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Keep things in perspective: stress management

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According to estimates, around 50 per cent, and in some universities, nearly 70 per cent of students are working part time to support themselves while they study. Add to this, the exams, the debt and the parties and it is easy to see why many students suffer from stress. Although stress is a natural part of life, when it becomes a regular feature it can be debilitating both in terms of health and finances. For example, recent Government figures show that stress costs companies around £1.24bn a year in sickness absence and lost productivity. Other research from the Trades Union Congress indicated that “workers exposed to stress for at least half their working lives are 25 per cent more likely to die from a heart attack, and have 50 per cent higher odds of suffering a fatal stroke”. The impact of stress cannot therefore be underestimated.

The term “stress” is often used quite loosely to describe even a temporary feeling of being under pressure. The

technical definition, however, in relation to work or study is “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. In other words stress is not so much about what you feel when you are under pressure but about how you react.

Diagnosing stress

Successful treatment of any medical condition starts with diagnosis. The same is true of stress. To manage stress successfully you need to be aware of the symptoms. In ‘Managing workplace stress’¹ the authors split the symptoms into two categories — physical and behavioural.

Physical symptoms

- ▶ Tiredness
- ▶ Lethargy
- ▶ Nausea
- ▶ Bowel disturbance
- ▶ Headaches
- ▶ Loss of sexual drive

- ▶ Muscle tension
- ▶ Nervous twitches
- ▶ Altered sleep patterns

Behavioural symptoms

- ▶ Irritability
- ▶ Aggression
- ▶ Anxiety and apprehension
- ▶ Poor decision-making
- ▶ Preoccupation with trivia
- ▶ Inability to prioritise
- ▶ Difficulty in coping
- ▶ Mood changes
- ▶ Difficulty in concentrating
- ▶ Feelings of failure
- ▶ Lack of self-worth
- ▶ Isolation

If you can identify the symptoms of stress or possibly even see an emerging pattern to your stress, you can then start to think about possible causes. For example, does the stress only arise at certain points of the year such as exam season? Is it linked to the behaviour of a person or group of people? Do you feel stressed and anxious when you have to deliver presentations?

The fact that you have a reaction to stress, either psychologically or physically is not necessarily a bad thing because the reaction is part of your body's defence mechanism. However, the effectiveness of the body's natural defence mechanism is greatly reduced if you are in poor emotional, physical or mental health. Keeping healthy as a student is therefore essential. In practical terms this means regular and healthy eating, regular sleep, regular exercise and avoiding health-debilitating habits such as smoking, drug-taking and excessive drinking.

Stress busting techniques

The first action to take if you recognise that you are suffering from stress is to talk to someone. It could be a family member or friend whom you can trust. Most universities now offer counselling services either as part of the university's own central services or as part of the student's union welfare services. The services on offer may also include access to a peer-mentor or "buddy" who may well be a student on the same course but

in a different year. Contact your student union for more details.

You may for all sorts of reasons prefer to take your problems outside the university, in which case organisations such as the Samaritans can offer a listening ear. One other useful source of support is "Nightline". This unique service operates after 6pm specifically so that students can talk to someone when perhaps access to other support services or even friends is limited. "When everything else is closed, we're there to help," says Sophie Allchin, co-ordinator at London Nightline and chair of National Nightline. "The service is run by students for students and we offer a listening ear for a whole range of problems that students may have. If we can't help, then we signpost students to other services". Nightline operates nationally and in most universities (www.nightline.ac.uk).

At www.stressbusting.co.uk Dr Roger Henderson, a GP, recommends the following five practical techniques for stress busting that you may find helpful:

- ▶ Keep a diary — use it to log situations, events, times, places and people that appear to cause you stress, then . . .
- ▶ Talk through your diary with a good friend or partner and ask for impartial advice.
- ▶ Learn how to relax — practise deep-breathing techniques such as slowly inhaling while counting to five; hold your breath for five seconds then breath out slowly. Repeat this 10 times when you are feeling stressed and concentrate on nothing but breathing.
- ▶ Exercise regularly — brisk walking for 20 minutes three times a week.
- ▶ Plan breaks in your day — allocate time in the morning and afternoon when you can have time for yourself.

In 'Instant stress management',² author Brian Clegg recommends a rather more novel approach. He suggests "play" as a key stress busting technique. He believes play is just as important in the emotional health of adults as it is in the emotional health of children. "Find some form of play in which you can totally lose yourself. It might be playing computer games or board games or silly party games. It might be conjuring up a fantasy world on the

tube, or trying not to step on the cracks in the pavement . . . just play," says Clegg.

Last but not least, do not forget that a simple technique for reducing the stress in your life is to manage your self and your time effectively. Plan and prioritise tasks so that you have enough time to meet deadlines. ³

Summary

Key points to remember for managing stress are:

- ▶ Eat healthily and live a healthy life
- ▶ Get regular exercise
- ▶ Talk to someone as soon as you recognise that you are suffering from stress
- ▶ Take regular breaks when you are studying
- ▶ Use relaxation and visualisation techniques to reduce stress
- ▶ Plan, prioritise and manage your work within self-devised deadlines
- ▶ Get things in perspective

References

1. *Williams S and Cooper. L. Managing workplace stress. Chichester: John Wiley & Son; 2002.*
2. *Clegg B. Instant stress management. London: Kogan Page; 2000.*

Further Reading

- ▶ *Richards M. The Stress Pocketbook. Hampshire: Management Pocketbooks; 1998.*

Useful websites

- ▶ www.studentcounselling.org
- ▶ www.studenthealth.co.uk
- ▶ www.samaritans.org.uk
- ▶ www.stressbusting.co.uk