

COPING WITH COLLEGE

Mental Health



SECTION I: MENTAL HEALTH AND STRESS

When you think of someone who is mentally healthy, what do you imagine? Does robust mental health require freedom from problems and stress, or perhaps a Pollyanna view of the world that refuses to see and deal with real problems? Do mentally healthy adults come from perfect families? Do they learn optimism from impossibly happy life circumstances? If so, it would seem that few of us could ever achieve such a state. After all, our lives are full of stressors.

College students, in particular, are in a time of transition. They commonly experience uncertainties about majors and careers, relationship ups and downs, roommate adjustments and conflicts, and ambivalence about relationships with parents. In addition, they are often worried about finances and about classes, exams, and evaluations. All of these factors contribute to a highly stressful mix that is the common experience of most college students.

Of course, you may have additional stressors that are all too real. You may be worried about the physical or mental illness or substance abuse of a parent, sibling, or partner. You may have experienced physical or sexual abuse. You may have lost someone you loved very much. You may be struggling with physical limitations or chronic illnesses. You may have encountered rejection after “coming out.” You may have struggled with racism or sexism that impeded your ability to achieve your dreams. All of these and many more situations can add to the already considerable stress of being a college student.

I wish I could tell you that this article will help you eliminate most of these stressors, but that would be an unrealistic promise. While we can certainly work together to make the



world a more just and caring place, it is impossible to avoid all sources of stress. This article is about coping with the problems you have in a way that will promote good mental health and healthy adjustment. First, I will share some basic information about stress and stressors. Next, I will talk about some things you can do to improve your ability to think and behave in health-enhancing ways. I will also talk about coping with painful feelings. Finally, I will provide some information about how to get additional help for yourself or a friend if needed. Asking for help when you need it is another healthy way of coping with stress.

WHAT IS STRESS?

- **Interesting fact #1:** Stress is not necessarily a bad thing. Any kind of change is stressful, even “positive change” like a job promotion, graduation, or wedding. Problems develop when we don’t manage stress effectively, or when stress is intense and/or prolonged.
- **Interesting fact #2:** The effects of stress are physical, not just emotional. Too much stress can worsen health symptoms including digestive problems and migraines, and weaken our immune systems.
- **Interesting fact #3:** The biggest problem comes from chronic stress, which can include the stress of “daily hassles.” These “daily hassles” can include things like commuting, financial pressures, and coursework demands. These chronic “small” stressors add up, and can lead to serious problems if not managed well.

COPING WITH STRESS: HEALTHY THINKING*

Would you be surprised to hear that the way you think about the stress in your life can have a big effect on your ability to stay healthy? You can actually train yourself to notice and avoid some thinking pitfalls that often get in the way of healthy coping.

For example, here are some attitudes that won’t help and may actually hurt you:

- I have to do everything perfectly.
- If something goes wrong, it must be someone’s fault.
- My happiness depends solely on luck.
- I am a victim of circumstances beyond my control.



- I always need to be right.
- I must always put other people's needs before my own.
- There is always an answer, and I can find it.
- Nothing can ever hurt me if I am sufficiently vigilant.

CHANGING NEGATIVE THINKING

What can you do if you catch yourself in negative thinking? You might notice that your own thinking matches some of the examples above, or you might discover a different negative thought. No matter what it is, your first step is simply to notice the thought and write it down. Next, get curious about the thought: what evidence do you have to support or disprove it? How do you feel when you read it aloud? What happens if you make a few changes in the thought, such as substituting "sometimes" for "always" in question #5? Does that make any difference in the way you feel?

With practice, you can learn to notice and change negative thinking that increases your stress level. If your habits of negative thought are very strong, you might need some help with these steps. If so, a counselor or therapist can help you examine and change destructive attitudes that contribute to your stress. *Some of these ideas were derived from the work of Albert Ellis.

COPING WITH STRESS: BEHAVIORAL TIPS

As mentioned above, the physical symptoms of stress include muscle tightness and other signs of physiological arousal. These symptoms, if prolonged, can contribute to physical and emotional problems. It stands alone to reason, then, that consciously relaxing your body can help.

Here are some behavioral suggestions for reducing stress:

- ***Deep breathing relaxation technique:*** While sitting or lying down in a comfortable position, place a hand on your abdomen. Inhale slowly and deeply while counting to seven; hold the breath while counting to seven; and exhale slowly while counting to seven. As you inhale deeply and exhale completely, you should feel your hand move up and down on your abdomen.



Try inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth, making a sighing sound as you exhale. Practice this for five minutes every day, so it will be easy to use the next time you feel tense. This is easy to use and it really works!

- ***Muscle relaxation exercise:*** Use the deep breathing relaxation technique (see above) while you do this exercise. Get into a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down. If seated, make sure your back is straight and your hands comfortable. Allow your mouth to be slightly open.

Starting at the top of your head, notice any tense muscle and gently give yourself permission to let go of the tension. If this is not possible for you, do not reproach yourself in any way; just pay attention to how the tension feels and continue the exercise. Slowly repeat the first step with each region of your body, including the mouth and eyes, jaw, neck, shoulders, torso, arms, and legs.

As you move down your body, try to imagine gravity helping the tension slowly drain out through your arms, fingers, legs, and feet. Consciously focus on feeling supported by the chair and/or floor. Practice five minutes every day, so this will be easy to use the next time you need it. You can also try this if you are having trouble getting to sleep.

- ***Imagine a peaceful scene:*** Take a few minutes for a mental vacation to the beach, the mountains, or some other place that is inspiring or healing for you. Combine this with one of the exercises above for a brief respite during a busy day.
- ***Increase physical activity:*** Exercise can help you relax and cope more effectively with stress.
- ***Be sure to leave time to play:*** All of us need recreation and fun in our lives. Adding humor helps, too.

COPING WITH STRESS: PAINFUL FEELINGS

All of us feel pain when bad things happen. Grief reactions are expected when a loved one dies or we end a long romantic relationship. Smaller losses also hurt. For example, sadness and/or disappointment are normal reactions if you fail a class, don't get a job you really want, or get turned down when you ask someone to go out with you. Coping effectively with these difficult feelings can help maintain your physical and mental health.



Here are some suggestions for coping with painful feelings:

- **Talk to a friend:** Getting emotional support can really help. Studies have shown that dependable social relationships reduce emotional distress, improve coping, and sometimes even have a positive effect on physical health (e.g. Weihs et al, Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 2005).
- **Express your feelings:** It's okay to cry! Journaling about your feelings can also be very helpful. Think about the purpose of the journal before you make a decision about whether to post it online, however.
- **Use creative art to work through feelings:** Visual arts, music, and poetry can be powerful tools for self-expression and can improve your ability to cope
- **Don't numb the pain in unhealthy ways:** Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope with emotional distress.
- **Ask for help if the pain persists:** Yes, this is another healthy way of coping. See below for more information.

IT'S OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP!

Sometimes you might find that the pain is too much to handle by yourself.

Here are some signs that you need to get help right away:

- Suicidal thoughts and/or suicidal intent
- Thoughts about hurting someone else
- Difficulty managing anger or aggression
- Self-injurious behaviors (cutting and other forms of self-harm)
- Self-destructive drinking or drug use
- Self-destructive eating behaviors
- Severe anxiety (e.g. panic attacks, post-traumatic stress)
- Chronic feelings of hopelessness
- Feeling a lack of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Dramatic weight loss or gain
- Changes in sleep patterns (too much or too little sleep)
- Decreased concentration and motivation



- Difficulty functioning at your usual level in work, school, and/or interpersonal relationships
- Chronic feelings of shame, or poor self-esteem

Working with a counselor or therapist can help you learn to manage your moods and return to a higher level of functioning. A few sessions with a professional clinician can help you enjoy your life again. What could be more important than that?

In some cases, medication might be a helpful or necessary to help you heal as quickly as possible.

HELPING A FRIEND *

You might be reading this with a friend in mind. Peers and friends are often the first to know that someone is struggling with significant psychological distress. You might be noticing some of the symptoms listed above in your friend.

The following signs are particularly significant and troubling:

- Threats to harm someone else
- Suicidal threats
- Behavioral indications that the person is thinking of suicide (e.g. giving away possessions, researching suicide methods on the internet)
- Behavior that endangers or frightens others, including aggression, violence, and stalking
- Presence of hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that others do not see or hear)
- Changes in speech or thought processes
- Extreme suspiciousness

If you believe the situation is an emergency, contact someone from one of the mental health resources available (many are cited in this publication). Do not promise the person that you will keep this information a secret, because his or her safety is the first concern. Stay with the person while you wait for help. Reassure the person that he or she will feel better. If you are not sure whether it is an emergency, ask someone else to stay with the person while you contact a resource person. In extremely urgent situations, dial 911 for assistance.



In a non-emergency, discuss your concerns privately with your friend. Use “I” statements about what you have observed that increased your concern. Don’t get into an argument with your friend, because this will tend to make him or her more defensive and less able to hear you. Do listen to your friend and let him or her know you care and you have understood them.

*This section uses material from the “Referral Guide for Students: Helping a Friend or Peer in Distress,” Counseling and Psychological Services, George Mason University.

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SECTION II: INTERNET ADDICTION

Do you find yourself missing classes? ... Having an erratic sleep schedule? ... Noticing symptoms of depression or anxiety? ... Having problems with your personal relationships? ... Have your grades dropped? ... Is your Internet use interfering in your life? ...

Could you be addicted to the Internet? To find out, answer the following questions:

- Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session)?
- Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time to achieve satisfaction?
- Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?
- Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?
- Do you stay online longer than originally intended?
- Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity because of the Internet?



- Have you lied to family members, therapists, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?
- Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, and depression)?

Only nonessential computer/Internet usage (i.e., nonbusiness- or nonacademic- related use) should be evaluated. Addiction is present when people answer yes to 5 or more questions during a 6-month period. (Young, 2004)

Researchers who study internet addiction in college students find that many students are faced with severe academic problems because they spend a significant amount of study time surfing irrelevant web sites, gossiping in chat rooms, and playing interactive games on the Internet. These students had problems completing homework assignments, studying for exams, or getting enough sleep to be alert for class the next morning due to late night Internet use. In one study, 50% of students interviewed after dismissal for academic failure listed excessive Internet usage as a reason for their problems.

IS THERE TREATMENT FOR INTERNET ADDICTION? ABSOLUTELY!

Here are some strategies for regaining control:

- See a counselor
- Join a support group
- Keep a log of your Internet use
- Set time limits
- Develop other interests
- Get involved in campus clubs and organizations
- Exercise
- Watch less television
- Go to all your classes and talk to other students afterwards
- Shorten your Internet sessions
- Be mindful of your moods and behaviors that lead you to use the Internet
- Identify your rituals and triggers to go online



- Use external shut down devices on your computer
- Evaluate your priorities
- Make new friends
- Change the time of day when you use the computer
- Limit your computer game time
- Explore the campus library
- Attend a campus sports event
- Try Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)
- Completely stop using certain applications
- Eat regular meals
- Sleep at night
- Consult a health care provider
- See a counselor

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