

Managing stress

STRESS is essential in small doses, too little can actually be bad for you - leaving you bored and under stimulated. Sometimes the challenges of study, work, relationships, finances and home life overload us and we feel unable to cope. Frequently it feels as though very little has actually changed when all of a sudden we are experiencing quite extreme stress: it is like that and stress can creep up on us when we least expect it to, and can appear in many different situations.

Where stress comes from

Our relationships, home life, work load, financial and time pressures are stressors we often don't notice. Specific events such as the loss of a loved one, or the ending of a relationship on top of the demands of our daily life, can feel unbearable. Being at university is, in itself, stressful and when we add this into the mix we can easily become overwhelmed.

Stress is a normal response to new and challenging situations and is our body's way of helping us cope - but it can easily become overwhelming without warning!

Stressors include -

- lack of sleep
- large workloads or on-going workloads without the opportunity to rest.
- extreme physical exercise, or none at all
- sickness or injury
- moving house or leaving home
- starting a new relationship or any relationship difficulties
- employment changes or uncertainty
- living in a different culture
- climatic extremes - high or low temperatures.

How will I know that I am stressed out?

The effects of stress vary between people and change with age and personal circumstances. When the demands on your energy become too great you may experience these symptoms of stress.

- sleep problems
- lack of concentration
- exhaustion
- anxiety
- sadness or depression

- stomach ache, butterflies or ulcers
- digestive upsets and appetite loss
- difficulty making decisions
- asthma and skin rashes
- high blood pressure
- absenteeism and general illnesses
- shortness of breath and chest pains
- headaches and migraines
- social withdrawal or feeling irritable and angry with people around you
- poor work or study performance
- hot and cold flushes.

What can I do about my stress?

It is often not about beating stress (stress is inevitable) but about beating stresses ability to beat you! Take control by considering how balanced your lifestyle is in terms of meeting your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs. Identify the main sources of stress and what adjustments you can make to reduce them. Do not ignore the signs, do something before you reach burnout or crisis point. So often we only realise we are stressed when we are no longer coping but to manage the demands of university we also have to learn how to build up our "emotional bank balance" rather than just "spending" all the time. If we keep spending without saving (emotionally) we will end up in debt and will not have the resources to cope when life continues to make demands of us.

You don't have to do all of these things every day, but the more often you can do more of these things, the more likely you are to be able to prevent stress from beating you!

- The most important thing is to build up your "emotional bank balance" and so increase your stress tolerance and resilience by maintaining a healthy lifestyle with regular physical exercise, sleep, rest and good nutrition. More information about all these can be obtained from Student Counselling and from our website.
- Take time out from being busy to "sharpen your saw". By forcing yourself to keep going when you are exhausted simply leads to reduced efficiency, whereas a short break to do something fun or see a friend can result in increased efficiency and better performance in the long term.
- Avoid or limit smoking and recreational drug and alcohol consumption. They may help you cope in the short term but their long term effect is to reduce your ability to manage stress.
- Find out what helps you relax, and do that - for some people its playing sport, for others it's meditation.

- If you need to relax right now, practice slow deep breathing in through your nose and out through the mouth. Further benefit is added by strongly contracting the muscles of one part of your body with each "in" breath and relaxing it on "out" breath. Work through the body; take about 10 minutes to do so, while listening to peaceful music in a quiet place. Student Counselling has a variety of CDs you can borrow to learn how to do this effectively.
- Plan regular recreation breaks throughout your day, and don't try to study for more than about 45 minutes or an hour without a break
- Build a supportive network of friends and family.
- Organise, prioritise and manage your time, break big goals into small steps, anticipate deadlines and demanding times in your calendar and reduce other commitments accordingly.
- Practice rational thinking, temper your reactions, have realistic self expectations and try to accept frustrations, failures and mistakes, as a normal part of life, learn from them, but don't base your self esteem on them.
- Have realistic and meaningful short and long term goals. Evaluate the stressors you are prepared to tolerate in the light of these and your Values, and make some changes if necessary.
- If you are having problems don't be afraid to ask for help, everyone has stressful times. What advice would you give a friend if they asked for help with stress? Can you follow your own advice?

Self check

You may like to check out what you are doing or can do to manage your stress.

Am I ...

- ...eating, sleeping and exercising sufficiently?
- ...taking time out to relax and have fun every day?
- ...planning and using time management techniques?
- ...regularly accessing my goals?
- ...spending quality time with friends and family?
- ...considering going to student counselling.?

To find out more about stress management then please make an appointment with one of our counsellors at guidance@oc.school.nz. Alternatively utilise the question option on our website to allow us to signpost you to some helpful resources etc.