On the other hand, procrastinating keeps you in denial of it. Empowerly team member Natalie T. knows how it usually goes: “You check Facebook, take “breaks” from your break; essentially run laps for hours around the work you have to. And the tougher the assignment, the more tempting it is to put it off, which will make it even harder to complete.”

So, how do you get over procrastination? Natalie brings us three high-level ways to hijack your brain to get over the anxiety—and down to business.



1. Set a Timer for 10 Minutes — then Decide

“I learned this from a college professor who always delivered nuggets from Buddhist philosophy — this one has always worked for me,” Natalie said. “She told us that the reason we often procrastinate is because we don’t feel like we’ve chosen the work. The work may feel more like something thrown on us. But really, each time we do an assignment, we are involved — no one really has to do anything ever. We chose. And we chose all the time.”

Natalie continued, “So, this is what you do: set a timer for ten to fifteen minutes (whatever feels like a truly negligible amount of time), and do a part of your assignment. After the timer goes off, you have the choice to continue or not. If you don’t feel like working, then stop. The trick? Most often, you usually end up continuing.”

2. Change Where You Study

Maybe your room used to inspire you to work. But now, you just feel bored. The shine has rubbed off. It is probably time to switch environments — at least for a day or two. Research shows that when we are in new places, our brain is primed to pay more attention. New coffee shop down the road? Try it. Study with a friend instead of studying alone? Why not? Now, you can return to your regular work space with a fresh mind.

3. Keep it Simple

When there is a big assignment, we may be subconsciously overwhelmed. This is completely normal — but you need to make it clear to yourself that you can do this. Instead of thinking of it as one big project, break it down into concrete tasks. Remember when we talked about goal-setting? That is also a great way to overcome procrastination tendencies.



Now that we have covered a strong foundation in time management, let's take a closer look at how successful learners actually study.

Study Strategies

Establishing good study habits can take time and practice. However, the sooner you start focusing on forming good practices, the easier it will be to succeed in high school. With every passing year of school, students' workload gets heavier and more challenging. Students should have a plan to tackle the increasing schoolwork. Naturally, [good effective study habits](#) should be an important aspect of that plan.

It's important to remember that [habits are easier to keep than they are to form](#). So, if you start off early when your workload is lighter, you'll have an easier time getting good habits to stick. Here are some tips and tricks to stay on top of your work.

Ultimately, you'll need to try out a few strategies and see for yourself. Before you get going, you can even [test yourself here with a knowledge quiz](#). Figure out what works for you, and what combo of tactics help you most. Here are some of Empowerly's most critical study strategies and advice.



Make studying a daily habit.

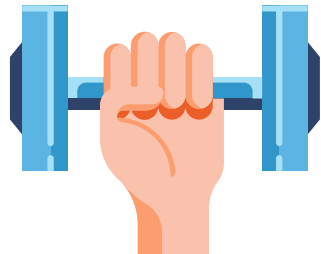
Successful students know how to manage their time wisely. They know how to make time for school, family, friends, and extracurriculars. Including studying your daily routine is a great way to improve your study habits. Studying regularly everyday will teach you to be a better student and teach you consistency. It will also eliminate a lot of stress from your life and will be a useful skill when you get to college. Look at your schedule and make note of all your daily commitments. After doing this, schedule a study session each day. Learn to be flexible because sometimes things will not always go your way and your schedule will change!

Become a teacher.

Empowerly team member Rashi J. explained, “Teaching the information helps you learn it better. Enlist anyone to be a fake student: a friend, parent, sibling, even pet. As you explain concepts, you will gain a whole new understanding of them. History was my best subject in high school and I used to review for tests by teaching my parents what I learned in class,” she said. “You can do the same for Science and even Math, by explaining topics you learned in class and describing the methods you are using to solve problems.”

Get moving.

Studies show that physical activities help increase memory and academic performance. Throw a ball around, do some crunches, pretty much just get moving while you study. It helps you stay more alert and engaged with what you are learning.



Try a study group for accountability.

Study groups are a great, social way to get work done. You can be more productive by splitting work up among friends and then having each friend teach the group their part. Or, talk through assignments and test preparation. Groups are especially important for classes that have a lot of projects; this ensures one person does not get stuck with all the work, and everyone gets the chance to learn the material. Not to mention, practicing group work is a good way to develop strategies you will continue to utilize in the future.

Ask for help.

This is something that most students fail to do and it could be the difference between a failing and successful student. **Ask your teachers for help!** Let down your pride and shyness and just ask. Teachers love when students ask questions, so make the most of your class time and ask questions, even if it's just to clarify.

Don't be afraid to stay after class for a little while if you need a little extra help either. Doing this will also teach you to be proactive in life and will be beneficial when you go to college. It will teach you to take an active approach in everything you do! Asking questions and showing that you're a hard worker will also win your teachers over for sure and is much better than having no relationship at all. Your teacher might even grade your papers a little easier, and you might even be able to get a letter of recommendation for college!

Keep in mind that this applies to any area of your life. Asking for resources, support, or guidance is nothing to be ashamed of; it's a necessary step on your way to succeeding in your education and life. Next up, let's discuss resources and where to find them.



Finding Resources

The first step on any student’s journey to wellness is finding resources that will help them thrive. Let’s get down to the basics.

Your college’s website (you’ll recognize the official site ends in “.edu”) is always a great place to look for community resources associated with the university itself. Student interest groups, announcements, events, and tutoring classes will likely be shared here. Take advantage of what your school has to offer!

While you’re searching the internet, we’ll help you understand how to balance technological resources throughout your education. Yes, Google, Wikipedia, and more are great resources for information; but, they [shouldn’t dictate what you learn!](#)

If you don’t see what you’re looking for right away, don’t lose heart. Sometimes the tools are harder to find. For example, this piece describes [seeking accessible education](#) at Stanford, and the journey to [find resources in college](#). While these articles convey only one person’s story, Empowerly is here to help ensure you have a strong suite of resources, no matter where your next step takes you.

And for those who want to start preparing now, check out this shortlist of [recommended resource apps for students](#), to make your life easier.

Finally, don’t forget to get your copy of our next issue, Empowerly’s Guide to Student Wellness: Adapting to Challenges.

