

What is Stress?

Stress is a normal part of life. Everyone needs a little bit of stress to stay motivated and alert. Without stress, we would probably sit on the couch all day eating potato chips and watching TV or playing video games. Too much stress means that our body is overreacting to life events. If I get a B on a test and I feel as if the world is going to end, this might mean that my body is having a reaction that exceeds whatever it is that's making me anxious.

Why do we have Stress

Our physical stress reaction has developed over a long period of time, and it's usually referred to as the "fight or flight" response. This response happens when we perceive that there is a threat in our environment and our bodies physically prepare for action. Our pupils dilate, our heart rate speeds up, the blood vessels in our muscles dilate, and our reflexes accelerate, among other things. This response works well to save us from physical threats we might encounter (such as being mugged by an armed thief.) The problem is that our bodies can't tell the difference between a literal life-or-death threat and a threat from a different source. So for some of us, we have a similar reaction to a professor calling on us in class when we didn't do the reading and being threatened by someone with a gun.

Research shows that as our stress level increases, our level of performance will increase correspondingly. So the right amount of stress causes us to feel motivated, alert, and ready for a challenge. However, everyone has a cutoff point where the stress becomes too much and our fight or flight response is triggered. Once we pass this cutoff point our performance quickly drops. Everyone has a different cutoff point, and knowing where this cutoff point is can help you to maintain the right amount of stress level in your life. No stress usually means little or no motivation.

An example of is shown in a team playing basketball. Have you ever seen a really good team get beaten by a really bad team? This might be because the good team didn't have enough stress going into the game, and so their performance was also low because of it. Likewise, have you ever seen two really good teams face off in a championship game and they both make too many errors? This is probably because their stress levels passed the cutoff point and their performance declined as a result. Most pro athletes will tell you that they perform best when they feel like they have something to prove (pressure) but aren't so focused on their performance that they get stuck in their own heads. The same holds true for any activity that we do that causes stress, whether it's taking a test, asking someone on a date, or interviewing for a job

Causes of Stress in College

While sources of stress vary from person to person, there are some common sources of stress for many college students. The first of these is separation from family. While it's probably a good thing to gain some independence, being away from family can also mean losing the immediate social support that you had back home. This also means that you have pressure to establish a new social network, and this takes effort.

Freedom and independence are another significant stressor for students. Freedom always sounds like a good thing, but it can pose some problems as well. Freedom means making choices, but also living with the consequences of those choices. In other words, we are free to stay awake until 4:00 in the morning playing video games, but we are not free to be alert and attentive at our 8:00 class. Also, in college there is a lack of structure that was previously built into our lives (as in high school). This can introduce a fair amount of stress.

Competition is another source of stress. This source becomes even more apparent as students get further in college. You may feel like you're in competition to get in to medical school or law school, or you may compete to get assistantships or even to find a job. There can also be competition between our wants and our needs (for example, your need to study may be competing with your want to play basketball).

Another significant source of stress is peer pressure. You might be tempted to think that you outgrew peer pressure in high school, but consider the following questions. What would you do if your friends were pressuring you to drink more than you wanted to? How would you handle it if they made fun of you? What if you needed to study but your friends were going out and wanted you to come? These can also be big sources of stress, especially if by acquiescing to their demands you make a mistake that you have to pay for later (like getting an MPI or DWI).

Most people would agree that choosing a career is a significant source of stress. This actually encompasses most of the prior sources of stress listed – family, freedom (and consequences), competition, and maybe even peer pressure. How do you satisfy your needs for a job, your parents' wishes, make a lot of money, and get respect for your career? What if you pick something you later don't like?

How Do You Experience Stress?

When people experience stress they usually do so on multiple levels. Below are some cognitive (thought), emotional, behavioral, and physical symptoms of stress. Everybody experiences stress a little differently, but see which of these symptoms apply to you.

- **COGNITIVE:**
 - Can't concentrate
 - Racing thoughts
 - Can't think logically
 - Forgetfulness
 - Confusion
 - Thoughts of worthlessness
 - Suicidal thinking
 - Loss of motivation

- **EMOTION:**
 - Irritable
 - Apathetic
 - Nervous
 - Feeling out of control
 - Feeling helpless
 - Feeling alone
 - Anxiety/panic
 - Sad/hopeless

- **BEHAVIORAL:**
 - Isolates
 - Loses motivation
 - Workaholic response
 - Lashes out
 - "Breakdowns" (uncontrollable crying, etc)
 - Neglecting self-care
 - Self-medicating the stress (through drugs, alcohol, video games, etc.)

- **PHYSICAL:**
 - Headaches
 - Upset stomach
 - Racing heart
 - Dizziness
 - Not enough/too much sleep
 - Shortness of breath
 - Feeling lethargic
 - Tight/tense muscles
 - Decreased sex drive
 - Lowered immune system

Stress usually works in a cycle in which symptoms on one level can contribute to symptoms on other levels. For example, too much stress about failing a test can lead to problems focusing, forgetfulness, and other cognitive symptoms. As we experience problems focusing during the test, emotional symptoms may appear in the form of anxiety and even panic. These emotional responses trigger physical symptoms such as racing heartbeat, upset stomach, shortness of breath, and dizziness. All of these symptoms combined can eventually become strong enough that they lead to the behavioral response of leaving the test without finishing it.

One of the keys to managing stress effectively is to learn what your optimal level of stress is and what your stress "cutoff" is. While everybody experiences some of the symptoms listed above at various times, if you experience a high frequency of these symptoms or if you have symptoms of high intensity then these are probably signals that you're reaching your own stress cutoff point.

Breaking The Stress Cycle

Since stress occurs in a cycle, changing even one piece of the cycle will force changes throughout the whole cycle. Stress management can occur on any level of the cycle, or even on multiple levels at once. Listed below are some suggestions on how to practice stress management on our cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physical levels. Remember, the goal is not to eliminate stress, but rather to reach the right level of productive stress for us.

- **COGNITIVE COPING:**

- Challenge negative thoughts
A "C" grade means I don't enjoy algebra, not that I'm stupid or worthless
 - Maintain perspective
How will I feel about this in a day? A month? A year?
 - Set realistic goals and celebrate their accomplishment
I'm willing to put in a "B" effort on this paper, and if I got a "B" I'd be satisfied.
 - Practice forgiving yourself for mistakes, then learning from them.
That "D" grade sure showed me how NOT to study for thermodynamics; next time I'll try something different.
 - Pray or meditate
- **EMOTIONAL COPING:**
 - Face your anxiety; don't avoid
Avoiding is easy in the short term but doesn't solve the problem. Anxiety is usually intense but time-limited, so endure it and then reward yourself for enduring it. Usually the more you face your anxiety the less intense it becomes.
 - Reach out for emotional support
Talk to friends that you can count on. Sometimes just venting can release much of our stress.
 - Practice humor and positive emotion
 - Find something you can appreciate about each day, even if it's only that you made it through the day.
 - Seek out laughter. Watch funny movies, joke with friends, etc. Humor is one of the best ways to keep perspective
 - Affirm yourself for the positive things you do. You may be failing your chemistry course, but that grade only applies to your chemistry abilities – not to your worth as a son/daughter, sister/brother, friend, employee, etc.
- **BEHAVIORAL COPING:**
 - Practice time management
Make lists of what you need to do, then prioritize those lists. Consider dropping things that are low priority.
 - **SOCIALIZE!** Do NOT isolate
 - Usually when we feel like isolating is when we could benefit the most from social support. Spending time with friends can recharge us enough to tackle our stressors.
 - Assert your needs in your relationships. Relationships can be one of the biggest stressors in our lives. Communicate what you need and expect from the relationship or friendship and give others chances to meet these needs.
 - Learn to enjoy activities by yourself.
- **PHYSICAL COPING:**
 - Practice good nutrition
Healthy eating habits contribute to a sense of physical well-being. Avoid too much caffeine since the physiological effects of caffeine can exacerbate the physical symptoms of stress.
 - Avoid drugs or alcohol
Using or drinking in response to stress is dangerous because the consequences of using typically lead to more stress. Smoking pot can definitely reduce anxiety in the short term but it does nothing to help you learn how to manage the anxiety when you don't have any pot around. And sleeping off a hangover or missing class because you're high will only make your stress worse.
 - Practice relaxation techniques
 - Deep breathing exercises
 - Progressive muscle relaxation.
 - Get the right amount of sleep
Sleep is critical in managing stress. Too little or too much sleep and our ability to deal with problems decreases.
 - Exercise regularly
Exercise stimulates chemicals in the brain that contribute to positive emotion, reduces social isolation, and can increase health and self-esteem.

If you try these skills and they don't seem to work, don't give up! Just like building a muscle, practicing these stress management skills *consistently* will give good results. And the more of these skills that you practice the better things will get.

Stress And Anxiety

Stress refers to the demand placed on us physically, mentally, and emotionally. Anxiety is an emotional reaction that we may have when we experience stress. Anxiety usually involves feelings of worry, nervousness, fear, or panic. Not everyone who experiences stress reacts with anxiety all the time, but anyone who experiences anxiety is experiencing some form of stress. Since anxiety is a basic emotion everybody experiences anxiety at one point or another; however, some people experience anxiety that is sufficiently intense or long-lasting as to require more in-depth treatment.

For some people anxiety may be mild most of the time. They may feel jittery or nervous, fidget, or sweat. Other people may experience anxiety more intensely, with racing heartbeat, dizziness, trouble concentrating, or difficulty sleeping. To ease mild to moderate anxiety, the coping strategies listed above should be effective; however, someone with intense, long-lasting anxiety may benefit from counseling and/or medication.

There are many different types of anxiety, and knowing which type of anxiety you have is important as you seek treatment. Listed below are some of the different types of anxiety with brief descriptions attached.

Panic Attack:

A panic attack is a period in which a person feels intense apprehension, fear, or terror. Panic attacks usually include physical symptoms (shortness of breath, racing heart, etc) as well as emotional and cognitive symptoms (fear of going crazy). Someone who experiences recurrent panic attacks may be experiencing *Panic Disorder*.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder consists of at least 6 months of excessive anxiety or worry about many different events or activities. The anxiety is perceived as difficult to control.

Social Phobia:

Social Phobia consists of a persistent fear of social or performance situations in which the individual may experience embarrassment. Anticipating or being in the social situation provokes a strong anxiety response, and often the individual will try and avoid the social situation. Often the anxiety with social phobia may be manifested through a panic attack.

Specific Phobia

Individuals with specific phobias experience persistent fear of certain objects or situations. Exposure to the object or situation provokes an immediate anxiety response which is excessive and unreasonable. Often the individual will try and avoid the object or situation. Examples of types of phobias include fear of certain types of animals, fear of seeing blood or injuries, fear of driving, fear of flying, or fear of getting sick.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Individuals with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder were exposed to a traumatic event that involved a direct threat to themselves or others and to which they reacted with intense fear or helplessness. These individuals experience intrusive recollections of the event that elicit strong anxiety responses. These responses often include increased arousal or avoidance of thoughts, people, or events that remind them of the trauma.

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder

People with obsessive compulsive disorder experience obsessions and compulsions that interfere with their ability to function in daily life. Obsessions are defined as recurrent and persistent thoughts, impulses, or images that are experienced as intrusive and that cause anxiety or distress. Some examples of obsessions may include persistent fears of contamination after shaking someone's hand, or persistent worries that one forgot to lock their door or window, among others. Compulsions refers to repeated behaviors or thoughts that have as their goal to prevent or reduce anxiety. Often these compulsions involve ritualistic thoughts or behaviors that are intended to reduce anxiety associated with the obsessions (for example, by repeatedly washing hands to reduce fear of contamination after shaking hands with someone.)