

THE BALANCE BEAM OF LIFE

Stress and Relaxation



WHAT IS STRESS?

The term stress is commonly used by college students, yet few really understand what stress is and the effects that stress has on them physically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially. Although stress is usually associated with the negative events in life, stress—in and of itself—is neither good nor bad. The term is borrowed from the field of physics, and refers to any experience of pressure or change. Some changes are perceived to be positive (e.g., falling in love, being promoted, winning the lottery)—this is called eustress. Those changes that are perceived to be negative (e.g., becoming ill, failing an exam, getting stuck in traffic) are called distress. Both types of stress are necessary for maintaining interest, energy, and motivation. Stress becomes harmful only when we have too much eustress or distress occurring too often.

A useful analogy is that human beings are like rubber bands. Rubber bands are designed to stretch in different directions and to fit around objects of different shapes and sizes. Similarly, we are designed to manage the various changes that occur throughout our waking hours—changes in light, temperature, movement, positioning, and the many demands placed on us to communicate, make decisions, and solve problems. However, if a rubber band is stretched too far or is continuously stretched in the same direction without stopping, the rubber band breaks. This is called stress exhaustion.

WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

Any change in your life can be experienced as stressful.



Stress may be caused by one or more of the following:

- The death of a partner, family member, or close friend
- A separation or divorce (one's own or a loved one's)
- Problems in a romantic relationship
- Conflicts with parents or other family members
- Problems with teachers or supervisors
- Entering a marriage or commitment to a life partner
- A change in health of a family member or close friend
- Change in social activities
- Vacations, holidays, or trips away from home
- A personal injury or illness
- A change in sleeping habits and/or eating habits
- A change in exercise habits and/or physical activity
- A change in finances
- Borrowing money (for education, home, car, etc.)
- A change in career or major
- A change in workload
- Major decision-making
- Outstanding personal achievement
- Failure to reach a personal goal
- Beginning or finishing school, or transferring to a new school
- Being suspended from school or fired from work
- A change in living conditions or residence

Common sources of stress for college students include:

- Leaving home for the first time
- Adjusting to roommate(s)
- Experiencing increased freedom, independence, and responsibility



- Balancing school and other demands
- Deciding on a major
- Taking exams
- Speaking in public or giving presentations
- Making new friends and fitting in
- Wondering if you're in the right place

WHAT HAPPENS TO ME WHEN I EXPERIENCE STRESS?

We respond to stress-inducing situations (called stressors) in the following manner:

Stage 1: We perceive some threat to our well-being.

The stress process begins with perception. This is why two people can be experiencing the very same event (e.g., riding a rollercoaster), but have very different stress reactions. The first person perceives that such events are fun, exciting, and harmless—this person experiences some eustress, but otherwise is undisturbed. The second person perceives that rollercoasters are dangerous, threatening, and scary—this person is much more likely to experience distress.

Stage 2: The stress response is activated.

Once a threat is perceived, the body goes into “fight or flight” mode, which means that the body prepares to physically fight or physically flee from the threat. To do this, the body activates certain systems and shuts down others. Systems such as circulation (i.e., heart rate) and respiration (i.e., breathing) increase; muscles tense; pupils dilate; perspiration (the body's method of cooling itself during exertion) increases; and the mind assumes a hypervigilant state, actively scanning for threats in the immediate environment. Similarly, bodily systems not needed for immediate survival—digestion, reproduction, growth, and the immune system, among others—are de-activated.

Stage 3: Once the threat is past, the body restores its equilibrium.

After the threat has been managed through addressing/attacking the problem (i.e., “fighting”) and/or avoiding/escaping the problem (i.e., “flight”-ing), the body works to return to its pre-threat state. This means that activated systems are slowed and de-activated systems are resumed.



It's important to realize that this sequence of perception, stress response, and relaxation response occurs naturally in most animal species. The key to preventing this process from becoming detrimental, however, is time. The body needs time to recover from the threats it perceives and the physical, cognitive, and emotional changes that occur as a result of the "fight or flight" response. When one does not allow enough time for this perception-stress-relaxation to occur, the result is the breaking of the rubber band—stress exhaustion.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS EXHAUSTION

Symptoms can be divided into four general areas: physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Different people experience different symptoms of stress exhaustion.

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)

HOW DO I MANAGE STRESS MORE EFFECTIVELY

Stress management involves three primary elements:

1. Assessment
2. Perception
3. Behavior

Step 1: Assessing current stressors/stress levels

- On a scale of 0 (= no stress at all) to 10 (= the most stress you can imagine), what level of stress do you need to feel energized but not overwhelmed? This is your optimal stress level.
- Compare your optimal stress level with the level of stress (0-10) you are currently experiencing. Do you need to increase or decrease your stress level, and to what degree?



- What major life-event stressors have you experienced lately? What daily stressors or hassles do you typically encounter?

Step 2: Evaluating and exploring options for perceptions

How can you change your perceptions of stressful events?

1. **Altering:** Can you change how you think about stressors, turning threats into challenges, or making accommodations that change how you perceive the situation?
2. **Avoiding:** Can you find ways to remove yourself from the situation in a way that will not cause you problems in the long run?
3. **Accepting:** Some things cannot be changed or avoided. Can you find ways to accept that some stressors are a part of life?

How can you minimize and/or change irrational beliefs? How can you reduce the amount of perfectionist “shoulds” and “musts” in your thinking? Ask yourself: is it really that important that I do everything perfectly all the time?

Step 3: Making changes to behavior

How can you create a greater sense of control?

1. **Assertiveness:** Learn how to (a) communicate your needs to others and (b) establish healthy boundaries in relationships; these skills are critical for stress management.
2. **Time management:** Learn to keep a written schedule/calendar; be realistic about the amount of time needed for all tasks; schedule in time for eating, sleeping, relaxing, commuting, and recreation; learn to prioritize; determine the best time to accomplish tasks (i.e., if you do not function at your best in the early morning, do not schedule important meetings/classes at that time).

How can you attend to physical wellness?

1. **Exercise:** Learn to incorporate physical activity into your day—walking/jogging/running; taking stairs; stretching/yoga; individual/team sports; dancing; martial arts; weight-lifting.



2. **Nutrition:** Learn to avoid chemical stimulants, including nicotine, caffeine, and processed sugar; eat a balanced, low-fat diet, including protein, complex carbohydrates, and vitamins/minerals; consider taking a daily multi-vitamin; avoid using alcohol as a stress management tool—drinking disrupts the sleep cycle and can cause social and other problems.
3. **Taking care of medical needs:** Attend to injuries and illnesses; attempting to function while sick or injured adds to stress levels.

How can you use interpersonal relationships to help manage stress?

1. **Building & maintaining healthy relationships:** It is important to learn how to give and receive emotional support from friends and loved ones, and to use these supportive people for reality checks, alternate perspectives, and problem-solving.
2. **Planning social recreation time:** It is critical to schedule time with others, in whatever setting feels most appropriate.
3. **Laughing:** Laughing and smiling release endorphins (pleasure-inducing chemicals) in the brain, which promotes relaxation.
4. **Practice relaxation techniques:** Think of relaxation techniques both as ways to manage stress as it occurs and as preventive medicine. Individuals who practice relaxation techniques a few minutes every day have lower overall stress levels and are better able to manage stress when it occurs.
5. **Relaxation techniques include:**
 - a. Deep breathing
 - b. Progressive muscle relaxation
 - c. Autogenic training & hand warming
 - d. Guided imagery
 - e. Yoga/meditation/self-hypnosis/prayer

Silvestro Menzano, Ph.D.
Counselor, Counseling Center

