

Managing stress

Are you under too much stress?

What is stress?

Stress arises when a person has to respond to demanding situations. As a university student, you may experience stress trying to meet the demands of your course while juggling all the other things going on in your life. Most students are anxious to do as well as possible and, if things don't go as planned, their expectations may become a source of stress.

It is important to understand that stress is a normal part of daily life and the effects of stress are not always negative.

A degree of stress can be motivating and challenging and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress.

The ideal is not to eliminate stress, but to identify the optimum level that will motivate but not overwhelm you. If you consistently exceed your limits of stress tolerance, loss of well-being or illness will result.

- Are you under too much stress? Consider the following:
- Are you feeling sad or upset?
- Are you feeling anxious or tense?
- Do you often lose control, become angry or hostile?
- Do you regularly feel tired, fatigued or exhausted?
- Do you have difficulty sleeping?
- Are you having difficulty concentrating, remembering things or making decisions?
- Do you experience shortness of breath or digestive problems?

If you are experiencing any of these stress symptoms, you need to reduce the stress in your life and / or improve your ability to manage stress.

Managing stress

There are two main ways to reduce stress: change the situation that is causing stress or change your response to the situation. Both are easier said than done, but the following strategies will help.

Don't ignore *distress* (negative stress)

Become aware of the situations that are stressful for you and register your physical and emotional reactions.

Try to identify precisely what it is about the situation that is stressful for you. Once you know this, you can work to manage both these situations and the negative effects they have on you.

Identify what you can change about the stressful situation

Can you avoid the *stressor*, or reduce its intensity by managing it differently? For example, you may be able to reduce exam panic by spending more time preparing and revising; you may be able to limit essay-writing anxieties by planning the task more thoroughly and taking detailed notes. An **Academic Skills Adviser** can help with these issues.

Work at reducing the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress

Are you making a difficult situation into a disaster by overreacting? Try to moderate extreme emotional responses when considering the consequences of events. Don't focus on the negatives and the 'what if's'; rather, try to consider the realities of the situation.

Learn to moderate your physical responses to stress

Practice relaxing. Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart-rate and respiration back to normal. Relaxation techniques and stretching will reduce muscle tension. You may wish to seek medical advice if stress is affecting your health adversely.

Build your physical reserves

Include aerobic exercise in your daily routines. Eat well-balanced meals; avoid caffeine, alcohol and drugs; reduce your intake of refined sugars. Try to get at least 7 hours of sleep a night.

Spend time each day relaxing – take a warm bath; go for a walk; practice yoga; play tennis; go to the gym; undertake any activity that you find relaxing.

Maintain your emotional reserves

Spend time maintaining mutually supportive friendships and relationships. Choose people you can trust and talk to them about the things you are finding stressful. Pursue realistic goals that are meaningful to you; do things that you do well and that you like. Expect some frustrations and failures and remember how you have managed to resolve these situations in the past.

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Reducing study stress

The best way to reduce the stress of studying is to develop work habits that even out the burden of work over the semester (see the Academic Skills Time & Task Management pamphlet). It is also important to make sure the time you spend studying is as effective as possible. However, even the most organised students 'hit the wall' at times and it's not uncommon to feel overburdened by study.

Talking with someone can help you clarify why you're stressed and can help you think through ways of managing the situation. You could talk to an understanding friend, a lecturer, a family member, your subject co-ordinator, an Academic Skills Adviser or a counsellor from the university's counselling service.

Study stress can arise if you've been working too hard – in which case you might need to take a short break or vary your routines, or, it can arise if you have not done enough work during the semester. In either case, some thoughtful planning of your workload can often reduce your stress levels. Here are some tips for managing your academic workload when you're feeling it's getting out of control.

Revise your timetable

If several assignments are due together or you have exams to prepare for, you may need to review the time allocated to university tasks, rearrange social or work commitments, or you may consider applying for an extension. Get yourself a university wall planner to assist you mapping out tasks and assignments.

Prioritise your workload

List everything you *have to do* and decide which tasks absolutely **MUST** be done: '**non-negotiables**'. List these in order of importance. You may find there are low priority tasks that you can cross off your list without compromising your overall results. Review due dates and deadlines on your planner and, with these in mind, decide the order in which to tackle the important tasks.

Check all instructions

Students sometimes get stressed about an essay or assignment because they are trying to do a more difficult task than that which is required.

Make sure that you understand clearly the nature and requirements of each task. Re-read instructions, the question you are to answer and, if necessary, seek clarification from your tutor or lecturer or an Academic Skills advisor.

Focus on one major task at a time

Don't try to do everything at once - for example, plan to complete one assignment or lab report and hand it in before focusing on the next task on your list. Identify the necessary stages of each task and plan how you will finish them in a time-frame that will allow you to complete all work on time.

Resist perfectionism

Give yourself permission to vary the standard of your finished work. It is not essential that *everything* be perfect. Decide which assignments you want to do your absolute best work on and which ones you can call finished when they are 'good enough'. Remember that academic results only reflect the amount and quality of your work – not yourself.

Exam stress

Consider exam preparation a semester long activity; be organised and plan your study time to enable you to revise thoroughly.

- Leading up to exam time, ensure your expectations are realistic. During this time get enough sleep and exercise, eat well, and avoid alcohol, smoking and too much coffee to ensure you are physically able to manage your exams.
- Be well prepared for the exam. Know the format, time, location and equipment requirements.
- Try to relax prior to and during the exam. Practice positive visualisation, relaxation or breathing techniques to help you focus.
- In the exam use the reading time to decide which questions you will answer, in what order you will answer questions and how much time you will spend on each question/section. Start with questions you are most confident with, read **all** instructions carefully, and stick to times allocated to questions.
- After the exam don't stress out about what has passed. Reflect on what you can learn from the experience and move on.

If the stress you are experiencing relates to other things in your life — difficulties at home, relationship or financial problems — talking to someone may be useful. Talk to your tutors and explain the situation. It may be possible to get an extension of time or to apply for special consideration.

Further resources:

The Academic Skills web site has pamphlets on **Exam revision**, **Exam day tips** and **Writing essays in exams**

The University of Melbourne provides a free, confidential and experienced counselling service to assist students in times of stress at:

www.cms.unimelb.edu.au/student-services/counsel

The following web sites also have useful information for managing stress:

www.ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/stressmanagement.shtml

www.stressmanagement.com.au/

www.mindtools.com/smpage.html

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