

Coping With Stress

Stress is your physical, emotional, and mental response to change, regardless of whether the change is good or bad. Without some stress, people wouldn't get a lot done. The extra burst of adrenaline that helps you finish your final paper, win at sports, or meet any other challenge is positive stress. It's a short-term physiological tensing and added mental alertness that subsides when the challenge has been met, enabling you to relax and carry on with normal activities.

If you can't return to a relaxed state, this stress becomes negative. The changes in your body - increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, and stomach and muscle tension - start to take their toll, often leading to mental and physical exhaustion and illness. Using the analogy of a rubber band, positive stress is just the right amount of stress needed to stretch the band and make it useful. Negative stress snaps the band.

The Signs of Stress

The symptoms below may indicate increased stress as well as other problems. Have a medical checkup for any physical symptoms and try some stress reduction techniques to relax and regain perspective. If relaxation or returning to healthy habits is still difficult, you may want to investigate individual or group counseling through your student or community health or counseling center. Some signs of stress are listed below:

- problems eating or sleeping
- increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- increased boredom and fatigue; a general sense of "the blahs"
- problems making decisions; increased procrastination
- becoming anxious and confused over unimportant events
- inability to concentrate or pay attention
- weakness, dizziness and shortness of breath; "anxiety attacks"
- persistent hostile or angry feelings; increased frustration with minor annoyances
- nightmares
- overpowering urges to cry or run and hide
- changes in your exercise habits
- frequent headaches, backaches, muscle aches or tightness in the stomach
- frequent indigestion, diarrhea, or urination
- frequent colds and infections
- frequent accidents and minor injuries

Stress and Illness

Negative, excessive stress may be a key element in half of all illnesses, ranging from the common cold to heart disease. Studies suggest that your stress level affects your immune and nervous systems, heart function, metabolism and hormone levels. As a result, researchers now believe that stress may affect your recovery from, as well as your susceptibility to, illness.

Short-Term Ways to Handle Stress

- Relax where you are. Sitting in a comfortable place, place your left hand over your navel and rest your right hand on top of your left. Breathe deeply through your nose, feeling your hands rise as your abdomen fills with air. Still inhaling, count to three and feel your chest expand. Hold your breath momentarily, then release it. Repeat four times, but stop if you become lightheaded.
- Take a break. Get some exercise or fresh air, or go somewhere private and yell or cry.
- Ask yourself whether it's worth being upset over the situation. You can choose to stay calm and ignore it. If the issue is important, confront it directly, talk it out with a sympathetic friend, or write it out in a letter that you don't send.
- List all the things you think you need to do right away. Then prioritize the list and do only the top few. The rest can be first priority tomorrow.

Long-Term Ways to Handle Stress

- Seek your own stress level. Strive for excellence within your limits.
- Choose your own goals. Don't live out choices others have made for you.
- Become part of a support system. Look out for yourself by letting friends help you when you are under too much stress and by helping when they are overloaded.
- Think positive. Your mind sends signals to your body to prepare for danger whenever you think about possible negative outcomes, and you become tense regardless of whether the event happens.
- Make decisions. You can learn to live with the consequences or change your mind. In general, any decision - even consciously deciding to do nothing - is better than none.
- Keep your expectations realistic. Don't expect perfection from yourself or others. Expect some problems reaching your goals and realize that you can solve most of them with practice.
- Accept what you cannot change. If a problem is beyond your control, you're better off accepting it for now than spinning your wheels.
- Anticipate potentially stressful situations and prepare for them. Decide whether the situation is one you should deal with, postpone, or avoid. If you decide to deal with the situation, practice what you will say and do.
- Live in the present. Learn from the past and move on.
- Manage your time. Prioritizing and planning can keep the demands of college life from becoming overwhelming.
- Take care of your health. Exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and avoid alcohol and other mood-altering drugs.
- Take time for yourself. Make yourself your priority. Find time to relax - even if only for a few minutes - every day.

Beating Procrastination

- Buy a calendar. Set up a daily or weekly schedule for yourself, allowing time for class, leisure, exercise, and other activities that are important or fun for you. Allow about two hours of study time for every one hour of class. And remember, your schedule doesn't have to be perfect - you can change it as needed.
- Keep a "to do" list. Prioritize your tasks and try to get the most important things done on time. Fit the rest in as possible, making certain that you take some time to enjoy yourself.
- Ask for help. Contact your student or community counseling center for support and additional help if you need it.

