More and more university students, especially freshmen, find their lives at college depressing. Their situation may become worse and develop into serious psychological dysfunction if left untreated, experts say.

According to a 2006 study conducted by The University of Hong Kong, depression, anxiety and stress levels are high among undergraduate students. Among the 14,000 full-time undergraduate students surveyed, approximately 31 percent graded their level of depression, anxiety and stress as "extremely severe."

Some undergraduates said they felt depressed while adapting to their new environment at school. Riise Hui, a freshman from the Logistics Engineering and Management department at Hong Kong Polytechnic University was very depressed in his first semester because university life was very different from secondary school.

He said the style of education, the way he studied, and the medium of instruction have changed. "It seems trivial to others, but it is a burden to me," Hui said.

He could not concentrate, so he caught up his sleeping hours in lectures. He passed time playing computer games. "Life was like that for two to three months," he said. By then he had almost abandoned his study in the first semester.

Everything seemed negative to him at that time. He felt pressured when his secondary friends invited him for gatherings.

"Gatherings with old friends should be happy, but I didn't want to go," he said. He felt ashamed when seeing his friends not having any problems adapting to, and being pleased with, their university lives. "But I can't adapt. I felt I was inferior and ashamed," said Hui.

Even when he went to these gatherings, he kept a distance from his old friends and avoided interacting with them.

He started losing weight and developed an eating disorder. He said he had no motivation to do anything.

Anita Lee, clinical psychologist in the Department of Psychology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong said Hui displayed some symptoms that suggest he might be suffering from depression.

"Weight-losing is the most significant symptom of depression," Lee said.

Other symptoms include insomnia, losing interests, feeling tired all the time, loss of appetite and losing concentration. She said the most serious symptom is having recurrent thoughts of death.

Lee suggested that people should seek help from professionals if they are dissatisfied with their lives. "Depression is just like a fever. If you have a fever you need to go to see a doctor," she said.

Thomas Yu, a second year university student was sent to Kwi Chung Hospital, which specialises in psychiatry, for a month to treat his depression. He said that the psychiatrist had helped him a lot.

At the early stage of his illness, Yu tried to hide his feelings because he felt his depression was embarrassing. Later, his problems became worse. He shook when he could not understand what the teachers were talking about at lectures. He burst out crying when he was taking tests. His friends took him to see a social worker.

The social workers suggested consultation with a psychiatrist and psychologist.

"Psychiatrists in the hospital helped him physiologically by prescribing various medication. Clinical psychologists helped him mentally by changing his negative thinking to the positive. He was asked to record his feelings and discuss the problems with the clinical psychologists regularly.

After finishing some take-home exercises prescribed by the clinical psychologists, and through consultation with the psychiatric specialists, Yu eventually recovered.

However, student counsellors at local universities said students are not willing to seek professional help out of fear of being labelled mentally ill.

Senior Student Counsellor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) Isaac Tam said there is a common misconception among students that visiting the counselling centre means they are crazy or problematic. Thus many have neglected the preventive aspects and development of counselling.

While universities encourage students to seek counselling on a voluntary basis, Dr Tam said it has also devised some ways to approach students who need help.

HKUST is planning to invite hall tutors and course tutors, who have closer relations with students, to receive training to detect students with depression, offer supportive care, and refer them to professional counsellors. The tutors can also assist in mental health education in cooperation with Student Counselling Service.

Lam Wai-lung, a university student who suffered from depression, said the counsellor helped him locate the root of his problem by chatting with him.

But support from friends, he said, is more important in helping him recover from the illness.

"The student counselling centre is just a place for a short break. What really helps is having a group of close friends around," he said.

A counsellor at the Hong Kong Psychological Counselling Centre, Wilfred Wong said that while support from family and friends is important, patients should realise they are also responsible for themselves.

He also advised students to be alert of the seriousness of depression, which may lead to other psychiatric problems if not treated properly.

"Depression is the very initial stage of many psychotic problems. Other kinds of psychotic problems like schizophrenia and paranoia will develop if depression is not treated properly," he said.

"If the depressing feeling is not treated appropriately, it may become a kind of mental illness."