

CLEAR-UP STRESS AMBIGUITY

Stress and Relaxation



BY FOLLOWING THIS COMPASS TOOL, YOU SHOULD:

- The difference between good and bad stress,
- That improving your life situation is an effective way to reduce stress,
- To manage stress through coping skills,
- To practice relaxation exercises,
- To relieve tension through healthy physical activities; and
- To rely on professional resources for stress management.

You will see how this material relates to other approaches highlighted in COMPASS that are often associated with stress and relaxation, such as exercise and physical fitness, alcohol, and the natural world, and see which approaches work most effectively for you.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Is it any wonder that college students find stress to be ambiguous?

As a noun, it is defined by opposite meanings:

stress |stress||

1. pressure or tension exerted on
2. a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from

To clear-up the ambiguity, stress should be considered the equivalent of change. Meaning, you change (become stressed) as a result of changes (sources of stress) taking place outside of you. In technical language, the internal change is called the stress



response whereas the outside changes are referred to as stressors. So personal frustrations, family obligations, school assignments, and financial concerns are common stressors in everyday life. Nervousness, muscular tension, increased heart rate, and alertness of mind are typical stress responses. This might seem simple and straightforward. However, some stress ambiguity persists. Stress can be good and bad. Good stress, or eustress, contributes to health and performance, whereas bad stress, or distress, has a contrary outcome. You can discern distress by its amount, intensity and duration. Eventually, it wears and tears your health and performance.

For years, health researchers have investigated the stressors commonly faced by college students.*

Here are typical ones that have made the list:

- Lack of money
- Someone broke a promise
- Death (family member or friend)
- Dealt with incompetence at the Registrar's office
- Can't concentrate
- Had a lot of tests
- Thought about unfinished work
- Someone did a "pet peeve" of yours
- It's finals week
- Living with boy or girlfriend
- No sleep
- Applying to graduate school
- Felt need for transportation
- Sick, injury
- Bad haircut today
- Victim of a crime
- Had a class presentation
- Job requirements changed
- Applying for a job
- Assignments in all classes due the same day
- Fought with boy or girlfriend
- No time to eat
- You have a hard upcoming week
- Felt some peer pressure
- Lots of deadlines to meet
- Went into test unprepared



- Working while in school
- Arguments, conflict of values with friends
- You have a hangover
- Problems with your computer
- Lost something (especially wallet)
- Death of a pet
- Bothered by having no social support of family
- Performed poorly at a task
- Did worse than expected on a test
- Problem getting home from bar when drunk
- Used a fake ID
- Had an interview
- Had projects, research papers due
- Did badly on a test
- Can not finish everything you needed to do
- Heard bad news
- No sex for awhile
- Someone cut ahead of you in line
- Had confrontation with an authority figure
- Maintaining a long-distance boy or girlfriend
- Crammed for a test
- Parents getting a divorce
- Dependent on other people
- Feel unorganized
- Breaking up with boy or girlfriend
- Trying to decide on major
- Feel isolated
- Having roommate conflicts
- Checkbook didn't balance
- Visit from a relative and entertaining him/her
- Decision to have sex on your mind
- Car/bike broke down, flat tire, etc.
- Parents controlling with money
- Could not find a parking space
- Noise disturbed you while trying to study
- Someone borrowed something without permission
- Had to ask for money



- Got a traffic ticket
- Talked with a professor
- Change of environment (new doctor, dentist, etc.)
- Exposed to upsetting TV show, book, or movie
- Got to class late
- Erratic schedule
- Found out boy or girlfriend cheated on you
- Can't understand your professor
- Trying to get into your major or college
- Missed your period and waiting (or your girlfriend has missed her period and is waiting)
- Coping with addictions
- Registration for classes
- Stayed up late writing a paper
- Property stolen
- Someone you expected to call did not
- Holiday
- Sat through a boring class
- Favorite sporting team lost
- Thoughts about the future

*Adapted and modified from: Crandall, C.S., Pressler, J.J. & Ausprung, J. (1992). Measuring life events in the lives of college students: The Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 5, 627-662.

So, have you also faced these stressors? Several of these external changes have the potential of positively changing you--making you more life-experienced. This would be eustress. If the amount, intensity or duration of these stressors wears and tears at your health and performance, you would be experiencing distress.

Can distress result in illness or disease. The fact is that sickness and morbidities are caused by many factors; stress may be one. Interestingly, most people at risk from stressful experiences do not necessarily get sick or develop a disease. Although there is a relationship between distress and negative health conditions, distress does not seem to be a major cause of either emotional or physical problems. Rather, too much, too intense and too chronic stress responses seem to amplify the detrimental effects of other risk factors to illness and disease.



With this in mind, here are typical emotional and physical conditions associated with distress that have been recognized by counseling professionals:*

Physiological

- Headaches/migraines
- Muscle aches, cramps, spasms
- Jaw tension and/or teeth grinding
- Rapid/pounding heart rate
- Nervous/upset stomach, nausea
- Diarrhea, constipation
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, early waking)
- Fatigue, lack of energy
- Cold hands/feet
- Skin conditions (rash, acne); allergic reactions
- Increased perspiration
- Changes in appetite, eating habits, weight
- Colds, flu, other illnesses

Cognitive

- Difficulty concentrating, confusion
- Forgetfulness/memory problems
- Dissatisfied or unhappy with work/school
- Restlessness or boredom
- Frequent worrying or obsessive thoughts
- Nightmares
- Apathy, anhedonia (ceasing to find pleasure)

Emotional

- Anxiety/fearfulness
- Depression/sadness
- Feelings of guilt
- Feeling overwhelmed or overloaded

Behavioral

- Use of substances to reduce stress (alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, other drugs)
- Compulsive behavior (eating, shopping, sex)



- Problems with relationships
- Social isolation
- Increased aggressiveness (physical or verbal)

Menzano, S. (2005). The balance beam of life: Negotiating stress and relaxation. In Anderson, D. (Ed). *Compass: A Roadmap To Healthy Living*, Center for the Advancement of Public Health, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA.

WHAT IS STRESS MANAGEMENT?

Managing stress successfully means making stress work for you and experiencing a positive stress response. That would be capitalizing on the eustress potential and avoiding or reducing the distressing potential. There are five levels of stress management: life situational, perception, emotional, physical, and professional. You can learn to practice stress management techniques at each of these levels.

LIFE SITUATIONAL LEVEL

Improving your life situation is an effective way of reducing stress. A strained relationship, an unrewarding job, or a noisy living arrangement could be possible stressors in your life situations. Any one of these stressors could play a role in the development of emotional and physical conditions. You have the opportunity to change and improve your life situation and minimize the degree to which you are experiencing emotional and physical reactions to stress.

In the case of academic dissatisfaction, you could make a dramatic change by literally “starting over again.” You could change majors—what’s more, you could literally leave the university and seek study elsewhere, yet how practical is this change? Changing majors or switching schools may afford some pleasant relief at least in the immediate sense. And perhaps this is a good move on your part. However, how often can you resort to these dramatic changes as a way of handling academic dissatisfaction? This holds true with other aspects of your life situation. How often can you end relationships that have become tiring, or move residence because the neighbors are annoying?

Ironically, changing a life situation to reduce stress may actually place an additional demand on you. After all, stress is change. If you choose to change your major, you have to make sure the next major meets your needs or be prepared to spend extra semesters at the University. By leaving one institution for another one, think of all the hassle that



comes with the admissions process. Therefore, it is important to be selective when changing your life situation in order to handle the everyday demands which require your immediate attention.

A more practical stress management approach would be to improve rather than change your life situation. This approach is based on your accepting your present life situation and striving to make it better. Faced with a stressful aspect of your life, think to yourself: "So this is what life is all about. Okay, so how am I going to improve it?"

PERCEPTUAL LEVEL

Improving your life situation is an effective stress management approach to major stressors at school, work and home. However, techniques are needed to handle the hassles in your daily life. An effective method of managing stress on a day-to-day basis is the use of coping skills. This method is based on how you perceive stress. Your reactions to school or job demands may be different from someone else's reactions. Have you ever noticed how something may really annoy you but seemingly does not affect the person next to you?

Determining if a demand is good or bad is a matter of personal interpretation. If you consider a particular demand to be good (e.g., a challenging task, an assignment), you are likely to benefit from the experience. Yet if the demand is considered bad (e.g., an unrealistic time frame to complete a task), you are likely to become distressed. Bad stress, if not properly managed, will result in unhealthy mental and physical reactions. Therefore, it is important for you to be able to distinguish between good and bad stress.

You can convert bad stress to good stress through the use of coping skills. Too much, too intense, and long-lasting stress interferes with your mental and physical sense of balance. Coping skills reestablish this balance. According to mental health specialists, there are 10 basic coping skills. You can use these skills singularly or in combination with one another. Since you are unique and face a variety of daily stressors, it is important to choose which skills you normally use to cope with daily demands.

Consider using these skills more regularly:

- ***Take one thing at a time.*** Complete one task so that you can then start another.
- ***Try not to be a super-person.*** Know your limitations and admit them when appropriate.



- ***Get away for a while.*** Find a quiet place to think and “recharge your batteries.”
- ***Avoid withdrawing from daily activities.*** You must always return to the “stream of things” and do your best.
- ***Give the other person a break at times.*** Try reconsideration, compromise or accommodation.
- ***Work it off.*** Nothing helps you deal better with stress than strenuous physical activity.
- ***Talk it over.*** Express your concerns and be willing to “lend an ear” to others.
- ***Give in at times.*** “Okay, so no one is perfect.”
- ***Do something for others.*** “What goes around comes around.”
- ***Schedule your recreation.*** Make constructive use of your free time.

EMOTIONAL LEVEL

Emotional stress reaction may occur despite your efforts at using coping skills. Picture your having to speak in front of a class audience. You may perceive this as a challenge and try to do a good job (while “trying not to be a super-person”). You may in fact; “talk it over” with the instructor in order to get a better idea of what is expected of your class presentation. Yet you still can’t help but notice some emotional reactions—especially just prior to your talk. Even though your mind is alert, you are experiencing some nervousness. You may even detect some physical reactions such as muscular tension. Well, your presentation was a complete success and you receive a lot of compliments from the class. However, you sense some lingering feelings of nervousness and muscular tension. At this point you can reestablish your mental and physical balance by performing relaxation exercises.

Relaxation exercises are a means of managing emotional reactions to stress. Once performed there is a very good chance that your mind will return to a relaxed and calm state. As in the example above, relaxation exercises can be used after you experience good stress. More important, these exercises are especially beneficial if you are feeling worn and torn by distress. You can use relaxation techniques during a busy and hectic day. The exercises are categorized according to whether the mind is used to relax the body (e.g., guided imagery, relaxation response and others) or if the body is used to relax the mind (e.g., progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback and others).



A simple yet effective relaxation exercise is diaphragmatic breathing:

- While sitting comfortably but properly (shoulders above hips with lower back supported), assess your breathing cycle.
- As you inhale and exhale, which part of your body is moving? Is it your chest or stomach?
- Place a hand on top of each body part. It should be your stomach. This is called diaphragmatic breathing.
- To ensure relaxing through diaphragmatic breathing, your breathing should be conducted through your nostrils.
- Now comfortably, inhale (this should take about 2 seconds) and then exhale (this should take about 3 seconds). Remember: no forced-breathing.
- Place your hand on your abdomen to make sure you are breathing diaphragmatically.
- Within a minute of breathing this way you should notice a reduction in your emotional and physical reactions to stress.

PHYSICAL LEVEL

Your reaction to stress can also take place on a physical level. Increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, muscular tension, perspiration, and upset stomach are common stress byproducts. Initially, your body can not distinguish between good and bad kinds of stress. Your physical reactions are generally the same whether you make Dean's list or lose your wallet, sit next to someone to whom you are attracted or find yourself in the dentist's chair. What makes a difference is the length of time, intensity and amount of the stressor. You can shorten the length of time, and decrease the intensity and severity of your stress reaction through healthy physical activity. To begin with, you should practice tension-relieving exercises. These would simply include stretching and range of motion activities. You can complement these activities with more formal exercises involving cardio-respiratory (e.g., walking, swimming) and muscular conditioning workouts (e.g. calisthenics, weight training). Just performing healthy life activities such as gardening and housecleaning are beneficial effects as well.

You might be the kind of person who complains about not having enough time to work-out regularly. If that is the case, try this simple physical activity known as the heel-



jog. It represents a low-impact, cardio-respiratory activity that can be performed literally anywhere (and practically anytime).

1. Stand away from chair with some safety space around you.
2. You might wish to remove your shoes because the heel-jog is better accomplished by using your toes for balance.
3. Start by bending your right arm at elbow with your right hand extended forward.
4. Then bend the left knee forward.
5. Now switch—bend left arm and bend right knee.
6. Notice that just your heels rise off the floor.
7. Continue alternating your opposing limbs as if you were running in place – but in fact – your feet never leave the floor.
8. You can look down to make sure you are synchronizing the alternating opposing limbs.
9. You should practice in front of a mirror.
10. Remember to keep your shoulders as well as your hips steady and level (no gyrating or twisting movements because your feet are planted). You are allowed to look around so your neck muscles do not tighten.
11. You can allow your arms to go through space between the crook of your elbow and your back.
12. Most persons (definitely older adults) who perform the heel jog for 1 minute report heart rates at close to 90 beats per minute.
13. You can fool around with your tempo – if you want to speed it up.
14. You can conveniently insert this activity at various times throughout the day (while you are waiting for a computer print-out, during TV viewing, etc.).
15. And, once you and others in the same room perform the heel jog for about a minute, a mass-synchronization tends to occur. Just ask everyone to listen and they will hear a coordinated “swish-swish” arise from motions of doing the heel jog in unison.



PROFESSIONAL LEVEL

As much as you attempt to manage stress at situational, perceptual, emotional and physical levels, the accumulation of stress byproducts can diminish your emotional and physical health. At this point, it would be necessary to confer with your primary health care provider who could treat your condition and if necessary refer you to more specialized care. Yet even your health care provider will remind you that professional resources are available at each of the preceding level of stress management. Improving your life situation, such as through career counseling, is available at the University's Career Services. Trying to cope with stressful life events and everyday hassles can be made easier by consulting with Student Life person seek the advice of professionals in counseling, health care and education. They are there to offer direction and instruction. Physical distress can be met with healthy physical activity. You might even try meeting with an exercise specialist to develop a sound fitness program!

Rich Miller, Ed.D.

School of Recreation, Health and Tourism

