

How to Manage Stress Effectively



Many students experience stress as they combine busy lives, the demands of study, family time, and work while also trying to enjoy their college experience. All students experience some periods of intermittent stress (a major exam, finishing a major paper, learning new and difficult material, etc.). However, for some students stress almost becomes a way of life. Health professionals tell us that stress – over a long period of time – can have a negative impact on your health and sense of well-being.

This guide will discuss the origins of stress, basic ways to assess the level of your stress, and a variety of simple techniques to decrease your stress level.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is your body's general response to any demand that is placed on you. Stress is not, by definition, synonymous with nervous tension or anxiety. It is important to remember that certain forms of stress are normal and essential to a normal, healthy lifestyle and that without some stress people would not get a lot done. For instance, that extra burst of adrenaline that helps you finish your final paper, perform well in sports, or meet any challenge is positive. On the other hand, it can also cause exhaustion, illness (physical or psychological), and accidents if it does subside when the challenge has been met.

As your body responds to various forms of physical or psychological stress, certain predictable changes occur (increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, and secretions of stimulatory hormones). Often called the “**fight or flight**” mechanism, these responses to stress will occur regardless of the positive or negative nature of the stress.

However, the result of continual stress may disrupt your health (physical, emotional, spiritual or social). So, it is important to

understand that stress is a process that **builds** with time.

Because of this, it is more effective to intervene early in the process rather than later.

Signs of Stress

The following reactions suggest that you may be experiencing stress:

- ◆ General irritability
- ◆ Elevated heart rate
- ◆ Increased blood pressure
- ◆ Increased proneness to accidents
- ◆ Floating anxiety (feeling anxious for no specific reason)
- ◆ Trembling
- ◆ Insomnia
- ◆ Headaches
- ◆ Indigestion
- ◆ Neck or lower back pain
- ◆ Changes in appetite or sleep patterns

IDENTIFYING YOUR OWN STRESS

While the university experience can be one of the best times in your life, it can be undermined by a continued level of high stress. This may result in stress-related problems such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and eating disorders. All change produces stress, even positive changes. Going to the university is a positive change that is also a period in life where change makes adjustments necessary. For some students, these adjustments can be stressful. Some common sources of adjustment often resulting in stress during the university experience include:

- ♦ Greater academic demands than ever before;
- ♦ Maintaining your academic based scholarship;
- ♦ Learning and adjusting to a new environment and increased responsibilities;
- ♦ Responsibility for one's own finances;
- ♦ Exposure to new people, ideas, and attractions;
- ♦ Being away from home and family, often for the first time;
- ♦ Making important decisions on a higher level than ever before;
- ♦ Substance abuse;
- ♦ Awareness and exploration of one's sexual identity and orientation; and
- ♦ Preparing for life after graduation.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO STRESS?

When experiencing stress, you may not recognize that stress is the issue for some time. You may be affected not only in your bodily but also in your emotional reactions, your personal thoughts and your relations with others.

- **Learning Tool:** *"Do I have symptoms of stress?"* inventory found on this webpage will help you identify your reactions to stress.
- **Learning Tool:** *"Is my stress level harmful?"* will help you rate your stress level and give you a better idea if you should seek help and from whom.

STEPS FOR MANAGING YOUR STRESS

STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR VALUES AND PRIORITIES

One of the facts of life is that there are often more things to do than there are hours in the day. You only have so much physical and mental energy. It just makes sense to use that energy on the things you value the most.

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Now, imagine having led a long and fulfilling life. You are looking back in time on that life. What do you remember? What stands out to you? What would you value?

Write these things down.

Again, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

This time, imagine being told you have only 6 months left to live. How would you spend your time? What would you want to do? Who would you want to be with?

Write these things down.

The things you have written down reflect your values, i.e. priorities. There will probably be some differences between your long- and short-term responses – that is normal – they are all important.

STEP 2: CLARIFY YOUR GOALS

You have thought about career and family goals before. Now, to manage your stress, think of your goals in terms of a balanced and healthy life. Research has identified several life areas that are essential to overall health.

Identify your goals and compare them with your values using the exercise below.

For each of the following areas, identify your life goal and write it down:

- ◆ **Occupational** (vocational, career)
- ◆ **Spiritual** (values, ethics, morals, religion guiding principles)
- ◆ **Emotional** (mental health, sexual and Intimacy)
- ◆ **Intellectual** (academic, skills, creativity)
- ◆ **Social** (family, community, environment)
- ◆ **Physical** (fitness, nutrition, self-care, safety)

Make sure your life goal is consistent with the values/priorities you identified in Step 1. If it isn't, you may need to reconsider your goal.

Now, write down one thing you can do today to move toward your life goal in each area.

STEP 3: MANAGE YOUR TIME

Make a list of your responsibilities, jobs, assignments and chores.

Traditional time management often involves filling up every space in a calendar or daily planner with items from this list. For this exercise, start putting only the things that fit with your goals and values (i.e. priorities). Make sure that you include something from each life area you identified above in your schedule.

If something doesn't speak to your values, goals, priorities, ask yourself why it is on your list. You may want to reconsider this activity.

Remember, one of the most important aspects of time management is learning to say **NO**.

STEP 4: TAKING CARE OF YOUR BODY

The body and mind are better equipped to handle stress when you are engaging in physical self-care. The body needs rest, nutrition, and exercise in order to respond effectively to emotional, psychological, and physical stress.

In addition to your goals established above, make sure you are:

- ✘ Eating a balanced diet at regular intervals, drinking plenty of fluids, and limiting your intake of caffeine, alcohol, and sugar.
- ✘ Sleeping at least 6 to 8 hours every night. The body does not “catch up” from all nighters by excessive sleeping on the weekend.
- ✘ Engaging in regular exercise. It can be as little as a 10 minute walk (not a problem on this campus).

STEP 5: FINDING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Students with social support are less likely to experience prolonged, harmful stress than those with limited support. Reaching out to others is an important tool in managing your stress. Consider the following:

- ① Who can you talk to about the different parts of your life?
- ② Who will listen without judgment or trying to “fix it”?
- ③ Who will understand your stress in each life area?
- ④ Who do you trust to keep your information private?
- ⑤ Would it be helpful to talk to a professional?

While it may not be possible to find a single person who meets all these criteria, it is healthy to have more than one person with whom you can share your thoughts and feelings about what is happening in your life.

STEP 6: THINKING HEALTHY

How we think about our life can significantly impact how we feel and act. For instance:

- ♦ If you look for the worst in a situation, you will find it, and feel bad.
- ♦ If you ignore the positives and focus on the negatives you may feel overwhelmed.
- ♦ If you believe everyone is thinking negatively about you, you will feel anxious and suspicious.

IRRATIONAL BELIEFS AND THOUGHTS

Often our thoughts or beliefs are “irrational” or “dysfunctional”. By challenging these irrational thoughts, we can begin to see things more realistically and make better choices about how to act. Irrational or dysfunctional thoughts are born out of irrational beliefs which we hold about ourselves and others. Just a few of these beliefs might be:

- Scripts we have in our head about how we believe life “should” be for us and others.
- Ideas, feelings, beliefs, ways of thinking, attitudes, opinions, biases, prejudices or values with which we were raised. We have become accustomed to using them when faced with problems in our current life, even when they are not productive in helping us reach a positive, growth-enhancing solution.
- Counterproductive ways of thinking which give comfort and security in the short run but do not resolve or actually make a problem worse in the long run.
- Negative or pessimistic ways of looking at inherent life experiences such as loss, conflict, risk taking, rejection or accepting change.
- Patterns of thinking that make us appear to others as stubborn, bullheaded, intemperate, argumentative or aloof.
- Irrational conclusions about life that we have developed over time (e.g., unrealistic expectations of self which developed while a child in a high-stress family).

Out of these irrational or dysfunctional beliefs are born irrational thoughts which interfere with your ability to solve problems and move forward in your present life situation. Some examples of these irrational thoughts include:

- ☹ I do not deserve help.
- ☹ I should never burden others with my problems.
- ☹ I’m stupid.
- ☹ I’m uncreative, ineffective and have no talent.
- ☹ I’m powerless to solve my problems.
- ☹ I have so many problems I might as well give up right now.
- ☹ I’m the ugliest, most unattractive slob in the world.
- ☹ No one cares about anyone else.
- ☹ What counts in life is others’ opinion of you.
- ☹ There is only one way of doing things – my way.
- ☹ Admitting a mistake is a sign of weakness.
- ☹ Asking for help is admitting weakness.
- ☹ It’s not who you are but what you do that makes you attractive to others.
- ☹ There are only two choices: right or wrong; black or white; win or lose; pass or fail.
- ☹ What counts in life is others’ opinions of you.

RECOGNIZING WHEN IRRATIONAL BELIEFS AND THOUGHTS ARE AT WORK

Irrational beliefs and thoughts may be at work if we:

- ✓ Find ourselves caught up in a vicious cycle of addressing our problems over and over.
- ✓ Have been suffering from a problem for a long time yet have not taken steps to address the problem.
- ✓ Have decided on a creative problem solving solution but find ourselves incapable of implementing our solution.
- ✓ Have decided on how to solve a problem and find that we are unhappy with that solution but avoid looking for alternatives.
- ✓ Are afraid of pursuing a course of action because of the guilt we will feel if we do it.
- ✓ Are constantly obsessed with a problem but take no steps to resolve it.
- ✓ Are immobilized by our problems.
- ✓ Find that the only way to deal with a problem is to ignore it.

BENEFITS OF REFUTING OUR IRRATIONAL BELIEFS AND THOUGHTS

Irrational beliefs and their resulting irrational thoughts can become so ingrained in how you view the world that they are difficult to recognize and change. However, by learning how to deal with these beliefs and thoughts you can:

- ☺ Become a productive, realistic problem solver.
- ☺ Gain greater credibility with yourself and others.
- ☺ Gain clarity, purpose and intention in addressing your current problems.
- ☺ Identify the barriers that must first be hurdled before your problems can be resolved.
- ☺ Become more honest about yourself and your problems.
- ☺ Put your problem into a realistic perspective as to its importance, magnitude and probability of being solved.
- ☺ Separate your feelings from the problem.
- ☺ Gain a sense of humor in the presence of your problems and their resolution.
- ☺ Recognize your self-worth and separate it from the mistakes made in your life.
- ☺ Forgive yourself and others for mistakes made.
- ☺ Gain a sense of purpose and control in your life as you solve problems.
- ☺ Gain the ability to look for a “win-win” solution to problems which considers compromise as an acceptable part of the solution.

STEPS TO REFUTING AN IRRATIONAL BELIEF

As seen by the benefits listed above, refuting an irrational belief is well worth the effort. The following five steps can help you in identifying and refuting an irrational belief which is blocking your ability to deal with a change in your life. ***We suggest that you use a journal to respond to the questions in each step below.***

STEP ONE: Is your thinking and problem solving ability being blocked by an irrational belief? Consider a specific problem as you answer the following questions:

1. Am I going in circles in trying to solve this problem?
2. Is there something inside of me that is keeping me from taking the necessary actions in this matter?
3. Am I bothered by the thoughts of what I or others should do, act like, think or feel in this situation?
4. Do I find myself saying how this situation “should be” and having a hard time facing it the way it really is?
5. Do I use fantasy or “magical” thinking in looking at this problem? (Am I always hoping that by some miracle it will go away?)
6. Am I burdened by the fear of what others think of me as I work on this problem?
7. Do I know what the solution is but become paralyzed in its implementation?
8. Do I find myself using a lot of “yes, buts” in discussing this problem?
9. Do I find it easier to procrastinate, avoid, divert my attention, ignore or run away from this problem?
10. Is this problem causing excessive distress and discomfort for me and/or others and yet I cannot decide how to resolve it?

STEP TWO: If you answered “Yes” to any or all of the questions in Step One, you are probably facing a problem or situation in which an irrational belief is blocking or clouding your thinking. The second step is to identify that blocking believe. Please answer the following:

1. Is the blocking belief something I have believed in all my life?
2. Is the blocking belief coming from the teachings of my parents, church, family, peers, work society, culture, community, race, ethnic reference group or social network?
3. Is the blocking belief something that always recurs when I am trying to solve problems similar to this one?
4. Is the blocking belief something that has helped me solve problems successfully in the past?
5. Is the blocking belief something that can be stated in a sentence or two?
6. Is the blocking belief a consistent statement as I face this problem, or does it tend to change as variables of this problem become clearer to me?
7. Is the blocking belief a tangible statement of belief or is it simply a feeling or intuition?
8. Can I state the blocking belief? If so, write it in your journal (“My blocking belief is ...”

STEP THREE: Once you have identified the blocking belief (Step Two), test its rationality. Answer the following questions about the belief with either “yes” or “no”.

1. Is there any basis in reality which supports this belief as always being true?
2. Does this belief encourage personal growth, emotional maturity, independence of thinking and action, and stable mental health?
3. Is this belief one which, if ascribed to, will help you overcome this or future problems in your life?
4. Is this belief one which, if ascribed to, will result in behavior that is self-defeating for you?
5. Does this belief protect you and your rights as a person?
6. Does this belief assist you in connecting honestly and openly with others so that healthy interpersonal relationships that create growth are a result?
7. Does this belief assist you in being a creative, rational problem solver who is able to identify a series of alternatives from which you can choose your own personal priority solutions?
8. Does this belief stifle your thinking and problem solving ability to the point of immobilization?
9. When you tell others of this belief do they support you because that is the way everyone in your family, peer group, work, church or community thinks?
10. Is this belief an absolute? Is it a black or white, yes or no, win or lose, with no options in the middle form of belief?

Healthy answers to these questions are:

① No ② Yes ③ Yes ④ No ⑤ Yes ⑥ Yes ⑦ Yes ⑧ No ⑨ No ⑩ No

If you are unable to give a healthy answer to one or more questions in this step, then your blocking belief is most likely irrational.

STEP FOUR: If you determine that the blocking belief is irrational, you are ready to refute this irrational belief. Answer the following questions in your journal:

1. How do I consistently feel when I think of this belief?
2. Is there anything in reality to support this belief as true?
3. What in reality supports the lack of absolute truth in this belief?
4. Does the truth of this belief exist only in the way I talk, act or feel about this problem?
5. What is the worst thing that could happen to me if I do not hold on this belief?
6. What positive things might happen to me if I do not hold on this belief?
7. What would be an appropriate, realistic belief I could substitute for this irrational belief?
8. How would I feel if I substituted this new belief for my blocking belief?
9. How will I grow and how will my rights and the rights of others be protected by this substitute belief?
10. What is keeping me from accepting this alternate belief?

Once you have answered these questions, review and confirm (or change) your answers, and then substitute a rational belief and act on it:

(My substitute rational and healthy belief is ...).

With this rational and healthy belief in play, work on a solution to your problem or life change.

STEP FIVE: Remembering that you may have multiple blocking beliefs which affect your problem or life change and if you are still having trouble solving problems, return to Step One and begin again.

Adapted from: Handling Irrational Beliefs. Accessed September 14, 2011, from <http://www.livestrong.com/article/14728-handling-irrational0beliefs/>