

Stress management for students

You know the routine well. You were given the deadline weeks ago but now the deadline date looms ever closer. You feel stressed

because you haven't written one sentence let alone the required three thousand words for your project. And you only have two days to go! Amazingly enough, because you are forced to work to an extremely tight deadline, you are focused and produce a good project. We've all been there as students and it's true to say that at times, stress like this can be productive.

Although the odd bout of stress is harmless, when it becomes a regular feature of your life, it becomes destructive rather than productive. But what exactly is stress? In relation to work or study it is usually defined as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". In other words stress isn't so much about feeling pressured but about having an adverse reaction to pressure. It's about the response that you as an individual make to pressure. Another common definition is that it is the "harmful reaction of your body and mind to pressure". This is because when you are stressed, your

thoughts, feelings and physical health can be affected.

General causes of stress

Quite often, change is a trigger for stress and research indicates that the top ten life changing events that cause stress are in rank order as follows:

- ▶ Death of a partner
- ▶ Divorce
- ▶ Marital separation
- ▶ Imprisonment
- ▶ Death of a friend/close family member
- ▶ Personal injury or illness
- ▶ Marriage
- ▶ Dismissal from work
- ▶ Reconciliation with long-term partner
- ▶ Retirement.

As a student although it isn't impossible, statistically, the chances of your having to deal with any of the life changing incidents listed are low. Therefore your causes of stress are more likely to be related to your life as a student. For example, one of the biggest changes in your life will probably have been leaving home and moving into a house with complete strangers. Another common cause of stress among students

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is the pressure to succeed. Struggling to meet your own expectations and that of other people creates pressure and you can sometimes begin to feel that you are losing control over your own destiny, especially when your performance at university does not match your expectations.

Causes of student stress

People react in different ways to potential causes of stress, so while you might sail through exams without any worry at all, your room-mate might feel really stressed out at the mere thought of having to sit through a three hour exam. Here is a list of problems that normally create stress for students:

- ▶ Work overload
- ▶ Exams and revision
- ▶ Difficulties with house-mates
- ▶ Dissatisfaction with course
- ▶ Poor relationship with tutors
- ▶ Other people's expectations
- ▶ Fear of failure
- ▶ Financial difficulties
- ▶ Feelings of inadequacy
- ▶ Fear of unknown assessments
- ▶ Unsatisfactory accommodation.

How do you know when you're stressed?

The key to managing stress successfully is to recognise both the causes and symptoms. These will vary but tend to include at least one of the following:

- ▶ Tension headaches
- ▶ Anxiety and worry
- ▶ Feeling faint
- ▶ Poor decision-making
- ▶ Migraines
- ▶ Mood swings
- ▶ Nausea
- ▶ Depression, feeling low
- ▶ Nervous twitches
- ▶ Feeling of helplessness
- ▶ Backaches
- ▶ Poor concentration
- ▶ Altered sleep patterns
- ▶ Irritability/anger
- ▶ Excessive sweating
- ▶ Feelings of reduced self-esteem and self-worth.

The fact that you react to stress is actually part of a defence mechanism. However, if you are run down emotionally, mentally or physically, your body's ability to mount a reasonable defence to an attack of stress will be reduced. That's why keeping healthy as a student is essential. In practical terms this means regular and healthy eating, regular sleep, regular exercise and avoiding health debilitating habits such as smoking and excessive drinking.

Keeping stress in check

The first action to take if you recognise that you are suffering from stress is to talk to someone such as your personal tutor, student counsellor or someone from the student union. You might even be in a university that operates a mentoring service in which case, being able to talk to a mentor who may well have been in the same situation as yourself will be especially helpful. If you don't want to talk to anyone within the university, then talk to a family member or friend. The key thing is to find someone to whom you can

express your feelings openly. You might also find it useful to discuss your feelings with one of your university friends. Not only might they be feeling exactly the same way as you do but trying to help someone else sort out their problems is often a catalyst for your finding solutions to your own problems.

Talking about your stress and expressing your feelings is therapeutic and will help you to be more realistic about your expectations. It also helps you accept that to be imperfect is okay and that to not get the exam results you desired is also okay. When you are suffering from stress, there is a tendency to focus on the negative rather than the positive. Placing things in perspective will, however, help you to be less critical or judgmental about yourself. Thinking of where a perceived problem fits into the bigger picture of life can help to minimise its importance. It will also help you to avoid being hypercritical over mistakes. If you try to focus on the specific problem that is the source of your stress rather than thinking of yourself as being the problem, that too can help you keep things in perspective. Put your problems in perspective by asking yourself the following:

- ▶ Will things seem so bad in six months time?
- ▶ Is this problem such a big deal? Is this problem as big a deal as finding out I have a terminal illness?
- ▶ In the big picture of life and death, how big is this problem?
- ▶ What things do I have that I can be grateful for?

Practical stress busting

If you recall, this article started with a reference to deadlines. This perhaps is one obvious area for stress reduction. If you plan and prioritise your work you will have enough time to meet deadlines. You can achieve this by setting clear goals and priorities for each week, which will filter down to daily goals and priorities. With a clear idea in your mind of what you hope to achieve by the end of each day,

you will feel in control and better equipped to stop other people from imposing their priorities on you.

Useful tips

- ▶ As soon as you receive an assignment work out a plan for carrying out the necessary work
- ▶ Set your own deadlines for conducting research and writing drafts
- ▶ Aim to always be ahead of schedule and to have your work complete days before the official deadline.

Even if an assignment or task seems insurmountable, it isn't. Break any project or assignment down into smaller component parts and immediately it will become more manageable. You will also draw confidence from being able to complete the smaller parts of an assignment before completing the whole.

Researchers in the US have found that "writing therapy" can be another effective way of dealing with stress. So if as part of your course you have to keep a learning log, use it to record how you feel about your learning and your workload. Alternatively, start to keep a diary to record your feelings. Being able to express your feelings in writing provides a release but also helps you to see patterns in your feelings and behaviour. For example, you might discover that your stress occurs at certain points of the week or before certain lectures. This gives you something concrete to work with in managing your stress.

One simple but effective management strategy for dealing with stress is to relax. Relaxation will help you to feel calmer. You'll also find the self-indulgence aspect of relaxation soothing. Try deep-breathing techniques such as this one recommended by the University of Sunderland's effective learning programme:

"Sit or lie in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Take a slow breath in and then let it out slowly. Don't take your next

breath immediately, but remain totally still and calm for a moment. Then take another breath and slowly let it out. Try to concentrate wholly on your breathing, being aware of your breath flowing in and out of your body. You may like to try counting to ten, counting one number each time you exhale. This concentrates your mind and enables you to become calm and clear. You can do this anytime and anywhere — gradually you will find it only takes a few breaths to regain control or take stock of a difficult situation."

Going for regular walks out in the fresh air and taking regular breaks particularly during concentrated periods of study will help you to manage your stress more effectively. Visualisation is another recommended stress reduction strategy. It works like this. You find somewhere quiet to sit and then visualise or imagine being in the most beautiful place possible. It could be somewhere you've already been or somewhere you would like to be such as sitting under the shade of a palm tree overlooking a sun kissed beach with waves sweeping across a rich blue sea. The aim of visualisation is to take your mind away from your present environment to somewhere more relaxing. The fact that you are thinking about relaxing will help you to relax.

You can also use visualisation to help you deal with a potentially stressful situation such as an exam. Instead of imagining all sorts of negative things about the exam, think positive and visualise yourself as being calm and relaxed as you sit in the exam hall. Think yourself into being confident about your performance in the exam and you will feel much more prepared for it.

You're probably well versed in the health benefits of exercise. However, you might not be aware of just how much exercise can help you reduce stress unless you've tried it. So try to build exercise into your weekly timetable. It needn't be anything too strenuous such as working out in the gym every day but could just be a brisk 20 minutes walk every day.

For a book full of quick fix stress solutions, take a look at Brian Clegg's *Instant Stress Management*.¹ It's has about 70 different exercises for assessing and then managing your stress. Each stress busting technique comes with a star rating to let you know its benefits. These can be physical control, spiritual/emotional control, defence or just fun.

Summary

Stress is manageable and as with most things prevention is better than cure. However, life is unpredictable so even with the best planning you will at times find yourself stressed out. Key points to remember when such a situation arises are these:

- ▶ Eat and live a healthy life
- ▶ Get regular exercise
- ▶ Talk to someone when you're feeling stressed
- ▶ Take regular breaks when you're studying
- ▶ Use relaxation and visualisation techniques to reduce stress
- ▶ Plan, prioritise and manage your work within self-devised deadlines
- ▶ Get things in perspective. ☺

References and further reading

1. Clegg B. *Instant stress management*. London: Kogan Page; 2000
2. Cooper C L. *Conquer your stress*. London: Institute of Personal and Development; 2000.
3. Richards M. *The Stress Pocketbook*. Hampshire: Management Pocketbooks; 1998.

Useful websites

www.mindtools.com

www.howtomanagestress.co.uk