

# Back-to-School Stress: Grounding Tools for the First Weeks

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Have you ever felt overwhelmed before the semester even really started?

New syllabi stacking up.

A schedule that looked fine on paper and feels impossible in practice.

That first wave of “I’m already behind” before week one is even over.

For students, the first few weeks back can activate the I-System, the stress-driven part of the mind-body system, faster than almost any other time of year. Understanding why can make the adjustment easier.

## Why the First Weeks Hit So Hard

A new semester brings a flood of new Requirements all at once: “I should have my schedule figured out by now.” “I should already know how this class works.” “I shouldn’t feel this overwhelmed in week one.” When those expectations don’t match reality, which they rarely do at the start of a semester, the I-System reacts. The Depressor might jump in with “I’m already behind” or “everyone else has this figured out.” The Fixer follows close behind, pushing you to over-plan, re-read the syllabus for the fifth time, or take on more than you can actually manage, just to make the discomfort go away.

None of that means something is wrong with you. It means your I-System is doing exactly what it does under a sudden spike of new demands.

## How It Shows Up on Campus

- In the classroom: freezing up before raising your hand, convinced your question is “obvious.”
- With deadlines: spiraling over one late assignment instead of simply turning in the next one.
- In new social settings: reading a quiet roommate or classmate as rejection instead of just quiet.
- Late at night: replaying a comment you made in class hours after everyone else has moved on.

## A RELACS Pause Between Classes

You don’t need a quiet room or twenty minutes to interrupt the spiral. A short [RELACS](#) pause works even walking between buildings.

Mind-Body Bridging uses a practice called [RELACS](#) to help calm the I-System and reconnect with the present moment.

### Recognize

Notice the racing thoughts, the tight chest, the urge to check your phone for the tenth time.

### Label

Name what’s underneath it: “I have a Requirement that I should already have this figured out.” “My Fixer wants me to redo this whole assignment right now.”

### Come to Your Senses

Feel your backpack straps on your shoulders. Notice the sound of campus around you. Look at something real in front of you instead of the version of the semester playing out in your head.

## You Don’t Have to Have the Whole Semester Figured Out Today

[Natural Functioning](#), the calm, grounded state under all the noise, doesn’t require a perfect schedule or a clear head about every class. It just means you can meet this week without the whole semester riding on it.

## Ready to Build These Skills With Support?

The I-System Institute offers [free MBB Clinic sessions](#) and [virtual workshops](#) open to USU students at no cost — a

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good place to build these tools before midterms, not just during them.

The syllabus doesn't get shorter. But the story you're telling yourself about it can get a lot quieter.