STRESS

Identification:

There are many and varied stressors unique to and imbedded within the college or university experience. Living, in fact, is inherently stressful but how we manage it will determine the number and severity of the stress related symptoms we experience. Many people don’t recognize the symptoms or choose to ignore them. Stress related symptoms can be broken down into four major categories. These include:

A. Emotional
   - Anxiety
   - Irritability
   - Anger
   - Depression

B. Cognitive
   - Difficulties concentrating
   - Memory problems
   - Confusion

C. Physical
   - Sleep disturbance
   - Fatigue
   - Headaches
   - Change in appetite
   - Muscle tension
   - Gastrointestinal problems
   - Weight change
   - Decreased sexual interest

D. Behavioral
   - Increased substance (i.e., alcohol, drug) use
   - Social isolation
   - Conflict with others
These symptoms are your body’s way of telling you something is wrong and you need to pay attention to them. Symptoms that are ignored ultimately lead to much more serious health problems including: hypertension, cardiovascular disease, tension or migraine headaches, ulcers, asthma, diabetes, cancer, irritable bowel syndrome, multiple sclerosis and eczema. To reduce both stress related symptoms and the chances of developing these more serious stress related disorders, try the following strategies.

**Coping Strategies**

**1. Diaphragmatic Breathing**

When we are under stress, we tend to breathe both more quickly and more shallow. Fortunately we have control over our rate of breathing and when we take slow deep diaphragmatic breaths, we will induce the relaxation response in our body. If you are doing diaphragmatic breathing correctly, you will notice your abdomen rising and falling with each breath. If you notice instead that your chest is rising and falling more than your abdomen, you are reducing the efficiency of your breathing. Breathe in and out to the count of four or five and you will begin to feel a sense of relaxation fill your mind and your body.

**2. Learn Other Relaxation Skills**

Aside from diaphragmatic breathing, there are many other skills one can learn to relax. These include progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, deep muscle relaxation, imagery training, biofeedback, and self-hypnosis. If you want to learn these techniques, talk to a counsellor/psychologist at Student Counselling Services (or the counselling service on your campus) for assistance.

**3. Develop a Calming Focus**

Focus on something in your immediate environment that is pleasant, beautiful, or calming. This could be something visual such as a painting, tree, or flower or it could be something that stimulates your other senses such as a pleasant smell or taste. Allow yourself to fully experience whatever it is you are focusing on.

**4. Develop a Positive Filter**

A lot of stress is created by unknowingly focusing on all of the negativity in the world around you and in your own life. However you can, on a daily basis, begin to train yourself to look for the positive. This could involve doing an inventory
each day of what went right, rather than focusing on the problems you have encountered or mistakes you have made.

5. Avoid Stimulants
There are several substances, which on a physiological level, actually stimulate the stress response in our body. Two of the most commonly used stimulants are caffeine and nicotine. If stress is an issue for you, then reducing or eliminating these substances from your body would go a long way toward reducing your stress level.

6. Be Realistic About What You Can and Can’t Control
A great deal of stress can be created in one’s life by either trying to control events or other people we can’t control, or by not controlling those things that are within our control. The first step in reducing this source of stress is to determine whether the stressor is under your control or not. If it is not, learn to accept it rather than experience the frustration that inevitably follows if you try to change it. On the other hand, if it is controllable, devise and execute a plan to overcome it.

7. Develop More Realistic Self-Talk and Positive Affirmations
What we say to ourselves has a profound impact on our level of stress and our perceived ability to cope with it. Look for evidence for the accuracy of your present self-talk and change those aspects of it that are based on fear or anxiety rather than fact. Replace it with more rational self-statements and/or practice daily positive affirmations.

8. Live in the Present
Much stress is created by living in the past or worrying about the future. Develop a "one-day-at-a-time" mind set, since we can only really control the present anyway. Think each morning how you can make this the best day of your life despite any circumstances that may be challenging. Since none of us knows when our last day is coming, we have to live as if each day could be our last.

9. Keep a Journal
Instead of keeping all your feelings and thoughts inside, which can lead to a constant state of worry, express them in a journal which will both provide a sense of relief and may serve as the first step in a more problem-solving process to deal with the underlying issues.
10. Use Humor
Laughter is considered one of the best medicines for stress. Actively seek out humorous books, TV shows, movies or life situations that will bring humor into your life. Don’t be afraid to laugh at yourself and your mistakes, rather than dwell on these and create misery in your life. Be creative to get your daily fix of laughter.

11. Get Support
Research indicates that one of the best ways to combat stress is to develop and rely on a support system. Whether this be family, relatives, friends, other students, or faculty, the opportunity to talk to any of these people is a great way to minimize our stress. Don’t be reluctant to open up, since this is how we develop connection with the people around us and solidify our support system. Lack of connection will undoubtedly lead to feelings of loneliness and increase our overall stress level.

12. Watch Your Diet
Although most people today realize that our diet has a big impact on our physical health, fewer people are aware of how much it affects our resistance to stress. Eating a healthy and well balanced diet is like giving ourselves an immunity to stress.

13. Take a Holiday in Your Mind
Although taking a real holiday is a great potential stress reducer, it is not always possible especially in the middle of a hectic schedule. Instead, take a short (i.e., 1 to 5 minute) vacation in your head. Imagine any scene that you find relaxing, or any place you have been that is accompanied by positive memories. Try to bring each of your five senses (i.e., sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) into the image to increase your level of relaxation.

14. Let Go of Perfectionism
Trying to be perfect or do a perfect job is a sure recipe for stress. Realistic goals will still allow you a sense of achievement but will also give you room to make mistakes, which are inevitable anyway.

15. Manage Your Time
A major source of stress today for many people, particularly students, is being over-committed with little time available for rest and relaxation. Developing a reasonable schedule, which includes both productive activity and fun or relaxing activities, can significantly reduce stress. Develop a list of activities that you need
to accomplish and prioritize these. Realize that studying all the time without adequate breaks is not the most effective strategy to get high marks and is a sure recipe for stress.

16. Exercise or Become Physically Active

Exercise and other physical activity can both significantly reduce stress and prevent the negative effects of stress. The range of activities that are beneficial are endless and include such things as walking, running, cycling, swimming, dancing, skiing, gardening, weight training, hiking, and any number of team sports. Exercise causes the release of endorphins into our blood stream, which produces a natural "high" that leaves us calmer and less stressed.

17. Minimize Competition

It’s hard to avoid the competitiveness of the world today, particularly within the university climate. However, to experience less stress and greater satisfaction with your university experience, try to develop a mind-set where you focus on the joy of learning rather than competition for high marks. If you can find this type of satisfaction, it’s likely that your marks will in turn improve anyway.

18. Find Solitude

Given all the pressures of university life, time on your own can be an important strategy to manage your stress. This is particularly true if your day is filled with a lot of contact with other people. Alone time can be used for relaxation, as a time to reflect on your life, or as an opportunity to do solitary hobbies or physical activities.

19. Confront Life Problems Rather Than Ignore Them

As a short-term solution to stress, many people simply try to ignore life problems. Unfortunately, problems ignored tend to exacerbate over time until a solution is found. Problem-solving is a skill that definitely develops with practice, so refine your skill.

20. Be Assertive

Learning to openly and honestly express your feelings, values, and beliefs in a way that respects the rights of others can be a big stress reducer. This particularly applies if you have difficulties saying no to other people and become overwhelmed with tasks that you don’t really want to take on.
21. Slow Down Your Life
As society’s pace continues to increase, you can decide to step back and slow down the pace of your life. Research indicates that as the pace of our life increases, our productivity and enjoyment decrease and our life stress increases. Slowing down can actually increase our performance and enjoyment of the work we do.

22. Establish Realistic Goals
Live in the present but plan for the future. Writing out both short and long-term goals that are realistic and meaningful can reduce a lot of stress by making you more purposeful and productive. The alternative, which is to procrastinate, leads to high levels of stress.

23. Cry
Allowing yourself to express some tears when you are emotionally upset can be a great release and a big stress reducer. Crying is our body’s natural mechanism to reduce anxiety and tension, although many people, particularly men, are reluctant to use it. Holding in negative feelings in the long term just doesn’t work.

24. Self-Massage
For many people stress manifests itself as muscle tension in their body. One strategy to reduce this tension is to massage yourself if you can’t find someone else to do it for you. Focus on the neck, shoulders, and face since much of our stress accumulates in these muscle groups and will ultimately lead to pain if not attended to. Use either firm circular or back and forth motions with your fingers on these muscle groups.

25. Stretch
Stretching is another way to reduce muscle tension in your body and psychologically help you experience a sense of relaxation. Focusing on muscles that are most obviously tight is a good starting point, but you can include your whole body. Just shaking a part of your body may also be helpful to reduce tension. Taking up yoga may provide you a regular opportunity to enjoy the benefits of stretching and relaxation.

26. Spirituality
For some people developing a more spiritual life, whether this be formalized religion or not, can help reduce stress in a number of ways. Spirituality may help
one deal with some of the more existential questions about life. As well, prayer or meditations can have a very relaxing effect on the body.

27. Avoid Alcohol Use

If you are turning to alcohol as a way to reduce the pressure of college or university, realize that it is one of the poorest long-term solutions. Alcohol impairs our ability to problem-solve and ultimately take control of our life issues. Remember alcohol is also a depressant of the central nervous system and will enhance any depressive feelings we already have.

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