

Managing Stress

"LIFE IS TOO IMPORTANT TO BE TAKEN AS A JOKE, BUT TOO RIDICULOUS TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY."

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Stress occurs anytime you prepare to make changes in response to something, whether it is desired or demanded, voluntary or involuntary. It is a fact of life that you can't avoid. We often speak of stress in negative terms. Yet, stress is not necessarily bad. A certain level of stress is necessary for motivation and enervation, sharpening your senses and allowing you, for example, to be at your best for taking a test or running a marathon. So, you don't want to totally eliminate stress, but you do want to learn how to manage it in more effective ways, so that you don't "burn out" - physically, mentally, and/or emotionally.

SOURCES OF STRESS

Environment

Your environment places continual demands on you to adapt, change, or adjust to the weather, noise, crowding, interpersonal demands, time pressures, performance standards, and threats to your physical security.

Physiological

Demands on your body are a significant source of stress: illness, accidents, aging, sleep disturbances, and poor diet/insufficient nutrition.

Your Thoughts

How you think about, interpret, and label your experiences is also a significant source of stress. This is not a source of stress that many people recognize or understand, yet it is a significant contributor.

Example A

You are driving up Logan Canyon on a beautiful autumn day. The leaves are brilliant shades of red, orange, and yellow. You have taken this drive to relax and get away from homework and other demands. You are in no hurry and have no specific destination in mind. It's okay if you go all the way to Bear Lake or only as far as Second Dam. You are going to stop when the "spirit" moves you. All of a sudden, a car pulls out from First Dam. You have to slow down to avoid hitting it. The car, which you are now following, is going no more than 25 miles an hour. You tell yourself, "It's nice to have an excuse to drive slowly. Now I can really enjoy the canyon and relax."

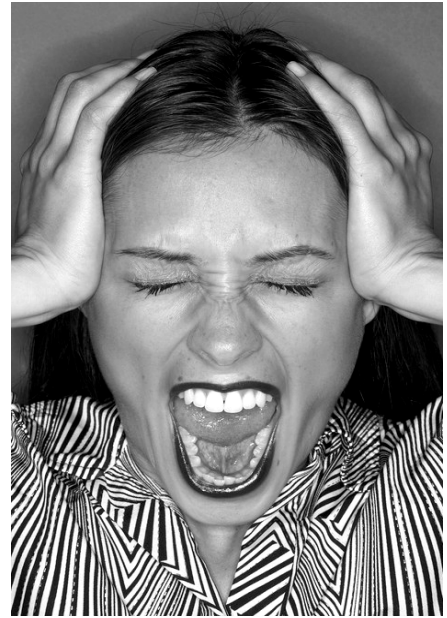
Example B

You are driving up Logan Canyon on a beautiful autumn day. The leaves are brilliant shades of red, orange, and yellow. You are expected to meet some friends at Tony Grove in 15 minutes, and it will take you at least 40 minutes to get there. All of a sudden, a car pulls out from First Dam. You have to slow down to avoid hitting it. The car, which you are now following, is going no more than 25 miles an hour. As you lean on your horn and shout at the offending driver, you tell yourself, "What a stupid jerk! He shouldn't have a driver's license. I can't believe this. I am going to be **so** late, and everyone will be **really** mad at me because I'm late."

Basically, the conditions in these two examples are the same. What is different is how the individual is interpreting and thinking about the experience. Just as you could choose to be angry and distressed at being slowed down and arriving late, you could choose to accept the situation, enjoy the drive, and trust that your friends would understand why you arrived late - **THUS** significantly reducing your stress.

WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS

There are several basic ways that you can eliminate or reduce stress. One or all of the approaches may be appropriate for any particular situation.



1. **Change the situation.**
Evaluate what about the situation is causing you stress. Then, brainstorm with yourself or people you trust all possible ways in which you can change the situation. If your roommates are driving you nuts, can you move out and into an apartment by yourself or with other people? Can you set up a meeting to discuss the conflicts and find ways to solve them to everyone's satisfaction? If you don't manage time well and thus become overwhelmed with too many commitments, can you seek training in time management or assertive communication?
2. **Change your perception of the situation.**
This is where monitoring and changing your thoughts comes in. Just as the driver in Example A chose to be relaxed and accepting of the slow driver, he/she could also have chosen to be angry and agitated. If you tend to see only the negative in every situation, attempt to identify what might be a growth opportunity (Remember the saying "Every cloud has a silver lining?") If you tend to catastrophize ("*If I get a "C" in that class, I'll never get into graduate school!*"), think about the situation realistically ("*My GPA will still be 3.2; besides, I can retake the class if I need to.*"). Accept that every situation can, in some way, be a positive learning experience.
3. **Change your capacity to deal with the situation.**
Your ability to deal with stress can be diminished by lack of sleep or exercise, poor diet/nutrition, inability to relax, illness, etc. These factors can be changed, thus increasing your ability to deal with stress. Make an effort to get *at least* 5-6 hours of sleep per night; consult with the nutritionist in the Student Health Center to help plan inexpensive, nutritious meals; attend stress management workshops to learn relaxation techniques; structure your schedule to allow yourself at least 30 minutes a day of exercise. If you can't find 30 minutes a day, do things like climbing stairs instead of taking the elevator, walk to school one day a week, etc.

How Vulnerable Are You to Stress?

The following test was developed by Psychologists Lyle H. Miller and Alma Dell Smith at Boston University Medical Center. Score each item from 1 (almost always) to 5 (never), according to how much of the time each statement applies to you.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>__1. I eat at least one hot, balanced meal a day.</p> <p>__2. I get seven to eight hours sleep at least four nights a week.</p> <p>__3. I give and receive affection regularly.</p> <p>__4. I have at least one relative within 50 miles on whom I can rely.</p> <p>__5. I exercise to the point of perspiration at least twice a week.</p> <p>__6. I smoke less than half a pack of cigarettes a day.</p> <p>__7. I drink fewer than five alcoholic drinks a week.</p> <p>__8. I am the appropriate weight for my height.</p> <p>__9. I have an income adequate to meet basic expenses.</p> <p>__10. I get strength from my religious beliefs.</p> <p>__11. I regularly attend club or social activities.</p> | <p>__12. I have a network of friends and acquaintances.</p> <p>__13. I have one or more friends to confide in about personal matters.</p> <p>__14. I am in good health (including eyesight, hearing, teeth).</p> <p>__15. I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried.</p> <p>__16. I have regular conversations with the people I live with about domestic problems, e.g., chores, money, and daily living issues.</p> <p>__17. I do something for fun at least once a week.</p> <p>__18. I am able to organize my time effectively.</p> <p>__19. I drink fewer than three cups of coffee (or tea or cola drinks) a day.</p> <p>__20. I take quiet time for myself during the day.</p> <p>___ TOTAL</p> |
|---|---|

To get your score, add up the figures and subtract 20. Any number over 30 indicates a vulnerability to stress. You are seriously vulnerable if your score is between 50 and 75, and extremely vulnerable if it is over 75.

Stress Control Lifestyle Questionnaire

Instructions: On the scale below, circle the number that most closely represents how you see yourself right now.

I am a person who:

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|--|---------------|--|
| 1. Doesn't mind leaving projects. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Must get projects finished once started. |
| 2. Feels calm and unhurried about keeping appointments | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Feels hurried about keeping appointments. |
| 3. Is non-competitive. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Is highly competitive. |
| 4. Lets others finish speaking. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Interrupts others. |
| 5. Never hurries. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Always hurries. |
| 6. Is able to wait calmly. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Is uneasy when waiting. |
| 7. Does one thing at a time. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Does several things at once. |
| 8. Speaks slowly and deliberately. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Speaks vigorously and forcefully. |
| 9. Concerned with satisfying self, not others | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Wants recognition from others for a job well done. |
| 10. Slow moving. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Fast moving. |
| 11. Is satisfied with my job. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Is ambitious, wants to advance quickly. |
| 12. Relies on others to set my deadlines. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Sets my own deadlines. |
| 13. Feels limited responsibility | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Feels responsibility for the whole world. |
| 14. Is casual about work. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Is obsessed with work. |
| 15. Is careless about details. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Pays careful attention to detail. |

Some stress is necessary, even healthy. It inspires creativity and achievement. Scores in the middle of the chart tend to indicate a healthy stress level. The further you are way from the middle, the more stress there may be in your life. The goal is to create a balance between the two extremes.