

## When stressed, remember:

- Experiencing stress is normal.
- Stress has physical, emotional, behavioral and mental effects.
- Recognize situations that are most stressful to you.
- Seek help from friends and counselors.
- Develop physical, emotional, behavioral and mental coping strategies.

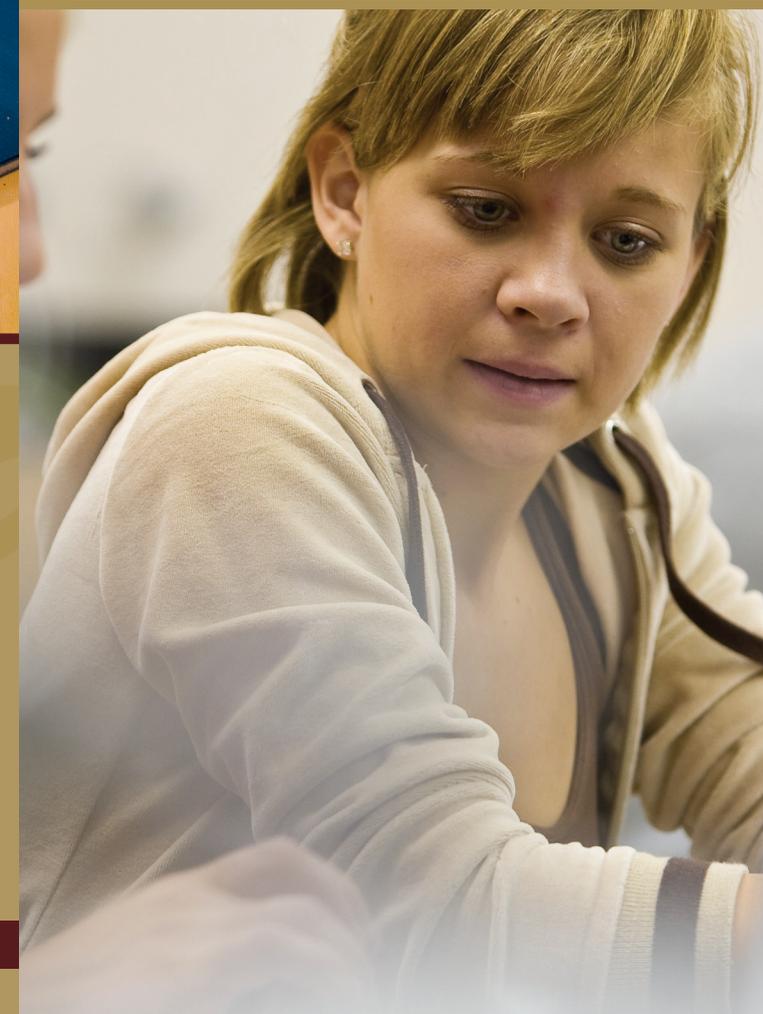


## Stress



## Managing the Stress of College

College is an exciting but stressful time. Students can learn to reduce and cope effectively with the stress they experience by recognizing the situations that produce stress and by learning and using effective coping strategies. Students should avoid trying to negate the effects of stress by abusing alcohol or drugs, over-eating or engaging in risky sexual or other harmful behaviors. These strategies typically result in increased stress levels rather than effective coping.



## Managing the Challenges of College

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## What is Stress?

Stress is a person's response to any situation that requires adjustment or change. Events or situations that evoke a stress reaction are called stressors. We often think of stress only in terms of negative events, but stressors can be positive as well. Ending a relationship can be stressful, but so can starting a new relationship.

We experience the most stress in response to situations we perceive as threatening. The amount of stress we feel is a product both of the situation or event and our perception of the threat it poses.

For example, one student sees failing an exam as a warning to seek help while another student sees this event as a terminal blow to his or her life plans.

## How is College Stressful?

Students experience constant challenges during their college years. They are attempting to cope with academic pressures, which are constantly changing, while at the same time trying to negotiate the hurdles of a particularly difficult period of developmental changes.

While in college, students are seeking:

- independence and autonomy from their parents and responsibility for themselves
- acceptance by their peers in a world of mixed values and more intimate relationships

All of these developmental tasks, in addition to academic challenges, present many opportunities for failure, conflict and rejection. Self-esteem is threatened.

When people experience stress they turn to their support systems — family, friends, clubs, teachers, clergy and groups. But most students attend college away from home, so they experience the developmental and academic stressors of college life at a time when they are separated from most of their support systems. This causes more stress.

## How Does Stress Affect You?

People experience the effects of stress physically, emotionally, behaviorally and mentally. When someone feels threatened or fearful (e.g. fear of failure, rejection or physical harm), the body reacts automatically in what is known as the fight-or-flight response:

- Adrenaline flow in the blood is increased.
- Muscles become tensed.
- Heart rate and respiration are increased.

Emotional signs of stress may include:

- anxiety
- tension
- irritability
- sadness
- depression
- extreme happiness and exhilaration

Behaviorally, a person under stress may experience:

- reduced physical coordination and control
- sleeplessness
- irrational behavior

Mental or cognitive signs include a severe reduction in the ability to:

- concentrate
- store information in memory
- solve mental problems

For college students, the mental effects of stress are critical because they affect the student's ability to perform academically. Test anxiety or "blinking out" is due to the brain's reduced ability to process information while under severe stress. For example, if a student is taking an exam and has an extreme fear of failing, effects of the stress might interfere with the student's ability to concentrate on the test.

## How Can I Deal with Stress?

Stress is a necessary part of life. We cannot and would not want to eliminate all sources of stress. Students can, however, learn to cope more effectively with stressors and reduce the amount of stress they experience. By employing effective physical, behavioral and cognitive coping strategies, students can reduce the anxiety and tension they often experience while trying to meet the continuous adjustments and demands of college life.

### Physical Strategies

- Learn to relax. With relaxation training, which is offered in the Counseling Center, students can learn to counteract the fight-or-flight response and enhance their abilities to think more clearly during times of stress.
- Exercise regularly. Exercise provides a healthy outlet for releasing energy.
- Get enough sleep. Students need an adequate amount of sleep to cope with the complex academic demands they experience.

### Behavioral Strategies

- Work to manage time effectively. College students have a lot of demands on their time. Learning to balance time and to establish priorities can reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed, especially near the end of the semester when assignments come due.
- Establish realistic and achievable goals.
- Maintain a balance among academic, work and social commitments. Taking on an excessive amount of work without adequate recreation is one of the major sources of student stress. By the same token, many students have learned that an excessive amount of recreation can increase the stress from academic demands.

### Cognitive Strategies

- Put a situation into its proper perspective. Most people tend to exaggerate the importance of potential consequences of a stress-producing situation. One way to reappraise the situation is to ask yourself, "What is the worst that could happen?" Usually the "worst" is not as bad as it seems at first.
- Remember the cycles of the semester. Many of the stressors of college life, like final examinations, are recurring events. Repeatedly telling yourself "you have experienced this stress before and made it through OK" can reassure you that you can do it again.
- Talk over your problems with a good friend or counselor. This sometimes provides valuable insight for coping with the situation. A little understanding is a lot of help. The Counseling Center has professional counseling staff who are concerned about you and who are experienced in helping students to cope with stress.

# Stress is normal.

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