

Stress Management

Stress and College

Stress is a state of tension that occurs when there are demands and pressures that tax an individual's ability to adjust. Although college is often regarded as a time of fun and few responsibilities, the reality is that college years can be very stressful. Stress typically results from the challenge of adjusting to transitions in life, and college is a time of significant change. For example, starting or ending college, or returning to school or home after breaks causes stress as one adapts to changes in routine. College students must adjust to the demands of living more independently, without parents and family to help manage and structure time. During college, the pressures of various role demands are also very high. College students cope with the pressure to succeed academically, and typically are faced with exams and papers all occurring within the same short time period. Beyond academics, many college students want and/or feel pressure to participate in campus activities which require additional time and investment. Even making time to see friends or a romantic partner can be experienced as another pressure. Family time and responsibilities at home also continue to compete for the college student's time and energy.

Stress in college can result from external sources such as academic demands or relationship conflicts, or from internally generated expectations for self. The stress response is very personal and varies for different students. For example, one student might be stressed by the prospect of having to give a speech in class, while another would not find this threatening. Although stressors are typically thought of as negative life events (e.g. arguing with a friend, having limited time to study for an exam), stress can also result from positive events (e.g. acceptance to a sorority/fraternity, graduating). This is because positive events also bring challenges for adjustment. Also, stress not only occurs after a sudden, acute situation (e.g. losing a paper after a computer crash), but also results from the smaller events that accumulate over time. Indeed, it is these cumulative factors or "daily hassles" (e.g. being late for class, missing the shuttle, forgetting a book) that are major contributors to chronic tension.

The Stress Response

The human body has adapted to react to threat with an automatic, physiological pattern of reaction known as the "fight or flight response." The body summons its defensive forces in an integrated manner, beginning with the release of the hormone ACTH into the bloodstream. Within seconds, there is the output of adrenalin and other stress-related hormones, a rise in blood pressure, an increase in glucose levels and the alerting of the major organs and sensory systems to prepare for physical action. This complicated physiological alarm response is set in motion in the face of any perceived threat. In modern society, of course, this kind of extreme physiological response is usually inappropriate to the level of actual danger, and the continued activation of the stress response reaction takes a physical toll on the body. Many diseases, including hypertension, heart disease, ulcers and diabetes, have been found to have a strong correlation with stress. In addition, stress may

aggravate or even be a causal factor in other conditions, such as headache, backache, skin disorders, indigestion, respiratory ailments, mental illnesses and accidental injuries.

Identification of Stress

The first step in dealing with stress is recognizing when it is occurring. There are three basic components of stress: physiological, behavioral and cognitive.

Physiological signs of stress are bodily changes that are important cues in the identification of a stress response. Physiological symptoms include the following:

- shallow, rapid breathing
- heart racing
- increased perspiration
- nausea or stomachache
- increased muscle tension
- headache, backache
- tightness in chest
- dry mouth
- increased urge to urinate cold hands or feet

Behavioral signs of stress are actions that are potentially observable to other people. An increase in interpersonal conflicts, including irritability, sarcasm or hostility in relationships with friends and family is often an indicator of stress. One may also become emotionally sensitive or volatile in response to inconsequential matters. Other behavioral signs of stress include losing patience, rushing, or being careless or forgetful. Stress may also cause a change in eating or sleep habits. The use of substances (e.g. alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, medications) is also a behavioral indicator of stress, and is a dangerous coping mechanism. College students may abuse alcohol, in particular, as a way of trying to cope with stress. However, the short-term relief provided by alcohol does not address the underlying causes of stress, and may lead to abuse or addiction.

Cognitive signs of stress involve the way in which we mentally process what is going on around us. When stressed, it often becomes difficult to concentrate or think clearly, and it is easy to become distracted by worries. Cognitive processes are an important component of stress as our attitude toward life situations determines how we respond. People who are chronically stressed have a tendency toward negative, self-defeating, or perfectionist thinking. For example, when faced with an important exam, the individual who is stressed might anticipate failing before even seeing the test. When we catastrophize, our thoughts and behaviors are extreme and out of proportion to the situation. This leads to even greater tension. Some people who operate under a high level of stress have longstanding expectations that are exceedingly high or unrealistic (e.g. "It is necessary for me to be talented at everything I do," "Everyone must like me."). These self-defeating beliefs are a set-up for inevitable defeat and are a primary contributor to stress.

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Once aware of a high degree of stress, it is helpful to identify those situations or experiences that typically evoke tension or worry. An effective way of pinpointing stressors is by keeping a stress diary in which stressful situations are recorded as they occur. This requires becoming aware of your individual physiological, behavioral and cognitive signs of stress. A diary would include date, time of day, location, who you were with, what you were doing, symptoms of stress and stress rating (e.g. 1 to 10). By noting these experiences, you can come to understand your own personal stressors and your unique stress pattern. This will help in formulating a plan to reduce the level of stress in your life.

The following are a few tips in how to manage stress:

1. Set realistic, clear goals and prioritize your time. Evaluate goals periodically, and have the flexibility to modify them when appropriate. Many college students take on too many activities without considering which ones are truly important and/or rewarding. If you find yourself overly stressed, consider letting go of some of your activities that you are only doing because you feel you “should.”
2. Deal with both success and failure with a balanced attitude. Recognize that disappointing/negative experiences are a natural part of the cycles of life. Use crises as opportunities for growth, and to reaffirm values and break unhealthy patterns.
3. Don’t “drift along” in troublesome or emotionally draining relationships or situations. Take steps to resolve the problems, or consider ending the relationship or experience.
4. Make time to be with significant others in relationships that are trusting and reciprocal, and that leave you feeling energized.
5. Find time every day for some form of relaxation or fun, such as watching your favorite show, exercising, laughing with a friend, or spending needed time alone.

For More Information

The Union College Counseling Center is available for personal assistance in coping with stress. Counseling is provided by doctoral level psychologists, is confidential and free of cost. To make an appointment, you may call (518) 388-6161 or stop by the front desk of the Wicker Wellness Center.