

## What Is Stress, Anyway?

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Stress is a fact of life. In the simplest of terms, stress is an emotional/bodily reaction to physical, psychological, and/or emotional demands. By definition, stress is not synonymous with nervous tension or anxiety. The important thing to remember about stress is that certain forms are normal and essential. Managed stress can become useful and healthy, as when we view events as challenges. Left un-examined, however, unmanaged stress can become distressful and unhealthy (as when we view events as threats).

## How Can I Tell If I'm under Too Much Stress?

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As we've said, stress is a natural part of life; so, before condemning stress outright we need to understand that stress is only harmful when it is excessive. Much of the stress that we all experience is helpful and stimulating. The challenges of life tend to be stressful and an attempt to avoid stress completely would lead to a rather boring existence. The problem comes when you experience too much stress and/or avoid dealing with stress for too long.

There are four primary sources of stress:

- **Our Physical Environment** - examples include noise, pollution, traffic and crowding, and the weather;
- **Physiological** - examples include illness, injuries, hormonal fluctuations, and inadequate sleep or nutrition;
- **Our Internal Environment** – expectations we place on ourselves, academic pressure, frustration, decisions, and perfectionism all contribute to increased stress. Expectations we have others, especially if these are not met, can also increase our level of stress. The way you think affects how you respond. Negative self-talk and catastrophizing (making small problems seem larger) are also contributing factors; and
- **Social Stressors** - examples include expectations others have of you, financial problems, work demands, social life, and losing a loved one.

Symptoms of stress appear in many forms. Some symptoms only impact the person who is directly experiencing stress, while other symptoms may have an impact on our relationships with others. Perhaps you experience some of the examples below when your stress levels are elevated?

### Physical Symptoms

- muscular tension
- colds or other illnesses
- high blood pressure
- indigestion
- ulcers
- increased or decreased sleep
- fatigue
- headaches
- backaches

### Emotional Symptoms

- depression
- anger
- fear or anxiety
- feeling overwhelmed
- lack of interest and ability to concentrate
- apathy
- mood swings
- exam time "jitters"
- exaggerated irritability

### Cognitive Symptoms

- Forgetfulness
- unwanted or repetitive thoughts
- difficulty concentrating
- confusion
- excessively blaming others
- Emotional outbursts

## What Can I Do When I'm Feeling Overwhelmed?

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### **Develop a Balanced Lifestyle**

Stress reactions to various situations are also affected by your overall level of health. Someone who is always feeling overwhelmed eats poorly and doesn't get enough sleep (a description of many students!), in turn is someone who usually has a limited ability to cope with stressful events. You need to pay attention to your own well-being. The right balance of sleep, food, exercise, work, school, and recreation is crucial.

### **What can you do to develop a balanced lifestyle?**

Keep a gratitude journal. Reflecting on the positive experiences, feelings, and relationships in your life can bring you greater joy. A gratitude journal is a good way to acknowledge the things that brighten your life and help you turn your focus away from negative thoughts and feelings.

Keep a journal by your bed so that at the end of each day, you can spend five to 10 minutes writing about something that you were grateful for in your day. Savor pleasant sights, sounds, and experiences—a sunset, the birds chirping outside your window, a hug from your child, or a call from a friend. Celebrate accomplishments large and small—learning to master a new hobby, doing well on a project at work, or getting the kids off to school on time.

Conjure up the scene in your mind and try to write about it in detail. Then, spend a few minutes soaking in the experience again. You can also use this journal to reflect on things from the past that you are grateful for. Don't have time to journal? Try this: Download the free web app iDoneThis <[idonethis.com](http://idonethis.com)> Reply to an evening email reminder with what you did that day.

Deflate cognitive distortions. When you recognize negative thoughts cropping up, take the following steps.

**Stop:** Consciously call a mental time-out.

**Breathe:** Take a few deep breaths to help release burgeoning tension.

**Reflect:** Ask some hard questions. Is this thought or belief true? Did I jump to a conclusion? What evidence do I actually have? Am I letting negative thoughts balloon? Is there another way to view the situation? What would be the worst that could happen? Does it help me to think this way?

**Choose:** Decide how to deal with the source of your stress. If distortion is the root of the problem, can you recognize this and let go? Is the problem or constraint a real one or is it one of your mind's making? If the problem is real, are there practical steps you can take to cope with it? Practicing a mini-relaxation may also help.

Overextended? Clear the deck of at least one time-consuming household task. Hire a housecleaning service, shop for groceries through the Internet, convene a family meeting to consider who can take on certain jobs, or barter with or pay teens for work around the house and yard. Consider what is truly essential and important to you and what might take a backseat right now.

Some people are in a constant state of trying to catch up. They find themselves rushing and hurrying from one activity to another, always racing with the clock and never getting on top of things. Part of this problem, for many students, is not being well-organized.

Apply time-management principles. Consider your priorities (be sure to include time for yourself) and delegate or discard unnecessary tasks. Map out your day, segment by segment, setting aside time for different tasks, such as writing or phone calls. If you are overly optimistic about travel time, consistently give yourself an extra 15 minutes or more to get to your destinations. If lateness stems from dragging your heels, consider the underlying issue. Are you anxious about what will happen after you get to work or to a social event, for example? Or maybe you're trying to jam too many tasks into too little time.

Want more tips and tricks? Drop in or make a personal counseling appointment with one of the licensed counselors in Advising and Counseling. If you're in C2C, be sure to talk with your C2C coordinator about how to develop effective time management techniques.

## Clarify Your Values and Develop a Sense of Life Meaning

Stress is often caused by general unhappiness and a sense of aimlessness or lack of purpose. People sometimes wind up making choices and living life styles that really don't fit them. A student may be studying accounting when he or she really wants to be an artist, or he or she may have a wide circle of friends, but not really have the kind of intimate relationships that feel fulfilling.

Clarifying your values and deciding what you really want out of your life can help you feel better about yourself because it is key to creating that sense of satisfaction and centeredness that helps you deal with the stresses of life. This process is, of course, not easy. Most of us are constantly growing and developing our sense of self, as well as our ideas about what we want and how we want to live. A sense of spirituality can help with this. You might find this with an organized religion or it might be a more personal, individual process. It may involve a sense of oneness with nature, or it may be related to the deep satisfaction gained from volunteer work that really helps someone. Although each of us must develop his/her own sense of well-being and spirituality, it does help to talk about these issues with others, as a way of clarifying and challenging our own ideas and beliefs.

### How can you clarify your values?

Take a class! You might take a class to explore these ideas. Typically, classes in the humanities—for example, world religion, philosophy, or the history of art—are all means of exploring your own ideas about what holds meaning in your life. Student clubs on the Flanagan campus include Bible Study Club as well as the Students for Environmental Action.

Make a commitment! Find an organization you'd like to volunteer at:

<http://www.ccri.edu/osl/service-learning/#What is Service Learning>

Volunteer for a day! Register for CCRI's Community Day of Service:

<http://ccri.edu/acw/> (be sure to check back!)

## Specific Stress-Reduction and Relaxation Techniques

Give yourself a week to focus on practical solutions that could help you cope with just one stumbling block or source of stress in your life. Pick a problem, and see if these suggestions work for you.

Techniques like meditation, yoga, and regular exercise can be extremely valuable in managing your stress. The practice of one of these techniques on a regular basis can provide a wonderfully calming and relaxing feeling that seems to have a lasting effect for many people. Your energy level and ability to cope with the external world are replenished. Practitioners and researchers have reported many positive life effects from the regular practice of one of these techniques.

Mini-relaxations can help allay fear and reduce pain while you sit in the dentist's chair. They're equally helpful in thwarting stress before an important meeting, while stuck in traffic, or when faced with people or situations that annoy you. Here are a few quick relaxation techniques to try.

### When you've got 1 minute

Place your hand just beneath your navel so you can feel the gentle rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Breathe in slowly. Pause for a count of three. Breathe out. Pause for a count of three. Continue to breathe deeply for one minute, pausing for a count of three after each inhalation and exhalation.

Or alternatively, while sitting comfortably, take a few slow deep breaths and quietly repeat to yourself "I am" as you breathe in and "at peace" as you breathe out. Repeat slowly two or three times. Then feel your entire body relax into the support of the chair.

### When you've got 2 minutes

Count down slowly from 10 to zero. With each number, take one complete breath, inhaling and exhaling. For example, breathe in deeply saying "10" to yourself. Breathe out slowly. On your next breath, say "nine," and so on. If you feel lightheaded, count down more slowly to space your breaths further apart. When you reach zero, you should feel more relaxed. If not, go through the exercise again.

Micro-breaks while you study. Even as you study, consider incorporating techniques such as deep breathing. Take frequent breaks, stand up and stretch, do some Sun Salutes, concentrate on your breathing, or go for a walk. Human beings are not made to sit still for eight hours a day! Not only are frequent breaks good for the body, they are also good for the soul. By taking frequent, micro-breaks from sitting in front of the computer or studying for exams, you acknowledge your physical limitations, which in turn reflects the deeper, emotional process of accepting what kind of person you are: strengths and weaknesses.

Unsure of your ability to do something? Don't try to go it alone. If the problem is work, talk to a co-worker or supportive boss. Ask a knowledgeable friend or call the local library or an organization that can supply the information you need. Write down other ways that you might get the answers or skills you need. If you're feeling a little behind on your classes, request a tutor: [http://www.ccri.edu/peer\\_tutor/programinfo/tutees/tutor-request/](http://www.ccri.edu/peer_tutor/programinfo/tutees/tutor-request/)

Or, start a study group. It's a good way to deepen your learning and understanding while getting to know your classmates.

Connect with your network! Counselors in the Advising and Counseling Center, as well as your C2C coordinator, can discuss additional ways to deal with stress. Let your C2C coordinator know if you're interested in participating in an ongoing stress management group.

### **How can you actually reduce your stress?**

While stress-reduction techniques are easy to learn, they can be difficult to fit into your schedule. If you don't have an opportunity to get additional instruction, just practice sitting quietly for 15 minutes, with no interruptions. Meditation can evoke the relaxation response, and appears to have health benefits as well. It's also simple to perform. Here's how to get started:

Choose a mental device to help you focus. Silently repeat a word, sound, prayer, or phrase (such as "one," "peace," "Om," or "breathing in calm"). You may close your eyes if you like or focus your gaze on an object.

- Adopt a passive attitude. Disregard distracting thoughts or concerns about how well you're doing. Any time your attention drifts, simply say, "Oh, well" to yourself and return to silently repeating your focus word or phrase.
- Now slowly relax your muscles, moving your attention gradually from your face to your feet. Breathe easily and naturally while using your focal device for 10 to 20 minutes. After you finish, sit quietly for a minute or so with your eyes closed. Then open your eyes, and wait another minute before standing up.
- Try to practice this meditation daily for 10 to 20 minutes, preferably at a specific time each day.

Stretch, breathe, relax! Even simple interruption can help. Equally important, as you study, you **MUST** stop and take a purposeful 10-minute break. Go for a walk, breathe deeply, call a friend, or put on some favorite music. Set up an automatic "time out" break on your computer using the free app!

Laugh, and the world laughs with you: Keep your sense of humor!

**Remember**, you can talk with a campus counselor in Advising and Counseling and/or your C2C coordinator to learn more about how to develop these and more stress-reducing skills.