

Stress & The College Student

Many people experience stress as they combine busy lives and the demands of study and or work while trying to also save time for friends and family. For some people, stress becomes almost a way of life. We all experience episodic stress – getting ready for a major exam, completing an important paper, perhaps getting ready for an important interview. However, a continuous “state” of stress should not become a way of life. We know that stress – over a prolonged period of time – can have increase certain health risks, to say nothing of the wear and tear that happens to relationships and general wellbeing.

This simple guide uses materials adapted from several college campuses with active stress reduction programs. It explores the origins of stress and provides some basic ways to assess the level of stress you may be feeling and then suggests some easy-to-incorporate ways to decrease the level of stress.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is simply the body's non-specific response to any demand made on it. Stress is not by definition synonymous with nervous tension or anxiety. Stress provides the means to express talents and energies and pursue happiness; it can also cause exhaustion and illness, either physical or psychological; heart attacks and accidents. The important Thing to remember about stress is that certain forms are normal and



Recognizing Stress

The following are indicators that you may be experiencing stress.

- ^ General irritability
- ^ Elevated heart rate
- ^ Increased blood pressure
- ^ Increased accident proneness
- ^ Floating anxiety-anxious feeling for no specific reason
- ^ Trembling
- ^ Insomnia
- ^ Headaches
- ^ Indigestion
- ^ Pain in neck and/or lower back
- ^ Changes in appetite or sleep pattern

essential. As the body responds to various forms of physical or psychological stress, certain predictable changes occur. These include increased heart rate, blood pressure (systolic and diastolic), and secretions of stimulatory hormones. These responses to stress will occur whether the stress is positive or negative in nature. In lay terms, it is known as the "fight or flight" mechanism. Continual exposure lowers the body's ability to cope with additional forms of psychological or physiological stress.

The results of continuing stress may cause disruption in one or more of the following areas of health: physical, emotional, spiritual and/or social. Stress is a process that builds. It is more effective to intervene early in the process rather than later. Try to become aware of the signs that suggest the process has begun.

COMMON STRESSORS IN COLLEGE LIFE INCLUDE:

- Greater academic demands
- Being on one's own in a new environment – with new responsibilities
- Changes in family relations and one's social life
- Financial responsibilities
- Exposure to new people, ideas, and temptations
- Being away from home, often for the first time
- Making decisions, on a higher level than one is used to
- Substance abuse
- Awareness of one's sexual identity and orientation
- Preparing for life after graduation
- Psychological make-up can also play a role in vulnerability to depression. People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism, or are readily overwhelmed by stress may be especially prone to depression.

TAKING STRESS SERIOUSLY

For many young adults, college is the best time of life. These critical years of adjustment can also be undermined by depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders. Researchers are finding that many mental illnesses are traced to trauma, whose damage surfaces in times of stress and change, such as the college years. The statistics listed below are evidence that stress - in ourselves or in someone about whom we care – should be taken and treated seriously.

College students are feeling more overwhelmed and stressed than fifteen years ago, according to a recent UCLA survey of college freshman. More than 30% of all college freshman report feeling overwhelmed - a great deal of the time. Thirty-eight percent of college women report feeling frequently overwhelmed.

Depression affects over 19 million adults in the US annually. At colleges nationwide, large percentages of college students are feeling overwhelmed, sad, hopeless and so depressed that they are unable to function. In a recent national college health survey, 10% of college students had been diagnosed with depression. Women, who tend to be more forthcoming (or are less stigmatized) in seeking treatment for depression, recorded a rate of 13%.

Anxiety disorders affect millions of adults every year, and anxiety levels among college students have been rising since the 1950s. In 2000, 7% of college students reported experiencing anxiety disorders within the previous year. Women are five times as likely to have anxiety disorders.

Eating disorders affect 5-10 million women and 1 million men, with the highest rates occurring in college-aged women. Advantaged, white women are at the highest risk.

Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death among the US population, the third leading cause of death for all those aged 15-24, and the second leading cause of death in college populations.

Individuals who are stressed are more likely to have accidents – including those involving motor vehicles, and, to be more careless with seatbelt use.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 7.8% of men and 12.3% of women ages 18-24 report frequent mental distress – a key indicator for depression and other mental disorders.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO STRESS?

(From N A S Database, 'Stress Management for the Health of It')

Stress affects us on many levels. The following is a list of stress symptoms that are the most typical reactions to stress. Go through and check all that apply. Next, go through and circle the ones that occur the most frequently.

Physical

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> headaches | <input type="checkbox"/> accident-prone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fatigue | <input type="checkbox"/> teeth grinding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> insomnia | <input type="checkbox"/> restlessness |
| <input type="checkbox"/> weight change | <input type="checkbox"/> increased alcohol, drug, tobacco use |
| <input type="checkbox"/> colds | <input type="checkbox"/> neck and shoulders tighten up/ache |
| <input type="checkbox"/> digestive upsets | <input type="checkbox"/> pounding heart |

Mental

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> forgetfulness | <input type="checkbox"/> confusion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dull senses | <input type="checkbox"/> lethargy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> poor concentration | <input type="checkbox"/> no new ideas |
| <input type="checkbox"/> low productivity | <input type="checkbox"/> boredom |
| <input type="checkbox"/> negative attitude | |

Emotional

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> anxiety | <input type="checkbox"/> irritability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> the "blues" | <input type="checkbox"/> depression |
| <input type="checkbox"/> moods swings | <input type="checkbox"/> nervous laugh |
| <input type="checkbox"/> bad temper | <input type="checkbox"/> worrying |
| <input type="checkbox"/> crying spells | <input type="checkbox"/> easily discouraged |

Social

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> isolation | <input type="checkbox"/> lowered sex drive |
| <input type="checkbox"/> resentment | <input type="checkbox"/> nagging |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loneliness | <input type="checkbox"/> fewer contacts with friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lashing out | <input type="checkbox"/> using / manipulating people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> clamming up | |

Study your list. Which of your reactions cause you the most concern? Did any patterns surface? Can you name one effective way of coping with each of your stress reactions?

[If you need ideas here, look at the next few pages of this article.]

After you recognize the stress reactions and patterns and your best coping mechanisms. you can then create a stress management program to address the stressors in your life.

If, after you complete this informal assessment, you want to know more about the origins of your stress, the College Readjustment Rating Scale on the last page of this resource can give you some indicators.

Remember - it is very important to seek professional help if you are struggling!

STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

(suggestions from Indiana University Health Center)

Following are tips on how to maintain a healthier lifestyle and to prepare you to cope with the stress of everyday living.

Structure each day to include a minimum of 20 minutes of aerobic exercise.

Eat well-balanced meals, more whole grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables. Substitute fruits for desserts.

Avoid caffeine. The substance may aggravate anxiety, insomnia, nervousness and trembling.

Reduce refined sugars. Excess sugars cause frequent fluctuation in blood glucose levels, adding stress to the body's physiological functioning.



Reduce alcohol and drugs. These substances may add to headaches, swelling, decrease coping mechanisms, and add to depression.

Get at least 7 hours of sleep nightly.

Spend time each day with at least one relaxation technique - imagery, daydreaming, prayer, yoga or meditation.

Take a warm bath or shower.

Go for a walk.

Get in touch! Hug someone, hold hands, or stroke a pet. Physical contact is a great way to relieve stress.

Some additional suggestions for reducing stress levels and enhancing your college experience:

- Keep your space and consequently your mind organized.
- Go to class.
- Keep up with course work (the rule of thumb is two hours of study per one hour in class).
- Get involved with campus activities.
- Maintain communication with your family.
- Take advantage of campus resources and choose a career path.
- Form healthy relationships.
- Talk to someone about your problems (family member, friend, college counselor).
- Get to know your professors.

Still not convinced you can do anything to reduce your level of stress? If your response to these tips is, "oh sure." When and how do I incorporate one more thing into my already busy life, read on.

HOW TO STAY STRESSED - A TONGUE -N-CHEEK APPROACH

[adapted from Stanford University Campus Health Center]

Apparently, some students enjoy stress. Are these benefits appealing?

- Stress helps you seem important.

Anyone as stressed as you must be working very hard and, therefore, is probably doing something very crucial.

- It helps you to maintain personal distance and avoid intimacy.

Anyone as busy as you certainly cannot be expected to form emotional attachments to anyone. And let's face it, you are not much fun to be around anyway.

- It helps you avoid responsibilities.

Obviously, you are too stressed to be given any more work. This gets you off the hook for all the mundane chores; let someone else take care of them.

- It helps you avoid success.

Why risk being "successful" when by simply staying stressed you can avoid all of that? Stress can keep your performance level low enough that success will not ever be a threat.

- Stress also lets you keep your directive style

"Just do what I say!" is generally permissible under crisis conditions. If you maintain a permanently stressed crisis atmosphere, you can justify telling folks what to do all the time.

Advice for folks who do not already have enough stress in your life - Here are a few more clinically proven methods to stay stressed or to increase your stress level.

Never exercise.

Exercise wastes a lot of time that could be spent worrying.

Eat, drink and smoke anything you want.

If cigarette smoke cannot cleanse your system, a balanced diet is not likely to do it either.

Gain weight.

Work hard at staying at least 25 pounds over your recommended weight.

Take plenty of stimulants.

The old standards of caffeine, nicotine, sugar, and cola will continue to do the job just fine.

Avoid soft, sensitive "woo-woo" practices.

Ignore the evidence suggesting that prayer, meditation, yoga, deep breathing, and/or mental imaging help to reduce stress. The work ethic is good for everyone, always!

Get rid of your social support system

Let the few friends who are willing to tolerate you know that you concern yourself with friendships only if you have time, and you never have time. If a few people persist in trying to actively care about you, avoid them.

Personalize all criticism.

Anyone who criticizes any aspect of your work, family, dog, room, house, or car is mounting a personal attack. Do not take time to listen, be offended, and then return the attack!

Throw out your sense of humor.

Staying stressed is no laughing matter, and it should not be treated as one.

Males and females alike - be macho – or at least stoic!

Never, never ever ask for help, and if you want it done right, do it yourself!

Become a workaholic.

Put work before everything else, and be sure to take work home evenings and weekends. Keep reminding yourself that vacations and time off are for sissies.

Discard good time management skills and work/study boundaries.

Schedule in more activities every day than you can possibly get done and then worry about it all whenever you get a chance.

Procrastinate.

Putting things off to the last second always produces a marvelous amount of stress.

Worry about things you cannot control

Worry about the stock market, earthquakes, the approaching ice age, you know, all the big issues.

Become not only a perfectionist but set impossibly high standards...

And either beat yourself up, or feel guilty, depressed, discouraged, and/or inadequate when you do not meet them."

AN ANALYTICAL LOOK AT STRESS

The College Readjustment Rating Scale is a Rutgers University (Health Services)* adaptation of Holmes and Rahe's Life Events Scale. It has been modified for college age adults and should be considered as a rough indication of stress levels that can have possible health consequences.

Using the College Readjustment Rating Scale – on the following page, each event, such as one's first term in college, is assigned a value that represents the amount of readjustment a person has to make as a result.

To determine your stress score, circle the number of points corresponding to the events you have experienced in the past six months or are likely to experience in the next three months. Then add up the circled numbers and record your answer in the total column.

*http://healthnet.rutgers.edu/stress/stressed_out.asp [accessed June 22, 2004]

Event	Points
Death of spouse	100
Female unwed pregnancy	92
Death of a parent	80
Male partner in unwed pregnancy	77
Divorce	73
Death of a close family member	70
Death of a close friend	65
Divorce between parents	63
Jail term	61
Major personal injury or illness	60
Marriage	55
Fired from a job	50
Loss of financial support from college	48
Failing grade in important or required class	47
Sexual difficulties	45
Serious argument with significant other	40
Academic probation	39
Change in major	37
New love interest	36
Increased workload from college	31
Outstanding personal achievement	29
First term in college	28
Serious conflict with instructor	27
Lower than expected grades	25
Change in college (transfer)	24
Change in social activities	22
Change in sleeping habits	21
Change in eating habits	19
Minor violations of the law (e.g. traffic ticket)	15
Total	

1. Persons with scores of 300 and higher have a high health risk and might consider seeking professional assistance to manage stress.

2. Persons scoring between 150 and 300 have about a 50 - 50 chance of serious health change within two years and may want to do frequent stress self checks to be certain they are coping as well as they think they are.

3. People scoring 150 and below have a 1 in 3 chance of a serious health change, but should still consider stress reduction activities.

Everyone should consider retaking this survey every so often to determine your health risk.

CREATIVE VISUALIZATION AND SIMULATION

If you are beginning to think there might be something to this “stress” stuff, the exercise that follows could be helpful – either for you to use as an individual, or perhaps something that could be incorporated into a group of which you are a part. Yes, this is the woo-woo thing.

Setting the Scene

Many accomplished artistic performers, successful corporate types, victorious athletes seem to have a common ability. They prepare themselves mentally for any challenge they encounter. The performance in the face of these challenges often seems effortless. The reason it appears effortless is that these individuals have practiced the skill over and over in their mind hundreds of times. They have seen themselves perform flawlessly and that becomes their self-fulfilling prophecy. The power of visualization is so strong that it has been found to influence our physiology at a microbiological level. The literature is full of examples of controlled studies where visualization has been used to enhance both physiology and performance.



Many readily available commercial relaxation tapes use examples of guided imagery to help people relax. If one can create a visual scene of relaxation the body will adjust accordingly. For some, this is an effective technique. However, visualization for relaxation often works best when individuals are able to create their own relaxing scenes. Not everyone is relaxed by floating on waves or in the clouds. If you want to use visualization for relaxation, imagine being in the most pleasant environment you have ever known. Re-create that special place as vividly as possible. Once created – go there with your any and all of your sensory apparatus – see that place, feel that place, hear the sounds of that place and close your mind to competing thoughts and worries. Stay in that place for as long as possible.

You might wish to combine the visualization with some simple relaxation techniques. If you are lying flat, once you have reached a comfortable place, beginning with your toes, relax your muscles. Work upward, ankles, knees, hips abdomen, diaphragm, go out your arms to your fingers, wrists, elbows, shoulders, neck and finally let your head be suspended.

Positive Affirmations

Another way of relieving stress through gaining better control of your environment is through positive self-talk. It is difficult if not impossible to visualize positive outcomes if your self-talk is negative. The mind will believe what you tell it. It is important to combine visualization exercises with positive affirmations. Poor performers and those with a negative self-image tend to be self-deprecating. If you consistently tell yourself you cannot do something, you will be very surprised if you are successful.

It can be very difficult to change negative self talk if this is part of your personality, part of who you are, or part of the message system that you received from parents or other significant adults as you were growing up. Often when people try to change, they end up putting themselves down even more each time they catch themselves saying something negative. For example, "I should have done better on that exam, I am so dumb sometimes. There I go criticizing myself again, I'm such a loser".

Rather than trying to eliminate negative self-talk, try to reduce it by replacing it with positive phrases you have practiced saying to yourself. This is not easy and often people will feel silly and phony using affirmations (i.e., Stuart Smalley from SNL, "You're good enough, you're smart enough and gosh darn it, people like you"). If someone has spent her/his whole life listening to negative scripts, it is unlikely that they will immediately believe the positive statements they make. It takes time and practice.

Following are some suggestions for the use of positive affirmations.

Use phrase affirmations using the first person singular and in the present tense when possible. Take ownership of the statement. For example, "I am...", "I can..."

Use phrase affirmations in the most positive way possible. Avoid the use of words like "no", "don't", and "not" in your affirmations. This is very important because the brain is not capable of visualizing a negative action. If you are trying to visualize yourself "not" doing something, you must visualize yourself doing that action. Try visualizing "don't eat the cookie."

The right side of your brain is predominately visual; the left side is logical and literal. In many ways, they do not communicate very well. If you are practicing self-hypnosis, all suggestions should be positive. To illustrate this, ask someone to do exactly as you say, then tell him or her to close their eyes and not think about what their hands are doing. If you ask them, they will tell you - when you asked them not to think of their hands, they thought of their hands. Your visual brain cannot understand the word not.

If you are taking an exam, or preparing to give a speech, or going for job interview, or asking someone for a date, if you say, "don't get stressed out", you are creating a picture of someone who is stressed out. If you say, "I feel calm and relaxed, I am confident and alert" then you are creating an image of someone who is relaxed and confident.

The implications of this can be profound. If you are giving instructions to someone, tell people what you want them to do, not what you do not want them to do.

Make affirmations short, simple and clear. Brevity furthers. Long complex statements are more difficult to internalize.

Use as many senses as possible in affirmations and visualizations. Verbalize statements aloud after writing them down. Better yet, watch yourself and listen to yourself say these statements while standing in front of a mirror. When you visualize your performance, recreate as much of the scene as possible to create an accurate simulation. Imagine what it sounds like, what it feels like, smells like, etc....

Make affirmations and visualizations emotional. Imagine what it will feel like to be happy, successful, powerful, self-assured. Visualize yourself experiencing these emotions. At the same time, work to eliminate statements of negative emotions from your life (e.g., I'm tired, I'm sad/depressed, I'm lonely, I'm bored, I'm overwhelmed, etc.).

In summary, create an image of someone you want to become - someone doing what you want to be doing - and then continue to focus on that image. Figure out what you want to be able to say about yourself and then start saying it.

A FINAL WORD ON STRESS

If you are experiencing, or someone you know seems to be experiencing, stress that markedly affects or impairs functioning on a daily basis, seek professional help.

Talk with a counselor.

Talk with a health care professional.

Talk with a pastor or chaplain.