

Managing Stress

If you have been experiencing an increased sense of stress lately, congratulate yourself. It probably shows that you are in touch with your feelings. However, if you feel bad or somehow inadequate because you feel stressed, think again. No one escapes stress.

A major difference between those who feel overwhelmed by stress and those who do not is not the presence or absence of stress, but the ability to recognize stress when it occurs and to manage it.

Stress management involves four overall tasks:

- Recognize and understand the signs of stress
- Identify and understand the sources of stress
- Learn to manage controllable sources of stress
- Learn to support yourself and cope with stress reactions to situations beyond your control

Signs of Stress

Over-stress reactions include a wide range of symptoms, including physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive (thought process) signs.

Physical symptoms:

- Stomach ache, headache, dizziness, eye strain
- Sleep problems (too little or too much)
- Problems concentrating

Feelings:

- Moodiness (Feeling low or depressed)
- Anxiety (Tense, nervous, jumpy, unable to relax)
- Irritable or hostile (Getting angry over minor things)
- Fearfulness (Afraid to make decisions)

Behaviors:

- Exaggerating normal behavior (hard workers turn into workaholics; quiet people become isolated)
- Withdrawing (from friends, family, and coworkers)
- Working harder (but getting less done)
- Blaming others (finding fault, being critical or hard to please)
- Having fewer stress-free conversations with family and friends
- Having fights (about everything and nothing)

- Sharing fewer satisfactions with family and friends
- Having other family members with stress problems (Stress is contagious.)
- Pretending that nothing is wrong (denial)

Thoughts:

- This is horrible/unbearable. I'm not good enough.
- I'm going to go crazy.

It's important to recognize that these are all signs of stress overload, probably not of more a more serious condition.

Sources of Stress

It goes almost goes without saying that attending college is in itself inherently stressful: There are so many activities, decisions, expenses, expectations and new roles involved. Many people do not realize how great an impact this stress can have on their happiness, sense of well-being and their. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of attending college can be the disparity between its stressfulness, on one hand, and, on the other, expectations that it will be a time of happiness and fulfillment.

Remember that other sources of stress (not related to college) don't go away because you are attending college. In fact, these additional stressors compound college stress. Keep in mind that all change in stressful, including good change. Common sources of high stress can include:

- Work, especially overwork and changes at work--including good changes like a promotion
- Loss of a family member, friend, pet
- Illness
- Birth of a child, demands of child-rearing
- Moving
- Travel
- Over-commitment, taking on too many tasks and obligations (Sound familiar?)

Some of these stressors are controllable. For example, some activities and commitments are optional. You control whether to accept many social invitations, how many classes to take at a time, etc. Other stressors are beyond your control. No one can prevent all personal losses and illnesses.

To deal with over-stress, you must first recognize and manage of those sources of stress that are within your control.

Taking Control of Stressors

If you are experiencing symptoms of serious stress overload, you must consider doing what you can to reduce your stress load. Sometimes this means dropping a class or working fewer hours at your job, for example, even if it means taking longer to finish your degree or doing with a bit less money than you had planned for a limited time.

You may need to reexamine your assumptions about how much you expect yourself to handle. It can be painful to realize that we can't necessarily do and accomplish everything that we would like during the time we have in mind or have available. Some choices are difficult. Use time management strategies to prioritize and set limits.

Many social obligations can be deferred. Sometimes it seems that everyone wants to get together. This can be fun, but sometimes it's too much. There are only so many hours in the day. People will understand when you tell them that you are overtaxed by the demands of college.

Even after you've done what you can to control sources of stress, there will probably be plenty of "uncontrollable" stressors remaining. Never fear, there are many strategies to help support yourself and cope with stress reactions.

Support Yourself During Stress

There are many additional things you can do to support your ability to handle and recover from stress.

- Get adequate sleep. Seven or eight hours minimum on a schedule regular. More than an hour or so of difference in bedtime or waking can disrupt your body's daily cycle. Your energy level may take several days to recover. You may be used to operating on less sleep and an irregular schedule, but you can't handle stress as well in this mode.
- Get some exercise every day (at minimum, 3 times/week, 20-30 minutes). Choose an activity that you enjoy, not one that seems like a chore. Exercise releases endorphins, natural chemicals promote calm and contentment. Start slow if you haven't been exercising--walking is a good starter. Exercise discharges stress tension from the body.
- Eat three or more small to medium meals on a regular schedule with good nutrition, including fruits and veggies, to maintain a balanced energy and coping level. Keep your eating moderate and avoid any drastic diets, etc. Take a standard multiple vitamin supplement to fill-in any nutritional gaps. Drink a lot of water. Water assists the body in eliminating biochemical waste.
- Take care of your body by avoiding excess sugar, caffeine (coffee, cola, tea), nicotine, alcohol, drugs, etc. All of these cause your system to 'crash'. Even though some provide a temporary stimulating or relaxing effect, ultimately your energy level suffers. These substances take more of a toll than you realize, until you have to handle stress. Cut down gradually over a period of a week or so to prevent severe withdrawal symptoms.
- Learn relaxation exercises or meditation (slow, deep breathing; imagine pleasant scenes; tense & relax muscles) Listen to relaxing music; read for pleasure. These activities decrease tension and help to process stress reactions.
- Maintain your perspective. Sometimes how you look at things can greatly increase or reduce their stressfulness. Keep an eye out for your unhelpful and untrue thoughts. ("I just can't do this.") Think through why these thoughts are incorrect and unhelpful. Then substitute more correct/helpful thoughts. ("If I just take one thing at a time, I'll accomplish my most important goals. But if I try to

think about or do everything at once, I'll get overwhelmed.") If you don't substitute positive thoughts, the negative ones will prevail.

- Use time management techniques to avoid becoming swamped. Make lists, get a sense of accomplishment checking off tasks as you get things done. If you can't stand to face a task, shift temporarily to another priority, then tackle the unpleasant item when you feel stronger.
- Be sure to have an emotional outlet. Talk to others about the stress. (Everyone has or has had stress!) In the press of activity we tend to put our emotional needs on hold. Expectations for an upbeat mood can be difficult when we have other feelings. Set aside time for yourself. Take special care to express your "negative" feelings. Stress is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, dealing with stress appropriately is a sign of maturity and health.
- Make time for fun and other pleasurable activities.

Don't pressure yourself to make too many changes all at once. We all change at our own pace.

If, after trying these suggestions, you still feel excessively over-stressed or run down, you might want to seek some professional advice.

How Vulnerable Are You To Stress?

Mark from 1 (almost always) to 5 (never), according to how much of the time each statement applies to you.

- ___ 1. I eat at least one hot, balanced meal a day.
- ___ 2. I get 7 to 8 hours of sleep at least 4 nights a week.
- ___ 3. I give and receive affection regularly.
- ___ 4. I have at least one relative within 50 miles on whom I can rely.
- ___ 5. I exercise to the point of perspiration at least twice a week.
- ___ 6. I smoke less than half a pack of cigarettes a day.
- ___ 7. I take fewer than five alcoholic drinks a week.
- ___ 8. I am the appropriate weight for my height.
- ___ 9. I have an income adequate to meet my basic expenses.
- ___ 10. I get strength from my religious beliefs.
- ___ 11. I regularly attend club or social activities.
- ___ 12. I have a network of friends and acquaintances.

- ___13. I have one or more friends to confide in about personal matters.
- ___14. I am in good health (including eyesight, hearing, teeth).
- ___15. I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried.
- ___16. I have regular conversations with the people I live with about domestic problems, e.g., chores, money, and daily living issues.
- ___17. I do something for fun at least once a week.
- ___18. I am able to organize my time effectively.
- ___19. I drink fewer than three cups of coffee (or tea or cola) a day.
- ___20. I take quiet time for myself during the day.

___ **SUBTOTAL - 20** = ___ **TOTAL**

To get your score, add up the figures. Then, subtract 20. Any number over 5 indicates a vulnerability to stress. You are seriously vulnerable if your score is between 25 and 55, and extremely vulnerable if your score is over 55.

Adapted from a test developed by Lyle H. Miller and Alma Dell Smith at Boston University Medical Center

If you or someone you care about would like more information, come in and speak with a professional counselor in 0203 James Hall. All services are free and confidential.

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