

DISTRESS OR DE-STRESS?

Throughout your university years and into your working life you may find yourself stressed. How well you cope at these times depends on your resilience. Rita Cleveland discusses how you can improve your self-management so that you can strengthen your ability to cope in stressful times

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Why is it that you can become distressed in response to one situation and not another? In our complex day-to-day lives events and challenges can create stressful situations that make us feel uncomfortable and put us off balance. There is enough research now to assure us that we can take back some control of these challenging situations so that our balance is re-established. Working at this can build life-long skills of resilience and the ability to de-stress rather than succumb to distress.

As students, positive self-management is critical to your motivation, engagement and academic achievement. So, what counts for boosting resilience on the path to improving self-management?

Self-awareness

Childhood and adolescent experiences may influence the way we react to certain unfamiliar challenges. The first thing that counts in transforming distress to de-stress is awareness. Sometimes we need to step back from the situation and take account of what is happening. For example, when you are challenged by something that may cause stress what are the physical reactions you feel? Do you sweat? Does your heart rate increase? What happens to your breathing? Do you want to run away? Do you want to lash out, become aggressive? Do you want to cry? Do you cause distress for others?

With practice and with increased self-awareness we can use techniques to

cope in the short term and build resilience in the long term. Here are some suggestions as to what you might do to de-stress:

- If you are feeling uncomfortable in a situation, politely remove yourself
- If you have been overdoing it, take some time out and “listen” to your body
- If you cannot control your thoughts and memories and they are disturbing you, seek professional help

Maintaining balance

By maintaining a balance of everyday activities you will find that it will have a major influence on your self-management. The pressures on students are most often linked to academic expectations, keeping finances under control and keeping up with the demands for cultural and social activities on campus. Emotional and behavioural difficulties may arise when a student’s life gets out of balance. For example, are your academic expectations too low or too high? How can you make changes? Are you having difficulty managing your budget? Where can you get help? Are you overdoing your social life? Do you handle relationships appropriately? Are you feeling isolated? Are you involved in physical activities?

There are many ways to assist us to maintain balance in our day-to-day demands. Simple techniques for managing time and budgets include:

- Keeping a diary
- Preparing a budget

- Taking time regularly to review the diary and the budget
- Monitoring academic timelines
- Regulating sleep and recreation

Staying connected

Finally the most effective way to build up skills and resilience to manage the pressures of student life towards lifelong self-management is to stay connected with people around you.

If you are aware (and congratulations as this is the first step) that you are not coping with your studies and relationships, or you are drawn towards extreme behaviour, where do you go for help? Who among your family or friends can you speak to? Perhaps professional support would be more helpful? What are the counselling services available at your university? These are the communities to which it is essential to stay connected.

Conclusion

Stressful situations are a part of life. As students, particular stresses will arise. It is up to you to decide whether they will be occasions for distress or de-stress. Techniques for immediate and life-long self-management can be put into practice to ensure that as situations arise you manage them and learn from them. This article suggests that you maintain a system of self-reflection, which includes staying aware, keeping your life in balance and staying connected with people around you. These are what count. ■