

Minimising Stress

Coping with stress

We all suffer from stress at key moments in our lives. There are many points within study at school, college and university when there may be considerable stress, perhaps at times of assessment and times when the amount of work feels too much. This is apart from the stress that may arise from your personal life.

This study advice sheet offers a variety of tips on how you can guard against the negative effects of stress when studying.

What is stress?

Any engineer will tell you that some stress is inevitable for a structure to remain standing. Sometimes stress is used to define a feeling of being under pressure. This can be a positive thing, by helping people to perform well and giving a sense of excitement and achievement. However you need to be concerned with stress when it becomes so bad that it begins to exceed your ability to cope and reduces your effectiveness. This can lead to a number of harmful consequences, either physical or emotional, leading to inability to work effectively.

Being aware of the impact of stress will help you to minimise its effects on your study.

Reading Styles or Techniques

At school, college and university you are probably concerned with the importance of your results and the way this will impact on your future. The styles of teaching may vary throughout your education – even between KS3 and KS4, between subjects and teachers – and sometimes it can be difficult to know how you are doing because you may not be getting immediate and meaningful feedback.

However pressured you feel, you are studying for good reason and therefore tasks can only be managed and not really reduced. But, if you can guard against the negative impact of stress through effective control measures, then it is less likely to make you ill and affect your studies.

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Managing your study

Three key control measures will help you to minimise the stress in your life:

- Get organised
- Look after your health
- Learn to relax

Get organised for study

- Plan a timetable for completion of coursework as soon as you know the requirements.
- Plan to complete coursework a week ahead of submission date.
- Be realistic about deadlines you set yourself.
- Decide your priorities and stick to them.
- Make sure set task requirements are clear to you.
- Complete one task before moving on to another.
- If a task is large and complicated then tackle it in smaller “chunks”.
- Don’t feel you have to strive for perfection – be content with trying your best.
- If there is a major crisis in your personal life let your teacher or tutor know so that work can be re-scheduled if necessary.

Look after your health

- Be warned! Coffee, alcohol and smoking all contribute to stressed feelings.
- Avoid taking non-prescription drugs.
- Allow time to eat properly.
- Try to keep a well balanced diet.
- Develop a regular exercise programme.

Learn to relax

- Take frequent five minute breaks away from study to do something different.
- Spend time alone each day doing nothing.
- Learn to recognise potential sources of stress (see opposite)
- Learn and regularly practise a few relaxation techniques.
- Talk to friends regularly.
- Allow for some fun in your life!

Signs and symptoms of stress

Physical

- Breathlessness, dizziness, nausea.
- Appetite changes.
- Frequent indigestion.
- Constipation/ diarrhoea.
- Trouble getting to sleep.
- Waking up early.
- Persistent tiredness.
- Fidgeting, nail biting
- Headaches, persistent neck pains

Mental and emotional

- Feeling weepy and emotional.
- Irritability.
- Inability to decide.
- Feeling unable to cope, failure.
- “people don’t like me”
- “I don’t like myself or others”
- Fear of something dreadful happening.
- Difficulty in concentrating.
- Inability to complete one task before going on to another.
- Loss of sense of humour and lack of interest in life.
- Unable to tell others how you feel.

If you experience a group of these symptoms on a regular basis then you may well be working ineffectively and may even be heading for illness.

Relaxation strategies

Relaxation techniques can help you by providing mental, emotional or physical release.

Mental

Doing a different type of mental exercise may be just what is needed:

- If you have any knowledge of the techniques of yoga, Zen, meditation or mindfulness then use them – or find out about them.
- Focus on a fantasy journey.
- Focus on an object in the room, for example a lighted candle. See the object and think only of that.
- Focus on breathing: breathe deeply in through the nose and out through the mouth in a regular rhythm, gradually allowing your breathing to adjust to its own depth. Try using this in conjunction with the other focusing exercises.

Emotional

Learn to identify the way you respond when you are under stress:

- Express those feelings appropriately, perhaps through writing or talking to others.
- Emotional catharsis through watching TV (even soaps can play a positive role here) or through drama, music or art.

Physical

Soundness of body and soundness of mind:

- Exercise: exercise is valuable because it helps to reduce the levels of stress-creating hormones in the bloodstream. You don't need to be a great athlete to keep fit.
Jogging for example has been used as a treatment for depression in the USA.
- A brisk walk.
- A hot bath.
- A massage or aromatherapy session. Make yourself comfortable and alternately clench and relax muscles, starting with your toes and finishing with your neck and face muscles.

Potential sources of stress for students

Teachers

Personalities, presentation and communication skills, tutoring roles.

Coursework

Incomplete or vague instructions, insufficient time, deadline clashes, lack of feedback.

Study

Work overload, pacing, motivation, prioritising, lack of understanding, organisational and learning skills, long reading lists.

Group work

Co-Ordinating activities, personality clashes, competition.

Exams

Failure, rescheduling, revision skills.

Resources and facilities

Library, computing facilities, laboratory access, study areas.

Personal issues

Relationships, Family, illness, accommodation, finances.

Find out what you enjoy doing and then do it.
Set up your relaxation programmes ahead of stress.
Then it is likely that you will avoid the worst problems.

Sources of support

When stress seems to be overwhelming, or you need to talk things through, there is a wide range of people available to give support to you.

For example:

Tutor

Teachers

Year Head

Pastoral Support team

SEN team

Connexions

Chaplain

Medical Officer

Useful websites to look at are: <http://www.childline.org.uk/Explore/SchoolCollege/Pages/exam-stress.aspx> and http://www.getconnected.org.uk/get_help/feelings_and_mental_health

These sites offer advice and guidance to any student who is feeling low, worried or stressed about things.

Other study advice sheets which may be of interest include **Organising yourself** and **Personal Development Planning**. Both of these titles discuss how you can take control of the way you study and how it impacts on your life.

Stress Management... an ongoing task

Stress management is about learning how to exert more control over your life and your environment. Developing self-management skills, such as those concerned with time management, problem solving, and relaxation, will improve your ability to cope with stressful situations.

By learning how to manage stress at an early age you will learn a skill you can use for the rest of your life.



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