

Managing Stress

Stress is a natural experience that everyone encounters simply by being alive and negotiating life's unpredictable challenges. At times, experiencing stress can be helpful to motivate us to complete tasks, to mobilize us when in dangerous situations (e.g., encountering a bear!), or to call our attention to unmet needs. At other times, stress may become so great that it overwhelms us. Attending university and being a student offers its own set of challenges and stresses that can be compounded by juggling multiple responsibilities, roles, and relationships. People differ in how they experience stress as well as how aware they are of their particular stress reactions. By increasing your awareness of how you experience stress, you will be more equipped to intervene and manage these reactions for greater overall well-being. Below is a list of some common stress responses. Review and see which ones fit for you; you may want to add to the categories if there is a stress response you have that isn't listed.

Different Stress Indicators

Physical	Cognitive	Behavioral	Emotional
Headaches	Confusion	Avoidance	Anxiety
Muscle tension	Repetitive worrying	Increased crying	Irritability
Rapid or shallow breathing	Difficulty making decisions	Sleep changes: sleeping more or less	Fearfulness
Stomach distress	Difficulty concentrating	Appetite changes: eating more or less	Moodiness
Sweating	Catastrophizing	Withdrawal/Social Isolation	Overwhelmed
Racing heart	Fortune telling	Impulsivity	Dread
Fatigue		Alcohol or drug use	Guilt
Back/neck problems		Procrastination	Nervousness
Trembling/shakiness		Teeth grinding/jaw clenching	Depression
Nausea		Greater proneness to accidents	Helplessness
		Working harder, less productivity	Hopelessness
		Increased likelihood of relationship conflict	

Given that people usually experience more than one indicator of stress, it can feel quite overwhelming to manage these reactions and still fulfill responsibilities for school, work, family, and fun. Following is a list of different ways to help manage stress. Some you may already identify as using and helpful; great! Review the list and consider adding to your stress management toolkit by trying a new strategy.

Stress Management Tools

1. Identify sources of social support (i.e., family, friends, mentors) and spend time with them.
2. Engage with people or in activities that spark laughter and humor.
3. Try to eat healthfully and get sufficient sleep.
4. Write in a journal. This may serve as a place to "vent" or identify feelings, get them out, and have a container for them.

Stress Management Tools

5. Pray, meditate, attend a sweat, attend church, or participate in other healing practices congruent with your values and beliefs.
6. Engage in self-soothing activities: listening to music, taking a warm bath or shower, spending time with pets or animals, engaging in a hobby.
7. Engage in a creative activity like beadwork, painting, drawing, dance, or writing poetry.
8. Connect with nature by going for a walk outside, swimming, fishing, or picnicking.
9. Exercise: go for a walk, run, or bike ride; play basketball; do yoga; dance; swim; or use the Hosaeus Fitness Center (<http://www.montana.edu/getfit/index.html>).
10. Practice deep breathing. This technique is great as you can practice it anywhere! Inhale through your nose, drawing your breath deep into your expanding diaphragm, hold for a count of 5, then exhale through your mouth. Do 3-5 deep breaths, but no more as it may lead to light-headedness.
11. Avoid perfectionism. Consider “good enough” performance.
12. Practice acceptance. Identify what you cannot change and redirect your attention to what you can do, letting go of the remainder.
13. Express feelings by journaling; talking to a friend, family member, or pet; or through art.
14. Be aware of your self-talk. How we feel is influenced by how we interpret situations and how we talk to ourselves internally. Self-criticism or blowing events out of proportion can lead to greater levels of stress. Monitor your thoughts and try to practice fair and kind self-talk that focuses on your strengths and a realistic assessment of situations. To learn more about cultivating positive self-talk, you can schedule an appointment with a therapist at Counseling & Psychological Services (CPS).
15. Learn and practice various relaxation strategies. In addition to the above mentioned deep breathing, you may try visualization, guided imagery, mindfulness, or progressive muscle relaxation. CPS offers weekly drop-in workshops to learn about these techniques as well as an on-going weekly Mindfulness Skills group; call or stop by to learn more or sign up!
16. Practice good time management and try to avoid procrastinating. A few time management tips:
 - A. Organize your days and week.
 - B. Make to-do lists.
 - C. Break tasks up into smaller parts.
 - D. Identify your best times for studying and places to get studying done.
 - E. Approach difficult tasks first.
 - F. Prioritize, order according to deadlines, cross off accomplished tasks.
 - G. Schedule leisure time after tasks are worked on as a reward.

Discussion Question: What signs and symptoms do you notice when you are feeling particularly stressed? What are some helpful and not so helpful ways you tend to cope?

More Serious Sign of Stress

Significant changes in sleep or appetite	Missing school or work	Thoughts of death or suicide
Excessive alcohol or drug use	Interpersonal conflict	
Social Isolation	Loss of enjoyment in activities	

If you experience any of the symptoms of stress mentioned above, you may want to consider scheduling an appointment to meet with a therapist.

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