



## Stress Management

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Stress is part of everyday life. Examples of stressful situations for university students may include meeting high academic demands, being in new social settings, being away from home for the first time, returning to study after a long time, sitting examinations or speaking in public. While mild stress can actually be beneficial as a motivator, higher levels of ongoing stress can lead to medical, psychological and social problems.

### **WHAT IS STRESS?**

Stress refers to the demands, pressures or forces applied to us. Stress also involves our perception of threat about internal or external events. Threat stimulates the release of stress hormones which produce the 'fight-flight' response. The fight-flight response prepares us for physical, emotional and mental action and is essential for survival.

When the stressors we face are psychological, the fight-flight hormones are still activated. As we do not respond physically to these stressors, the hormones remain in our bodies leading to ongoing feelings of tension and anxiety. Positive management of stress results in positive emotions such as enjoyment, satisfaction, enthusiasm and excitement. However, too much stress can be debilitating when it causes detrimental changes in how we think, feel and behave.

## **HOW IS STRESS DIFFERENT FROM ANXIETY?**

Stress is generally in response to known pressures, whereas anxiety is often anticipatory in nature and may be characterised by worry or fears about perceived threats or danger in the future.

Anxiety is often triggered when stress levels are already high and this may make it difficult to separate the two, or to identify what we are anxious about.

We can also make ourselves anxious with negative 'self-talk' that focuses on what might go wrong. If we think this way we will tend to over-estimate the likelihood of threat and at the same time underestimate our ability to cope with it.

Fears and worries are not normal when they become overwhelming and interfere with our daily living and ability to cope effectively. When fears and worries have reached this proportion, they are symptoms of an anxiety disorder. 'Anxiety disorders' is a general name for a group of more specific difficulties that can be managed with professional help.

Living with high stress or anxiety can be exhausting and debilitating. If you experience symptoms of stress or anxiety that interfere with your daily functioning and your ability to cope effectively, you may benefit from professional help.

## **SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS**

Below is a list of symptoms you might experience with stress. People vary in the ways they experience stress, so not all of these are relevant to every person.

### **Physical**

Increased heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, difficulty breathing, headaches, dizziness, dry mouth, nausea, diarrhoea, constipation, frequent urination.

Remember that physical symptoms might be caused by things other than stress, so if in doubt, always check with your GP.

### **Thoughts**

Difficulty concentrating, distractibility, forgetfulness, worry, negative self-talk.

### **Feeling**

Anxious, nervousness, frightened, moodiness, depressed, sadness, apathy, fatigue, guilt and shame, low self-esteem, low self-confidence.

### **Behaviour**

Sleep disturbance, emotional outbursts, irritability, withdrawal, crying easily, increased smoking/drinking, excessive eating or appetite loss, changes in activity level.

## **SOURCES OF STRESS**

Stress can come from both positive and negative events in our lives. However, major life changes are the greatest contributors of stress for most people as they place the greatest demand on resources for coping.

### **Major life changes**

- new relationships / separation / divorce
- new jobs
- lifestyle changes
- deaths / losses
- going to university

### **Environmental events**

- time pressure
- competition
- financial problems
- noise and crowding
- external demands

## Our thoughts

- External events are a source of stress, but our interpretation and reaction to events can magnify our response. For example, seeing a dog and thinking how dangerous it looks can lead to stress, while thinking how friendly it looks can lead to positive feelings.
- People interpret and respond differently to the same situation – public speaking is relaxing for some and stressful for others.
- Habitual negative thinking patterns result in over-estimating threat and under-estimating our ability to cope with it (i.e. ‘catastrophising’).
- Negative interpretation of ‘threat’ results in unpleasant thoughts, feelings and sensations and unproductive behaviours.

## STRESS AND PERFORMANCE

When stress is too low a person may be under stimulated resulting in boredom, poor motivation and low levels of activity. As stress increases, it may help a person perform at their optimal level, for example when an assignment is due, motivation to complete the assignment increases.

When stress rises above a certain level performance becomes impaired. If stress continues to increase, performance is likely to deteriorate. So, it is important to become aware of your optimal stress level and work at maintaining it.

## PRACTICAL WAYS TO COPE WITH STRESS

The key to stress management is to reduce the magnitude of the fight-flight response by increasing our ability to manage stress and/or to predict that we will have a measure of control over stressful events. Many stressors can be changed, eliminated or minimised.

Here are some things you can do to reduce your level of stress.

1. Become aware of your own reactions to stress:
  - recognise your sources of stress;
  - understand how stress affects you;
  - find your optimal level of stress tolerance;
  - recognise and accept your limits;
  - remember everyone manages stress levels differently.
2. Learn to use your time wisely:
  - evaluate how you are budgeting your time;
  - anticipate and plan for ‘busy’ periods;
  - set realistic goals;
  - eliminate procrastination;
  - make a weekly schedule and try to stick to it.
3. Practice rational thinking – use positive self-talk: “I’m ok, I just need to slow down and pace myself”.
4. Focus on your good qualities and accomplishments.
5. Avoid passive worrying, self-criticism and unnecessary competition.
6. Develop assertive behaviours – learn to say “no”.
7. Get a hobby or two – relax and have fun.
8. Exercise regularly – burn off excess stress hormones.
9. Eat a balanced diet daily and avoid excess caffeine and alcohol.

10. Learn and practice relaxation techniques:

- Use breathing techniques to calm you down.
- Muscle tension can be released through alternately contracting and relaxing muscle groups.
- Meditate to balance your mind/body.

11. Establish and make use of a good social network – talk with someone you can trust.

12. When studying for an exam:

- study in short blocks;
- gradually lengthen the time you spend studying;
- take frequent breaks;
- remember to keep a balance between study and leisure;
- attend exams skills workshops.

- If anxiety is severe and/or prolonged, consult your general medical practitioner.

*We would like to acknowledge our gratitude and appreciation for the ideas and information obtained from the University of Buffalo (USA) and Massey University (NZ) fact sheets.*

## **HELP! WHERE CAN I FIND IT?**

- Self-help information is available on the Student Services website – follow the links to the Counselling Service.
- Peruse/borrow books from the Student Services counselling resource library.
- Seek counselling through the Counselling Service to discuss your concerns, address issues, learn about relaxation techniques, help you see the positive side of yourself, help you identify and change negative thinking patterns and treat an anxiety disorder.
- Attend the gym, exercise or yoga classes.