

SELF HELP SHEET

Student Counselling Services

Stress Management

Stress is a common part of everyone's life, however, it can be managed and reduced. We respond to stress physically, mentally, emotionally and in the way we behave. Some of the most common causes of stress for students in colleges and universities include a death in the family, poor exam preparation, exam failure, parental separation, relationship problems, family difficulties, unexpected or unwanted pregnancy, financial difficulties, becoming a victim of crime or assault, adjustment to college, sexual harassment, poor time management, the transition from school to college to work and leaving home.

How do you know if you are suffering from stress?

Usually we show combinations of symptoms, but each of us responds predominately in one of the following areas:

- Physically through muscle tension, sweaty palms, chest palpitations, restlessness and nausea.
- Emotionally through periods of anxiety, crying or weeping, feelings of hopelessness, panic attacks and irritability.
- Behaviourally through changes in our sleeping and eating patterns, increased smoking or alcohol consumption, nail biting and absenteeism from work.
- Mentally or cognitively we react to stress through loss of self-confidence, muddled thinking, undue tiredness and memory lapses.

Some of the long-term conditions in which prolonged and continued stress can play a part are chronic backache, allergies, migraine headaches, high blood pressure, heart attacks, depression and irritable bowel syndrome.

Is it possible to cope with stress?

To learn to cope with stress, it is necessary to be able to identify the specific situations or events that tend to cause you stress. This is to enable you to tackle the stress before it builds up. Identifying your resources and making a note of them may help alleviate stress in the future. Ask yourself questions such as:

1. What are my physical strengths?
2. What are my emotional strengths?
3. What support systems do I have?
4. How is my present lifestyle helping me cope?

Some of the physical strengths that can help you overcome stress are high energy levels and agility. High self-esteem and confidence, humour and creativity are good emotional characteristics that will help you cope with stress. A good network of family and supportive friends are also important. Staying in contact with family and friends is a good investment in coping with stress later.

Becoming aware of the specific events or situations in which you become stressed allows you to develop methods of coping with those situations, e.g. knowing that you become stressed before and during exams allows you to prepare for this and use coping mechanisms that will alleviate the stress.

The most commonly used coping mechanisms in the alleviation of stress are:

1. Relaxation and breathing exercises

Many people find the use of mini-relaxation exercises several times a day can slow them down and give them a sense of calmness. These exercises can prevent tension from building up. Try these:

Hunch up both shoulders so they almost touch your ears and hold for 20 seconds before relaxing. Bring both elbows into your sides, bending arms upwards so that your hands touch your shoulders. Again hold for 20 seconds and relax. Tighten your stomach muscles, holding and then relaxing. Focus on your breathing - take a deep breath in, hold it and let it out slowly. As you let it out, loosen your forehead so that your eyes and eyelids feel heavy. Continue breathing slowly and evenly until you feel quiet, heavy and warm.

2. Keep worrying thoughts under control:

Refocus on what is happening around you, e.g. concentrate on lines in a book or other people's conversations. Engage in other mental activities, perhaps some mental arithmetic or reciting a poem. Recreation activities and interests let you think about other things for a while so that you can come back to problems with a fresh mind.

3. Challenging your thoughts

This involves replacing the worrying, negative thoughts with constructive, positive statements. Some of the more common thinking errors that produce stress fall into the following categories.

- Exaggerating - magnifying your bad points and weaknesses.
- Catastrophising - anticipating total disaster if something minor goes wrong
- Overgeneralization - expecting anything to go wrong all the time.
- Ignoring the positive - overlooking personal strengths and characteristics.

Interrupting those negative automatic thoughts and replacing them with more positive self-accepting thoughts will help to control and alleviate the stress. Positive reframing of events and situations will help you to get through the difficult situations.

4. Physical activity

Walking is good stress relief. So is taking the dog for a walk, gardening, playing with friends, children and pets. In addition to keeping you fit and physically able to cope with stress, more active sport helps to use up the adrenalin that otherwise make you feel tense. Being physically tired can help you sleep.

As well as exercise programs the Department of Sport and Recreation at College runs stress management and relaxation programs for students and staff. Contact them at the Luce Sports Centre on campus.

Regular sleep and a balanced diet are very important in stress management. Rest even if you find sleeping difficult. Avoid excessive use of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. Maintain the use of medication prescribed for you by your doctor. Keep in contact with family and friends. Rewarding yourself with gifts or treats or doing something you enjoy is also a good way to beat stress.

Further reading

Davis, M., Eshelman, R.E., & McKay, M (1995). The relaxation and stress reduction workbook. California: New Harbinger Publications.

Fontana, D. (1989). Managing stress. Leicester: British Psychological Society.

Patel, C. (1996). The complete guide to stress management. London: Vermilion.