

# Managing Life Stresses

## What is stress?

Feeling overwhelmed or 'stressed out' can be a familiar experience for many students. In fact, stress is a natural physiological response to a threatening or a dangerous situation in that it provides energy for defending or protecting ourselves. Increased demands or pressure on our time can provide such a threat and we experience the physiological changes in our bodies such as increase in breathing rate, increased tension in our muscles, increased blood pressure and heart rate.

Our bodies are designed to return to a state of balance once the threat or danger has passed. This is called the relaxation response. If we perceive that the threat has not passed it is possible that we can remain in the state of arousal for some time. When this happens we can be in a state of chronic stress and need to consciously induce the relaxation response. It is important to recognise that a small amount of predictable stress or anxiety can increase our ability to focus and learn. It is more when we face unpredictable or overwhelming stressful events that our stress levels can feel out of our control.

It isn't possible to eliminate stress from our lives, but there are many different ways to manage our stress levels.

## Behavioural strategies

- Share your goals with your friends and family and tell them how you are going.
- Reward yourself when you meet your goals.
- Recognise when you need help, and accept that you do have the right to ask for help when you need it.
- Communicate your thoughts and feelings in an assertive way.
- Work on changing yourself rather than others.
- Be prepared to compromise or find solutions when your needs conflict with others.

## Time Management:

- We only have 24 hours in a day, so think ahead and plan for deadlines.
- Balance your use of time so you make sure you still have time for relaxation and leisure activities.
- Set a realistic and achievable goal for each study session.
- Know when you are most alert and plan to use that time for study, if possible.
- Review and re-organise your time-management plan when you need to.

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## Cognitive strategies

- Listen to your 'self-talk'. When we are over-stressed we tend to increase our anxiety by saying negative things such as 'I can't cope'; 'I'm not good enough' or 'I'll never get this done'. Each time you notice that your thoughts are negative, try to find an exception that you can use to challenge this thought. For example, you might remind yourself of when you have got through a difficult time, and what helped you get through.
- Write down some of the more positive and realistic messages as affirmations. For example 'I can do this, one step at a time'. Put these affirmations near your desk or where you study, or take them with you on cards that you can see eg. when you open your wallet.

## Emotional strategies

- Take notice of how you are feeling from time to time. If you feel down or anxious find someone to share your feelings with.
- Feel okay about expressing your emotions appropriately and in non-harmful ways. For example, cry when you are sad, and enjoy expressing your good feelings by smiling, laughing or 'jumping for joy'.
- Write down your feelings in a journal.

## Physical strategies

- Take some deep/slow breaths several times a day to centre and calm you.
- Learn a relaxation technique and use it regularly. There are many different techniques, so find one that suits you. Some involve focusing on releasing physical muscle tension, while others involve visualisation of a peaceful scene.
- Regular meditation, prayer and yoga are also practices that can induce the relaxation response.
- Physical exercise is a great way to let off steam as well as lead to a healthier body.
- Eat healthy food and aim for your 'natural' weight.
- Aim for regular sleeping hours and the amount of sleep your body needs.
- Have a few belly laughs a day.
- Listen to your body, for example, if you are tired, give yourself some time to rest or sleep, if you feel tense, do some stretches or relaxation.
- Comfort hugs and physical contact, such as having a massage, can be very soothing.

For further information contact the UNE Counsellors at:

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