

STRESS MANAGEMENT





Strategies for Managing Stress

What is Stress?

One definition is that *stress is your body's reaction to any demands placed on you*. As a student, you'll certainly be aware that school makes many demands on you, so school can definitely be a source of stress.

We all feel stress; if we didn't, we wouldn't be alive. Stress is not necessarily a bad thing: up to a certain level, it can stimulate and motivate us to perform better or to meet whatever challenges might arise. The problem starts when there's too much stress. Excessive stress can negatively affect not only your school performance, but also your feelings, your relationships, and your health.

The stress response works like this: when you experience a stressful event (a stressor), your body prepares to meet the challenge by releasing adrenaline into your system. Some of the physical signs of stress - *increased heart rate, fast breathing, a general feeling of tension* - are probably a direct result of this biochemical change within your body. This state of "readiness", which has been called the "*fight or flight*" response, probably had great survival value in helping our ancestors escape from, or deal with some very real physical danger.

What Causes Stress?

There is a common misconception that only negative events or experiences are stressors. Actually, even very positive events (such as graduations, falling in love, weddings, births) all cause some degree of stress. All represent changes in a person's life, and it is the change itself that carries with it the extra demand. Different events may cause different levels of stress for different people.

There is considerable evidence that stress can affect the immune system, and this may be why we seem especially prone to illness when we are overstressed. Two researchers, Holmes and Rahe, have even developed a scale on which a certain number of points can be assigned to different changes in a person's life. For example, death of a loved one is assigned more points than a change in one's work hours because the former is obviously much more stressful. If too many points are accumulated in a one year period, a person is at high risk for developing some form of physical or emotional illness. Prolonged periods of high stress are associated with such illnesses as depression, stroke, or heart disease.

How Will I Know if I am Overstressed?

Here are some of the symptoms of stress overload which have been highlighted by the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation:

- concentration problems
- increased arguments
- appetite change and weight gain or loss
- increased dependence on drugs:
alcohol, cigarettes, sedatives
- pain, headaches, muscle tension
- moodiness, irritability, pessimism
- sleep problems
- change in activity level -
fidgeting, listlessness
- heart pounding, high pulse rate,
change in breathing

Students and Stress

Even though going to school is a pleasurable and desired activity most of the time, there are lots of stressors in the life of a student. Here are just a few of them (you could probably add lots more to the list!):

- ◆ Getting tested or evaluated - a lot.
- ◆ Meeting deadlines set by others (often by 5 others if you're taking a full course load).
- ◆ Finding your way around the bureaucracy that is part of any institution.
- ◆ Making oral presentations.
- ◆ Having two or more exams or assignments due on the same day.
- ◆ Making career decisions.
- ◆ Juggling school, work, family, relationships.

For those just out of high school, there is the additional stress of adjusting to a new system and environment, different expectations, and meeting new people. For mature students, there are the same adjustment issues as well as the need to get "study muscles" back into shape, and to face the reality of giving up some of the autonomy and control to which you were accustomed.

Successful students are those who have found ways of dealing with the stresses of school.

What You Can Do to Manage Stress

You first must become aware of what is causing stress in your life, and then try to eliminate or control the stressors. In other words, you must take some *action*. Here are the four basic strategies for stress management, together with some specific actions that you can take:

1. Build and Maintain Health

- ◆ **Nutrition**
Eat nutritious foods. Too much caffeine, salt, fat, refined sugar and alcohol can have a negative effect.
- ◆ **Sleep**
Try to get a good night's sleep. Things often seem much worse when you're overtired.
- ◆ **Exercise**
Regular exercise helps you to reduce tension, clear your mind and resist stress.

2. Change the Situation

- ◆ **Time Management**
If you're feeling overwhelmed and as if you never have enough time, learning some time management techniques will help.
- ◆ **Be assertive**
Learn to say "no" to things you don't want to do. This frees up time and insures that you're attending to your own priorities, rather than some one else's.
- ◆ **Slow down**
Do less and do it better. See above to remember your priorities.
- ◆ **Use resources**
Know what resources are available to help you deal with the stress in your life. Make use of the resources on campus such as Counselling & Learning Support, Math Learning Centre and the Writing Centre.
- ◆ **Support System**
Spend time with people who are supportive and understanding. Have fun with them.

3. Change your Body Response

- ◆ **Relaxation**
It's impossible to be both tense and relaxed at the same time, so learn how to relax. Meditate. Take a warm bath. Listen to music. Find what works for you and try to do it on a daily basis.
- ◆ **Breathing**
We tend to breathe more quickly and take shallow breaths when we're under stress. A simple method of practising slow, gentle, deep breathing can bring considerable relief.

4. Change your Thoughts

◆ **Positive Self-Talk**

Our thoughts and the messages we give ourselves can have a major effect on our feelings and even on our physiological reactions. So be supportive of yourself, rather than blaming or criticizing. Be aware of irrational thoughts and pointless worrying.

◆ **Sense of Humour**

Humour has been found to be an excellent antidote for stress. So remember to laugh at yourself and at life occasionally. It helps to get a different perspective on your situation.

◆ **Talk to Someone**

Sometimes, talking to a friend or family member is sufficient to get a different perspective on things. At other times, talking to a professional, such as a counsellor, can help you identify thought patterns that are contributing to your stress.

If you can't remember all of the above, at least remember the ABC's of stress management:

Action - Exercise burns off tension, and releases that energy that has been building up.

Breathing - Calms, relaxes and slows things down.

Confidence - Remember that positive thoughts about yourself are just as realistic as negative ones.

Need More Information?

Please contact Counselling & Learning Support (Birch 267 or phone 604.984.1744) to make an appointment with a counsellor or to find out about additional publications about stress management that are available for loan or reference.