

Stress in College: What Everyone Should Know



ACHA

American College
Health Association

advocacy • education • research

Stress in College

Stress is a normal physical, emotional, and mental response to change — regardless of whether the change is good or bad.

Some stress is actually beneficial. Tied to a physiological response, the stress reaction can give you that burst of adrenaline that helps you finish a paper, compete in sports, or meet other challenges you face. The increased tension and alertness created by the stress reaction remains positive and helpful so long as it is limited in duration and you are able to calm down and return to a normal level of alertness.

It's when you can't return to a relaxed state that stress becomes a real problem. Prolonged changes to your heart rate and blood pressure, along with stomach and muscular tension, start to take their toll, often leading to mental and physical exhaustion and even illness.

Negative, excessive stress may be a key element in half of all illnesses, ranging from the common cold to heart disease. Studies suggest that your stress level affects your immune and nervous systems, heart function, metabolism, and hormone levels. It appears that stress may affect both your susceptibility to and recovery from illness.

Stretching the Rubber Band

Think of a rubber band. Positive stress is just the right amount of force needed to stretch the band and make it useful. Negative stress — stress that is too intense and prolonged — snaps the band.

College is a time of considerable change, and it's normal to feel stressed out at times. Common stressors in college life include:

- greater academic demands
- adjusting to living on your own
- financial worries about school
- worries about future work prospects
- time spent away from family and friends
- exposure to new people and ideas
- relationship stress

In light of all these stressors, ask yourself: are you able to stretch, or are you at the point of snapping?

The Signs of Stress

One of the first steps toward taking care of yourself is assessing your general level of stress, along with your ability to cope. Take a look at these symptoms, all of which may indicate increased stress as well as other problems:

- problems eating or sudden changes in eating habits
- difficulty sleeping, oversleeping, or experiencing frequent nightmares

- increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- increased boredom and fatigue; a general sense of “the blahs”
- problems making decisions
- increased procrastination
- anxiety and confusion over unimportant events
- inability to concentrate, pay attention, or get organized
- weakness, dizziness, and shortness of breath; anxiety attacks
- persistent hostile or angry feelings; increased frustration with minor annoyances
- putting yourself or others at risk through dangerous behavior (such as driving too fast, vandalizing property, or practicing unsafe sex)
- friends repeatedly telling you that you seem stressed out
- overpowering urges to cry or run away
- changes in exercise habits
- physical pain, including frequent head, back, or muscle aches or stomach tightness
- frequent indigestion, diarrhea, or urination
- frequent colds and infections
- frequent accidents and minor injuries

If any of these symptoms fit, make sure that you first visit a physician to rule out any medical disorders. Next, try stress reduction techniques or some of the tips listed in this brochure. It is important to remember that some substances, such as caffeine, can create mental and physical changes that make it hard to cope with anxiety and stress. If you don't feel you are improving, visit your college counseling or health center or seek out support from a mental health clinic.

Taking Charge of Your Life

You've been using skills you learned as a child — by observing and copying others — to cope with stress for several years now. Given the new challenges you face in your college life, you may be feeling that some of these techniques aren't as effective

as you once thought they were. One of the many challenges that college life presents involves learning to cope with and manage stress in new, more effective ways. To some extent, this is as important as what you learn in the classroom.

It's important that you have some guidance in how to manage stress effectively. Check with your student counseling or health center or a local community mental health center to see what sorts of stress management workshops are available to you. In general, stress management usually involves both mental and physical processes, so make sure that whatever you do engages your mind, your emotions, and your body. Some examples of effective stress management techniques include:

- individual or group therapy
- biofeedback
- yoga/physical exercise
- mindfulness practices
- muscle relaxation
- time management
- assertiveness training

Short Term Ways to Handle Stress

- **Breathe.** Sitting in a comfortable position, place your left hand over your navel and rest your right hand on top of your left. Breathe deeply through your nose, feeling your hands rise as your abdomen fills with air. Still inhaling, count to three and feel your chest expand. Hold your breath momentarily, then release it. Repeat four times, but stop if you become light-headed.
- **Take a break.** Get some exercise or fresh air, or go somewhere private to yell or cry.
- **Remember that you have a choice.** Ask yourself whether it's worth being upset over the situation. You can choose to stay calm and ignore the issue. Or, if it is truly important, confront the problem directly, talk it out with a friend, or write a letter that you don't send.
- **Prioritize.** List all the things that you need to do right away. Then prioritize the list and place your focus on only the top few. The rest can be your priority tomorrow. See the “You Can Beat Procrastination” section in this brochure for more tips.

Long Term Ways to Handle Stress

- **Take care of your health.** When unhealthy, you are even more vulnerable to stress. Exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and avoid using alcohol or other drugs to cope with your problems.
- **Recognize limits.** Accept your limits and the limits of those around you.
- **Become self-directed.** Choose your own goals rather than letting others choose for you.
- **Maintain a support system.** Let friends help you when you feel overwhelmed and stressed out, and go out of your way to help them as well.
- **Try to be optimistic.** Your mind sends signals to your body whenever you think about possible negative outcomes, initiating a stress response. People often recover better from stressful situations when they realize that negative events are not usually permanent.
- **Make decisions.** In general, any decision — even the decision to do nothing — is better than none. By making decisions, you will likely feel more in control of your situation. Also, you can adapt to consequences or change your mind.
- **Be realistic.** Don't expect perfection from yourself or from others. Expect some obstacles as you work towards reaching your goals, and recognize that you can handle most obstacles through practice and planning.
- **Become tolerant and accepting.** Accept what you cannot change. If a problem is beyond your control, you're better off learning to tolerate the presence of the problem rather than wasting valuable time and energy worrying about it.
- **Anticipate stress.** Prepare yourself for stress. Be strategic and decide which challenges you are ready to take on and which challenges you need to postpone or delay for a bit. Practice how to handle those challenges you have decided to take on.
- **Live in the present.** Learn from the past and take steps to successfully move on from prior experiences.
- **Manage your time.** Developing a practice of prioritizing and planning and approaching work tasks strategically can keep life's demands from becoming overwhelming.
- **Take time for yourself.** Make yourself a priority. Find time to relax, if only for a few minutes. Go out of your way to do something for yourself.



You Can Beat Procrastination

Here are some tips to help you cope with one of the most common college stressors — procrastination. You can develop similar plans to manage other stressors.

- **Buy a calendar.** Set up a daily or weekly schedule for yourself, allowing time for class, study, exercise, and other activities that are important or fun. Allow about two hours of study time for about every one hour of class. Your schedule doesn't have to be perfect — you can change it as needed.
- **Keep a to-do list.** Prioritize your tasks and try to get the most important ones done on time. Fit the rest in as possible, making certain that you take time for yourself.
- **Reward yourself for finishing each task.** If there is something more difficult and less pleasurable that you need to do and something else that you would truly enjoy doing, postpone the enjoyable activity until you have completed the least pleasurable task.

Helping a Friend

A key part of developing and maintaining a social support network is supporting your friends when they feel overwhelmed. Despite the fact that you may feel pressure to solve your friend's problems, sometimes all they really need is a caring, empathic ear. If you notice that a friend has stress-related problems that are affecting your relationship but they deny having any problems, you may have to take the initiative.

- Keep in mind that many people feel that they should be able to handle stress and that admitting to being overwhelmed would be taken as sign of failure.
- Don't accept repeated denials or brushoffs — "it's just this paper" or "it's my boy/girlfriend."
- Focus on how your friend's situation makes you feel and express your concern. Use phrases that begin with "I." Avoid accusations.
- Point out that stressful times are normal and suggest campus or local hotlines or support programs.

For More Information

Mental Health America

(800) 969-6642

www.mentalhealthamerica.net

National Institute of Mental Health

(866) 615-6464

www.nimh.nih.gov

American College Health Association

1362 Mellon Road, Suite 180

Hanover, MD 21076

(410) 859-1500 | www.acha.org

It is illegal to reprint or reproduce this brochure. Additional copies can be obtained by contacting the American College Health Association. Stock imagery is used for illustrative purposes only. People depicted are models.

© Copyright February 2016. American College Health Association.

This brochure is for informational purposes only and is not meant to replace consultation with your health care provider. The information in this brochure does not constitute medical advice and should not be the basis for any diagnosis or treatment.