

# What Is Stress? The Definition, the Causes and Strategies to Manage Stress

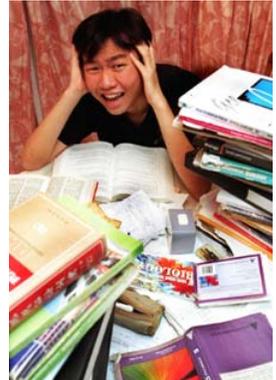
By Karen Lese-Fowler, Counseling Center

## What is Stress?

Stress is that waking up in the middle of the night feeling thinking “I’m never going to get all of this done!” Stress is your mind jumping around from thing to thing when you feel overwhelmed. Stress can be getting headaches or stomachaches you can’t seem to shake, with no real reason. Stress can mean getting more irritable with your friends.

Well, if you want the more technical definition, stress is actually the reaction people have to change or challenges. You can’t really avoid having some stress, and stress in itself isn’t such a bad thing. It keeps you on your toes and gives you energy and motivation to get things done, if you channel the energy right.

But too much stress can cause a lot of discomfort and can get in the way of being able to focus and achieve. Bottom line: you can’t really avoid stress, but you can do something about it.



## What Causes Stress?

According to the authors of The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook, there are three basic causes of stress. The first is the most obvious. Outside challenges and demands cause stress. As a college student you have a lot of demands on you, which it can be difficult to balance. Add family or work demands to class pressures and the adjustment of moving to a new school, and you’ve got a lot of life changes going on at one time. Remember that even exciting changes can cause stress.



The second cause of stress is physiological. Different people react differently to stressful situations than others. For example, some people tend to react physically to stress. Be aware of how your body reacts to stressful situations. If you’re prone to stomach aches, headaches, etc., maybe your body is telling you something. Go to the Health Center and get a check-up.

The third cause of stress is our thoughts. How we interpret events can cause as much, or more reactions as the events themselves.

## OK, so I’m stressed. So what do I do about it?

Believe it or not, you can make a difference in your stress level by doing a few simple things.

- **Learn to breathe.** This sounds really simple, but it’s not. Try an experiment and put one hand on your chest, and the other on your belly. Lie on the floor and watch the movement of your hands as you breathe. If the hand on your chest is rising more than the one on your stomach, you’re not breathing deeply. We have a tendency to breathe really shallowly, which can actually cause hyperventilation and more anxiety! Make a conscious effort to breathe deeply, beginning in your abdomen and slowly filling your chest cavity.
- **Prioritize.** It can be difficult to get college work done. A little planning goes a long way toward reducing stress. Try to avoid procrastination. If there’s an assignment that makes you nervous, take some action and talk to the professor or a trusted classmate about it, rather than avoiding it.



- **Have some fun.** It's important to have a balanced life. Your work time will be more productive if you have at least a little time for fun.
- **Keep your energy up by eating several mini-meals a day.** Don't skip meals, which will cause your energy level to drop.



- **Exercise.** Moderate cardiovascular exercise forces us to breathe deeply, and is good for our bodies and souls.
- **Be aware of the messages you send yourself.** Messages like "I'll never pass that test" or "I have to get an A in that class or it will be a disaster" bring more pressure and actually backfire, leading students to procrastinate and give up, rather than to get more done.
- **Try to be flexible with changes.** A lot of us like the world to be

predictable and structured, but it rarely stays that way. Try to see change as exciting, or at least interesting.

- **Make time for sleep.** If you're not rested, anything that stressed you a little before will make you much more anxious.
- **Get support.** Talking to someone who is supportive helps people feel less alone and helps the load feel a little lighter.
- **Remember your priorities.** Spiritual and religious practices can help people put stress in perspective. Feed your soul and your stress level will go down! Remember that when you start telling yourself "I don't have time" to relax, take a break, eat lunch, that might be a sign to you that you really need a short break!
- **Try some relaxation exercises.**



The following web sites provide recordings of relaxation exercises that many people find helpful:

- <http://www.hws.edu/studentlife/resources/counseling/relax.asp>
- <http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/RelaxationTape/index.html>

### **AM I stressed?**

Check your stress level with this on-line self-assessment tool: <http://wellness.uwsp.edu/Other/stress/>

If you're still feeling stressed after trying several of these approaches, consider talking to a professional. The **USD Counseling Center** offers free counseling to enrolled students. Stop by 300 Serra Hall, or call 260-4655 to make an appointment.

Relaxation is a physical skill, just like a sport. The more you practice it, the better you are at it.

FOR MORE FYE ONLINE RESOURCES VISIT: <http://www.sandiego.edu/sli/FYEOOnlineResources.php>