

# UNDERSTANDING STRESS & ITS CONSEQUENCES

## 1. WHAT KINDS OF THINGS CAUSE STRESS?

Different activities and life events cause people to feel stress. Most people think of stress as coming only from negative experiences (e.g., problems at home or school) but it can also come from positive experiences (e.g., planning a birthday party, preparing for job interviews).

### Examples of Negative Events:

- School or work pressures/conflict
- Conflict with romantic partner
- Financial problems
- Personal illness
- Family illness/death

### Examples of Positive Events:

- Starting a new relationship
- New job/internship
- Planning party or celebration
- Holidays with family
- Going on vacation

### *According to surveys of college students across the U.S...*

- Over 50% report “more than average” to “tremendous levels” of stress within the past 12 months, with academics/career, intimate relationships/family, and finances topping the list of stressors (American College Health Assoc. National College Health Assessment, 2013)
- 60% worry about having enough money to pay for school; 50% are worried about simply paying their monthly expenses (National Student Financial Wellness Study, 2015)

## 2. THE UPSIDE AND THE DOWNSIDE TO STRESS

Stress can help move us into action. That is, our bodies are designed to respond (e.g., kick our heart rate up, fuel our body, focus our attention) so that we can effectively manage challenges that we are faced with.

But, stress can become problematic when...

- it becomes **too high** (too many demands and you don't have enough resources to meet the demands)
- high level stressors come **too frequently**

If you regularly experience stress, over time...

- Your memory and daily cognitive functioning may suffer
- Your immune system will be less effective in carrying out its regular healing functions, making you more likely to get ill or stay ill for longer.
- You will be more likely to gain weight and develop disease (e.g., diabetes)

### 3. HOW DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE STRESSED?

There are many symptoms of stress. Some of these are physical and others are psychological.

#### Physical symptoms of stress:

- Headache
- Muscle tension or pain
- Chest pain
- Fatigue
- Stomach ache, irritable bowel
- Sleep problems
- Change in sex drive

#### Psychological symptoms of stress:

- Anxiety
- Sadness or depression
- Irritability or anger
- Restlessness
- Lack of motivation
- Difficulty concentrating
- Can't slow down your thoughts

Most people know the symptoms that tell them they are stressed, but all too often they ignore their symptoms ("I don't have time to have a headache!" Sound familiar?). Think of these symptoms as the early warning signs--the "red flags"--that tell you to stop and take a moment to consider how to better handle whatever is going on. By attending to these early signs you may be able to prevent yourself from feeling much worse later.

### 4. HOW DO YOU COPE WITH BEING STRESSED?

People react to their stress in all kinds of ways. Here are some examples of common coping strategies:

#### Examples of Positive Coping:

- Talking to friends/family/counselor
- Doing some physical activity
- Self-soothing (e.g., hot tea, bath, read, listen to music)
- Stretching/yoga/meditation
- Turning to spirituality

#### • Examples of Less Healthy Coping:

- Eating to feel better
- Being sedentary (e.g., sit on the couch, watch tv)
- Drinking
- Smoking
- Taking drugs

Once you start to recognize that you are stressed, what do you do to cope with that stress? Are there others things that you do that aren't on this list?

The strategies that categorized as "less healthy" are not particularly problematic if they are used only occasionally. For example, it would be unrealistic to think that people will never react to stress by relaxing on the couch and watching tv. Problems start to arise when the "less healthy" options are really they only tools that people have developed to manage their stressors and/or these "less healthy" strategies as their 1st choice to cope with stressors.

Remember, even though these "less healthy" strategies may feel good in the moment, these tools can actually backfire---that is, your reactions to stress (e.g., eating too much because of stress) can negatively affect your health in the long run (e.g., raise blood pressure, raise blood sugars; lead to depression or anxiety).

So, the goal is to begin to develop more positive strategies to help you better cope with your current stressors and learn how to reduce your use of "less healthy" coping behaviors in response to stress. So, let's practice developing these tools for your toolbox.

## MAKING SPACE TO TAKE CARE OF YOU

Consider thinking of your life as like a bucket. You fill it up with activities (positive and negative) and at some point you reach capacity---your bucket is full. There's no way to add anything else without the bucket overflowing. So, when life demands that you add one more thing to the bucket, you can feel really overwhelmed---or in other words *stressed*---and it can be difficult to keep things from spilling out.

So, what typically gets tossed out of your bucket when life demands more? For most people, taking care of themselves and their needs is the first thing that goes.

However, when you are stressed, it is precisely the time to give yourself a little attention, be kind to yourself, and give yourself a break, even if it is in small ways. So, how can you give back to yourself when your bucket is overflowing or is about to overflow? Below you will find a list of basic tools to help you cope more effectively with stress when it comes up.

### COPING WITH STRESS WHEN IT HAS ALREADY ARRIVED

- **Take a break for YOURSELF.** Sometimes just taking a moment to step out of the situation, breathe, and relax can help you to calm down and be able to go back to a challenging situation with a fresh perspective.
- **Move those muscles.** Get out and take a walk or do some other form of physical activity. By moving your muscles you can activate your body's own natural endorphins which can boost your mood. Remember, this doesn't have to be long---start with 5 or 10 minutes. You may find that once you get moving you will want to keep going for longer. But even if you don't, that's ok too!
- **Take care of you--do something that is soothing.** Sometimes people listen to music, read a book, draw or color, take a hot bath or shower, sip some tea, or get a massage. Think about what makes you feel more relaxed and make some time to do that, even if it for only 10 to 15 minutes. Sometimes all you need is a little break!
- **Reboot your sleep routine.** Sleep has a big impact on mood. Check out our sleep hygiene tips and join the #SleepRevolution
- **Make time to eat.** Pack snacks and schedule meals just like you schedule other activities. Refuel — you can't run on fumes!
- **Try relaxation techniques.** People who regularly stretch, practice progressive muscle relaxation, do deep breathing exercises and/or engage in other mindfulness techniques have shown reduced physical symptoms and psychological distress, enhanced daily functioning, increased well-being, and increased quality of life. Check out online resources to guide you through these exercises. For example:  
<http://self-compassion.org/category/exercises/#>  
<http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>  
<https://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/downloads.html>  
<http://health.ucsd.edu/specialties/mindfulness/programs/mbsr/Pages/audio.aspx>
- **Consider talking with family, friends, or important others (e.g., clergy).** We all need to support of others when stressors hit. Close others become “pillows” to fall back on---a place where you can find comfort and support as well as practical help to cope with your stressors. Think about who you will turn to for support and set up some time by phone or in person to talk.

## **SLEEP HYGIENE: 101**

### **Did you know?**

- The majority of adults require 7-9 hours of sleep per night
- 60% of college students don't get enough sleep
- Not getting enough sleep can make you more likely to catch a cold, gain weight, have higher risk for disease
- The effect of sleep deprivation on students' academic performance is roughly equivalent to the effect of binge drinking and substance use on performance.
- Among 1st yr. students, poor sleep predicts dropping or withdrawing from a course

### **SLEEP HYGIENE 101:**

- Set a sleep schedule. Decide on a reasonable time you want to go to bed each night. Remember, most adults need between 7-9 hrs. Backtrack 1/2 hr to 1 hr before that to start getting ready for bed.
- Make your bedroom conducive for sleep. Dark, quiet, cool. Consider a sleep mask, earplugs, or dark curtains to help. And make sure to use your bed just for the activities it's meant for (not as a desk for studying!)
- Turn off electronics. Light from your t.v., computer, tablet, and phone tricks your body into staying awake. Turn off the ringer and other alerts on your mobile devices and power down the others.
- Establish a bedtime routine. The goal: slow down your mind and body to get a good night's sleep. What helps you to relax? Perhaps take a shower or do some stretching to de-stress your body. Read a paperback book, color, journal about your day, listen to some chill music, or try an app with soothing nature sounds (e.g. rain, ocean waves).
- Cut the caffeine. The effects of tea, coffee, soda, & energy drinks can last up to 14 hrs and prevent you from falling asleep. Consider reducing your intake overall and cutting it out by mid-afternoon.
- Resist all-night study sessions. Your brain needs sleep to consolidate information. You will also be more alert and sharp after a good night's sleep and better for that test.
- Take a nap. 20-30 mins can improve mood, attention, and performance. But make sure its only 20-30 mins...otherwise you will feel groggy and might throw off your sleep later
- Limit alcohol before bedtime. Just a few drinks can affect the quality of your sleep and prevent you from restoring your fuel

**Join the #SleepRevolution**

## ROADMAP FOR STRESS REDUCTION

What are the activities or events that are causing you the most stress right now?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

What are some of the signals (physical & psychological) that tell you that you are stressed?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

What are your main strategies for coping stress?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

What tools do you want to add to your toolbox?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_