

STRESSED?

What is Stress?

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Stress is a person's response to any situation or event that requires **adjustment or change**. The stress reaction prepares the mind and body to react to any situation that is new, threatening or exciting. We often think of stress only in terms of negative events, but stressors can be positive as well. The result has more to do with how we interpret an event than it does with the stressor itself. For example, one student may see getting a poor grade as a warning to seek help, while another student may interpret this event as a blow to his or her life plans. Stress however, is a normal part of life. Stress provides energy and motivation. The root of problematic stress or an anxiety disorder may be due to a breakdown in coping.

Healthy Stress and the Biology of Stress

The body deals with stress by preparing a person to respond to what is experienced as a threat or a challenge. When a person experiences stressors, the body releases a hormone called cortisol. It is also called the stress hormone. Cortisol is produced by adrenal glands and influences the breakdown and utilization of the proteins, carbohydrates, and fats from a person's diet. When cortisol is released into the bloodstream, it helps provide the nutrients the body needs to manage stress. It also assists the body in suppressing reactions like pain and inflammation. **Physically**, the body may react to the threat with a series of physiological changes that usually include increased adrenalin flow. Muscles become tensed and heart rate and respiration are increased. When the stressor is not overwhelming and the person responds appropriately, these changes may lead to **optimal functioning and an appropriate response**. The response can be a useful tool for focusing the mind when there is a perceived threat or challenge. Once the body responds and the situation is taken care of, the body should return to normal. However, when stress remains high, so does cortisol, which can have negative effects on the body.

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How Does Stress Affect You?

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We experience the effects of stress physically, emotionally, behaviorally and mentally. When the **stressor is acute**, or when it is interpreted as being too threatening or overwhelming, the person may feel flooded. A national study on college students showed that there has been an increase in stress among college students.

For some, stress can revolve around time management: procrastinating, overscheduling and/or not balancing your daily schedule with relaxation time. Stress can also be exacerbated by troubles in the family or romantic relationships. Additionally, a person can magnify the negative impacts of stress by consuming too much caffeine, sugar and/or alcohol and by not getting enough sleep.

When Stress Becomes Distress

While there are some needed and natural manifestations of stress, on-going and severe exposure to stress can be harmful. A person under continued high stress may experience a wide a range of **emotional** reactions, which may include anxiety, irritability, sadness and depression. **Behaviorally**, a person may experience reduced physical energy, sleeplessness, problems with coordination and /or psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches, backaches or gastrointestinal problems. **Mentally**, a person may have a severe reduction in his/her ability to concentrate, store information in memory and solve mental problems.

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How Do I Reduce Stress?

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Stress is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. We cannot and would not want to eliminate all sources of stress. We can, however, learn to cope more effectively with stressors by employing effective physical, behavioral and cognitive coping strategies.

People tend to use different ways of coping at different times. The ways people cope with stress can be divided into three areas: Solution-Focused, Emotion-Focused, and Avoidance.

Solution-Focused Coping involves a person's efforts to resolve the problem or situation that causes him/her to feel stressed. Examples of solution-focused coping involve:

- Learning more about a situation
- Learning how to relax
- Exercise
- Time management
- Developing organizational skills
- Recognizing what can be changed (e.g., situation, exposure, interpretation)
- Eating and sleeping well, striving for balance

Emotion-Focused Coping refers to a person's efforts to decrease the emotional impact of a stressful situation and/or to increase a sense of emotional well-being. Examples of emotion-focused coping include:

- Talking to a friend or relative
- Seeking support or professional help
- Looking for ways to relax
- Rethinking the meaning of a situation or event
- Identifying distorted thinking or beliefs

Avoidance Coping takes place when an individual attempts to ignore or minimize a problem or stressful situation, and/or looks for ways to escape its impact. Examples include:

- Isolating oneself
- Procrastinating
- Using alcohol or drugs
- Keeping things to oneself
- Suicidal thoughts
- Postponing dealing with a problem or issue
- Oversleeping

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Tips to Cope

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1. Become aware of your stressors and your reactions.

- ◆ Notice your distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over your problems.
- ◆ Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about the meaning of these events?
- ◆ Determine how your body responds to the stress. Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?

2. Recognize what you can change.

- ◆ Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?
- ◆ Can you reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)?
- ◆ Can you shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)?
- ◆ Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies)?
- ◆ Consider what you can't change. We often add significantly to our stress level by trying to change things/situations that we have no control over.

3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.

- ◆ The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger...physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
- ◆ Are you expecting to please everyone?
- ◆ Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent? Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?
- ◆ Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.
- ◆ Try to temper your excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and the "what if's."

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Need Additional Help?

Tips to Cope (continued...)

4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.

- ◆ Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal.
- ◆ Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension.
- ◆ Medications, when prescribed by a physician, can help in the short term in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer.
- ◆ Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution.
- ◆ Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
- ◆ Maintain your healthy weight.
- ◆ Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants.
- ◆ Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can.
- ◆ Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.

5. Seek emotional support.

- ◆ Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships.
- ◆ Pursue realistic goals that are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.
- ◆ Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.
- ◆ Always be kind and gentle with yourself--be a friend to yourself.

Need Additional Help?

The Counseling Center offers group and individual counseling for these and related issues, as well as information about, and referral to, other campus and community resources. The Counseling Center also offers workshops and programs on various mental health topics, including stress management, time management, etc. If you are interested in having a professional present a workshop to your group, please contact us. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the Counseling Center at 260-4655. All appointments are strictly confidential and free of charge.