

## **Stress Recognition and Management for Students**

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## **1. What is Stress**

Definition:- A state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances. (Oxford Dictionary 2016)

Life is full of hassles, exams, frustrations and demands. Stress is the word that many people use when they are describing how the demands of their life are becoming too great for them to cope with. At times we can all feel overloaded and tense. Stress will affect everyone at certain times of life, it is a normal human reaction when we feel under pressure or particularly emotional. It is a common problem, in 2015/2016 10.4 million working days were lost due to stress and up to 5 million people in the UK reported feeling 'very' or 'extremely' stressed through their work. (Health & Safety Executive 2013)

## **2. Positive effects of stress**

A certain amount of stress can have positive effects and can help us be productive. It can reduce boredom, increase productivity and provides energy to keep us alert. It also motivates us to get on with things, help us to perform under pressure, and maintains our concentration levels. In dangerous situations the system responds quickly and the stress response can prove life-saving by increasing: reaction time, strength, focus and stamina ('fight-flight-freeze').

However, not all threats are caused by external factors, unfortunately we are not good at distinguishing between physical and psychological threats. The human physiological stress response can, therefore, be triggered merely by our thoughts and anxieties.

## **3. Why do we get stressed**

Persistent stress can lead to health problems, it is therefore important to identify the cause of stress, the symptoms of stress and be able to recognise our own limits.

Stress can build up when we try to do too much in the time available which may escalate insidiously. It's important not to be over ambitious with what we think we can achieve. It can also build up when we face difficult life experiences such as failure, bereavement, separation, illness and change.

Students should ensure that they take time out to relax and recharge batteries. It can help to stay organised, have a realistic plan about what you can achieve, prioritise well, avoid running late and procrastinating. Learning how to say 'no' and meaning it can also help control stress levels, Unfortunately, for many people in the western world stress is so common and familiar it's almost become a normal way of life.

## **4. Factors Affecting Stress**

The ability to cope with stress varies from person to person. What one person finds stressful may not be a problem for another. The ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors including the amount of stressors (issues causing stress), the quality of close relationships, personality, genetics and knowledge and preparation.

### Number of stressors

The number of 'stressors' you have at any one time. If we have a number of major stressors at the one time, we are more prone to suffer symptoms of stress. For instance, if we have exams but we also have relationship problems, health issues or bereavement.

### Support Network

A strong network of supportive friends and family can be an enormous buffer against stress. Communication is important, it put worries into perspective and using humour to see the 'funny side of life' can help manage stress.

### Sense of Control

It is easier to take stress in your stride if you have confidence in yourself and feel you have an ability to persevere through challenges and influence events.

### Attitude and Outlook

Optimistic characters tend to embrace challenges, accept change is a part of life and understand that some things are not necessarily fair or reasonable.

### Ability to Deal with Emotions

We will get stressed if we do not have strategies to calm and soothe ourselves when feeling sad, angry or overwhelmed. The ability to bring one's emotions back into balance after adversity is a skill that can be learned.

### Knowledge and Understanding

The more you know about the stressor including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. A study looking at patients after hip replacement surgery found, the more information they received, the less stress they reported.

## **5. When is stress a problem?**

Whilst many people suffer from stress at certain times in the day, long-term chronic stress is known to have an adverse effect on health. Problems arise when the stress response is too frequently triggered and stress hormones: including adrenaline and cortisol are regularly released into our circulating blood. This physical response can happen when our worries become disproportionate to the problem or we start imagine threats or 'worst case scenarios'. Sometimes worries persist unnecessarily long after the problem has gone and occasionally there isn't a problem at all, we just get into a bad pattern of living with continuous nervous energy and irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

People often try to ignore the signs of their increasing stress levels and feel that they need to carry on regardless. When stress becomes a problem it actually stops you doing the things you want/need to do and you start to notice it is interfering with your life. Academic performance suffers as students are unable to concentrate, think logically and analyse and retain information, sleep is often disturbed and friends start noticing a difference in your mood and behaviour.

For many people it is not until this point that support is sought. However, it is more effective to try to recognise the symptoms of stress at an earlier stage and take action to prevent a 'crisis' arising. Taking simple steps to manage and alleviate your stress levels at an earlier point can reduce the impact it has on your life and reduce the time it takes for you to get back on track.

## **6. Recognition of Increasing Stress.**

When stress levels become high and we can start experiencing the negative consequences of being over-stressed. These can be physical, emotional or behavioural and may include.

### *Behaviour*

Eating more or less, Sleeping more or less, Socialising more or less, Exercising more or less, Working more or less, Drinking/smoking/drugs.

### *Physical*

Headaches, Stomach pains, Heart Palpitations, Nausea, Dizziness, Lethargy, Muscle aches, Holding breath or over breathing.

While these physical stress symptoms can be uncomfortable it is important to recognise they are not harmful and usually pass quickly. Try using simple relaxation techniques like the Headspace app (see under relaxation).

## *Emotional*

Worrying, Moodiness, Irritability, Agitation, Inability to relax, Feeling overwhelmed, Sense of isolation, Feeling sad, Feeling defensive, Feeling negative, Anxious or Racing thoughts.

Please Note: If you have any of these physical symptoms, it is important to get checked out by your Doctor in the first instance.

Learning to reduce stress levels and developing coping strategies when stress does occur, are important skills to develop. Here are ten stress busting activities you could try.

### 7. Learn how to Manage Stress and Stay in Control.

7:1 Sleep Soundly

7:2 Exercise Regularly

7:3 Repetitive Daily Routine

7:4 Relaxation Programme

7:5 Recognising Negative Thoughts

7:6 Monitoring Your Moods

7:7 Eating a Balanced Diet

7:8 Talking Things Through

7:9 Self Help Programs

7:10 Professional Counselling

#### 7:1 Sleep Well

How good we feel during our waking hours depends a lot on how well we sleep at night. If we have a healthy sleep 'pattern' we'll stay productive, energetic and emotionally well balanced. If we don't we can get run down and more susceptible to mental issues like stress and anxiety and infections like colds and flu. Most people suffer with sleep problems at some point in their lives and exhaustion can have a detrimental effect on the mind and body. Sleep quality is partly dependent

on lifestyle choices and to help you improve your sleep quality try the following ten top sleep tips.

1 Avoid stimulants for at least two hours before sleep: tea, coffee, cigarettes, cola or exercise. 2 Stop working & relax 40 minutes before getting into bed. 3 Leave your worries with your tooth brush, you can pick both up in the morning. This may be difficult at first but you can learn to control your thoughts. 4 Comfort: make sure you are comfortable in your sleeping environment (bed, linen, temperature, lighting, noise). 5 Avoid excess alcohol: it prevents quality sleep. 6 Avoid eating late: the digestive process can delay sleep. 7 Avoid consecutive late nights: the body takes several hours to reach the deep sleep level required for rejuvenating sleep, going to sleep after midnight will reduce the quality of your sleep. 8 Get up early: 7-8am so you are tired at night and do not sleep during the day. 9 Don't lie awake in the dark for extended periods of time. Get up, go to the loo, have a drink or read, then try again after 10-15 minutes, repeat this process if you wake in the night. 10 No electronic devices: using devices before bed stimulates the brain and has been shown to delay the onset of sleep.

Even relaxing in bed helps the body rejuvenate, try not to get anxious and frustrated about insomnia, feeling tense will aggravate the problem. You can discuss insomnia with the Pharmacist at your local chemist, they advise on over-the-counter remedies. If things don't improve discuss your problems with your College Nurse or College Doctor. Keeping a sleep diary for a week can also be useful, try to include relevant information such as a) what you were doing before you got into bed b) the time you got into bed c) the time you got to sleep d) the time you woke up.

## 7:2 Exercise Regularly

Moderate physical activity (activity that gets you warm and slightly out of breath) has been shown to release endorphins – natural substances that help you feel better and maintain a positive attitude.

Adults should aim to be active daily. Over a week, activity should add up to at least 150 minutes (2 1/2 hours) of moderate intensity activity in bouts of 10 minutes or more – one way to approach this is to do 30 minutes on at least 5 days a week.

Alternatively, comparable benefits can be achieved through 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity spread across the week or combinations of moderate and vigorous intensity activity.

Adults should also undertake physical activity to improve muscle strength on at least two days a week. All adults should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (sitting) for extended periods.

Regular exercise will also provide you with more energy and stamina, helps to maintain a healthy weight and lowers your risk of major health problems such as coronary heart disease, diabetes and stroke in later life.

Choose activities that you enjoy and set realistic goals. You could choose different types of activities to keep you interested and motivated and joining a club can have an enjoyable social element. Even a brisk half hour walk daily can make a difference to how you feel, look and cope with life and swimming is a good all round exercise.

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Documents/adults-19-64-years.pdf>

### 7:3 Repetitive Daily Routine

The human body works most efficiently with a repeated daily routine. Naturally we would wake and dawn and sleep at dusk. Going to sleep, getting up and eating at the same time each day has proven health benefits. A circadian rhythm is present in humans and most animals and is generated by an internal clock that is synchronized to light-dark cycles. Our internal clock is located within the brain in the hypothalamus and pineal gland which releases melatonin in response to information it receives from the photo-receptors in the retina (eye) in response to light (day & night). Our body's hormones are also regulated by this important rhythm.

However, this system can be easily disrupted by an erratic lifestyle or international travel through time zones (jet lag). When our rhythm is disrupted symptoms such as indigestion, nausea, loss of appetite, headaches, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, irritability, memory problems and lethargy may occur. Family life is usually focused around routine but at University students have to establish their own routine and this can take some practice. A routine may be difficult to maintain with pressures as such work deadlines, social events and extra-curricular activities. However, it is important to bear this in mind especially if students are experiencing problems with stress, low mood or related symptoms. Keeping a strict routine each day can help.

### 7:4 Relaxation Programme

Relaxation can help combat the detrimental effects of stress by calming and quieting the body and reducing stress levels. People find various activities to help them relax: walking in the park, watching TV, listening to music, socialising with friends. It is important you do something that you find relaxing every day. 'All work no play makes Jill a dull girl' so scheduling in little regular treats each day will help combat stress, even if it's just meeting a friend for tea & cake.

However, sometimes stress levels have become too high and then more active relaxation strategies need to be adopted. Active relaxation is a skill that takes time to develop. Like any skill it needs to be learned and practiced and takes time to perfect. You don't get physically fit by watching people work out and mental fitness involves actively participating in effective relaxation.

1. This booklet has useful techniques to start you off.

<https://web.nrw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/leaflets/Stress.pdf>

2. This breathing exercise is useful:

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/ways-relieve-stress.aspx>

3. The Headspace App offers ten free 10 minute sessions of relaxation that can be repeated. Students have found this useful because it's free, quick and can be downloaded onto a phone. To give it a try go to:

<https://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app>

4. Mindfulness is a well-research, non-religious and effective means of alleviating stress and anxiety and promoting well-being. A practical eight-week course taught by teachers from the Oxford University Mindfulness Centre is offered to Oxford University students. Please contact

<https://www.facebook.com/OxfordStudentMindfulnessSociety>

[oxfordstudentmindfulnesssoc@gmail.com](mailto:oxfordstudentmindfulnesssoc@gmail.com)

5. Yogo, pilates and alternative therapies such as reflexology and body massage have also helped students.

6. <http://www.webmd.com/balance/guide/blissing-out-10-relaxation-techniques-reduce-stress-spot?page=2>

### 7:5 Recognise Negative Thoughts

We often send ourselves negative thought messages and start to convince ourselves that these thoughts are true. 'Rumination' is a negative thinking pattern, like a record that's stuck and repeating the same lyrics over & over. Replaying an argument with a friend or retracing past mistakes. These negative thoughts keep us bound up and draw down our mood 'I'm useless, I'm stupid, I'm ugly, It's hopeless, I just can't do it'. Think about how it would feel if a friend was telling you the negative things you tell yourself. You would want to get up and leave the room? See if you can work out which are the unhelpful thought messages you give yourself and try to challenge the pattern. Notice every time to tell yourself the



‘wrong’ kind of messages and start trying to replace them with some ‘right messages’ ‘I’ve actually done OK’, ‘I can do this’, ‘I’ll be fine’ ‘I’ve got this far’. A bit of balance is needed, don’t allow your thoughts to drag you down, it is a harmful habit.

Learning to control negative thought patterns is really beneficial. Think about Usain Bolt and the beginning of a race...he’s giving himself positive messages. Sports psychologists teach athletes how to use positive thinking to their advantage, you could learn these techniques too.

### 7:6 Monitoring your Moods

It is well recognised that regular monitoring of our moods can help to identify mood patterns over time. If we can identify negative and positive influences or ‘triggers’ we then know what to avoid or what to do more of. It also helps understand stress patterns and identifies early warning signs that things are not going so well. Monitoring your mood can help you feel more in control of your wellbeing and encourages people to be proactive about their emotional health. If you do need to consult a professional about mood problems, a record of your mood over a given period of time can be extremely useful. There are many different ways to monitor mood, some people devise their own simple scoring system. There are also various free apps you can download, this one is called Moodscope, it is quick and easy to use. <https://www.moodscope.com>

### 7:7 Eating A Balanced Diet

It is very important to eat properly and not to exist on snacks beer and coffee. Eating the right foods nourishes our bodies, helping us to study effectively and feel well. It is important to eat regular meals at a similar time each day. Try to eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and chose foods low in saturated fat, sugar and salt. Make sure at least one third of your food comes from bread, pasta, beans, rice, potatoes or pulses. Have less caffeinated drinks and drink plenty of water.

Read more about healthy eating:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/goodfood/Pages/the-eatwell-guide.aspx>

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/eatingwellandmentalhealth.aspx>

### 7:8 Talking Things Through

If you are feeling stressed, talking to friends and family can be a vital source of support and can pull students through difficult times. Talking over a problem with someone you trust and sharing your worries can help put things into perspective.

You may feel people won't understand but most people have been through difficult times themselves and are usually able to listen and offer support. You may be surprised by the compassion your friends show when you eventually open up and confide in them. It's important to remember that your friends and family care about you and will want what's best for you and will be happy to help. People who are close to you will notice changes in your mood and will probably already suspect you're not feeling your best. Getting someone else's opinion is also useful and friends can help with practical matters or accompany you to seek professional support. When you're feeling stressed and your mood is low it's important to spend time with other people. Spending too much time on your own in your room can make you feel more stressed and isolated. Having a good cry on your own or with your friends can also help reduce tension by releasing pent-up emotion.

When you decide to talk about your worries, choose somewhere quiet and pick a good time where you can concentrate on the conversation without being interrupted. Explain how you are feeling and the causes of your stress. Be clear with the person if you do not want them to keep your confidence. Sometimes support from friends & family just isn't enough and you may decide to look at some self help resources.

### 7:9 Self Help Programs

There are a number of potential advantages to using self-help materials. They are widely accessible, easy to access online and usually free. Self-help approaches are popular with students as they can work through them in their own time and at their own pace. They can be completed privately, without others needing to know. They also help people feel empowered and in control of their own stress management and they allow you to review and monitor your own improvements. It is clear from outcome studies that these approaches can be effective treatments of stress. Self-help can come in the forms of leaflets, books, work manuals or computer delivered packages. The aim of self help is to educate teach people how to recognize and reduce their stress and develop their own coping strategies.

Here are some suggestions:

<https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself>

<https://www.bigwhitewall.com/>

### 7:10 Counselling

There are many benefits to working in a therapeutic relationship with a professional counsellor on an individual basis. It can be a relief to tell someone who is independent about the difficulties you have been struggling with. You may

have a longstanding concern, be encountering new difficulties, or simply have a sense that something isn't right. A counsellor can help to normalize your experience and place it in context and bring objectivity. This can lead to seeing a problem in a new way and gaining more insight and understanding.

The experience of counselling will begin with a single session in which you and your counsellor work together to make sense of your experience and think together about how you might move forward. Some stress problems are complex and/or longstanding and may take time to work through.

The **Oxford University Counselling Service** offers free counselling to students. Please call on 01865-270300 or Email to make an appointment:  
counselling@admin.ox.ac.uk

Other local services in Oxford providing counselling include: Talking Space  
Oxfordshire : <https://www.oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/talkingspaceplus/>

TalkingSpace offers a range of therapies that have been approved by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) for the treatment of common problems such as stress and anxiety. Go to the website to carry out a self-referral.

Stress Curve – Try to keep yourself within the 'Optimal Performance'.

### **Further Support Available:**

Peer Supporters

Welfare Reps

Welfare Officers

Dean for Welfare

Chaplain

College Nurse

College Doctor

Nightline : <https://oxfordnightline.org/>

Listening, support and information, for students, by students, throughout the night.

Phone on 01865 (2)70270 any time 8pm to 8am from Sunday 0th week until Saturday 10th week - i.e., university term, and a week on either side. If you're ringing from an Oxford (01865) number or a mobile, they can phone you back.

Alternatively you can go down to the office at 16 Wellington Square & talk over coffee and biscuits for as long as you like. The phone number is internal, so you can phone them for free from any University phone (just drop the (2) from the number). Please be aware that unfortunately we do not have disabled access to the office, but please feel free to contact us via phone or Skype.

### **Useful Resources**

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/studenthealth/Pages/Copingwithstress.aspx>

<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/counselling/self-help?wssl=1>

### **Self Help Books**

Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World

Mark Williams and Danny Penman ( )

Manage Your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide

Gillian Butler and Tony Hope: Oxford University Press (2011)

(In Bnc library or loan from College Nurse)

Chimp Paradox: The Mind Management Programme

Dr Steve Peters: Vermilion CPI Group (2012)

The Daily Relaxer

Matthew McKay and Patrick Fanning: New Harbinger Publications (1997)

Stress Curve – Try to keep yourself within the ‘Optimal Performance’.

Figure 1: The Yerkes-Dodson Human Performance and Stress Curve

