



Managing your Stress

Almost everyone experiences stress to some extent, and college students are certainly no exception. Many college students report dealing with varying levels of stress throughout college for a number of different reasons. Stress affects everyone differently and for different reasons, and people respond to stress in many different ways, but it doesn't have to cripple you or prevent you from reaching your goals. Below you'll find strategies to reduce and manage stress in college.

Why are you stressed?

College students commonly experience stress because of increased responsibilities, a lack of good time management, changes in eating and sleeping habits, and not taking enough breaks for self-care. Transitioning to college can be a source of stress for most first-year students. Some predictable stressful times include studying for exams, competing for admissions or internships, and trying to learn large amounts of content in small amounts of time. Sudden changes, unexpected challenges, or traumatic events can be other sources of stress. Students are expected to make decisions about their careers and academic life and foster new meaningful relationships during their time in college. Take a moment to think about the things in your life that may be causing you stress so that you can try to address them effectively.

How does stress affect you?

Small amounts of stress for short periods of time can be healthy, as good stress can help us motivate ourselves to prepare for exams or make positive changes in our lives. However, stress becomes harmful when it occurs for too long or is chronic—when our bodies don't have a clear indication of when to return to normal functioning. Chronic high stress has several negative effects on our bodies and brains. It can:

- Interfere with studying or class attendance
- Interfere with cognitive processes such as attention and concentration
- Contribute to major health issues such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, and anxiety

Tips to reduce and manage stress

Knowing how to properly and healthily manage stress is an important tool for college students. Using effective stress management techniques can help you moderate and calm yourself during stressful times and help your academic, social, and emotional experiences in college be more positive and successful. While there is no perfect way to completely eliminate stress, here are a few tips for you to try to help manage and reduce it:

Manage your time

Research shows that students who manage their time are less likely to feel stressed. Time management can be especially difficult when living away from home for the first time, when studying from home, or when juggling many roles and responsibilities at the same time. Use a weekly planner or a priorities chart to help you manage your time effectively.

Engage in mindful leisurely activities

We all have personal needs that need to be met and leisurely activities that we enjoy (eating, sleeping, relaxing, reading, socializing). Taking a break can be as simple as grabbing a snack, going for a walk around campus or around your neighborhood, meeting a friend for lunch, or catching up with a friend on a video call. When we are mindful of our needs and take time to enjoy them, we are less likely to be stressed.

Plan for the worst-case scenario

Planning out the worst-case scenario can seem like an overwhelming task, and in some cases that may be true. However, when you can predict what will happen in the future, you are better able to put supports in place to help you manage when the 'worst case' scenario happens. For example, if you feel as though you might be failing a class (worst case scenario), you can talk to your teacher about receiving an incomplete, talk to an academic advisor to see how that affects your grade, create a study schedule to help yourself catch up, and see a peer tutor to support you with the material. If you are dealing with a sudden change or difficult situation that is impacting your learning, consider reaching out to your teacher, reaching out to your friends and family, or reaching out to an Academic Coach at the Student Support Centre.

Engage in self-care and self-compassion

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We are often harder on ourselves when we are unsuccessful or when things get challenging. One way to combat stress is to engage in self-compassion. Extend the same kindness you would to a friend to yourself. Know that you do deserve to take care of yourself. Be aware of when you are distressed and create a self-care plan for when you are. Integrating leisure and social activities is a great way to take care of yourself. You can also do simple relaxation exercises—such as deep breathing—multiple times during the day to help alleviate some of your stress.

When in doubt, write it out!

Research suggests that when you are feeling stressed, rather than avoid the uncomfortable feeling, it is better for you to address it by writing about it. Studies show that individuals who write out the causes of their stress, thoughts, and emotions tend to do better academically. To do this activity effectively it is recommended that you write everything you are feeling with no hesitation or worry. Improve your health

Healthy eating. The majority of the time, try to choose fresh whole foods, and limit your intake of fried, processed, and fast foods. The federal government has made it easier to determine how to eat healthier by creating the 'my plate' diagram. You can access more information about 'my plate' here (<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>). If you think you can improve your health by making changes to what, when, how, or how much you eat, consider meeting with a registered dietitian at Campus Health to come up with a plan.

Hydration. Drink plenty of water, and choose water over caffeinated drinks so you don't consume too much caffeine which can make you feel irritable and can affect your sleep routine.

Physical activity. Knowing how to properly work out and making time for it can be challenging. However, there are many ways to engage in physical activity—going to the gym, attending fitness classes, swimming laps, jogging, playing basketball or another sport you enjoy, or doing yoga. You can also add in some simple modifications to your day to increase physical activity without having to go to the gym or play a sport. Try walking rather than taking the bus, getting off a bus early and walking the rest of the way, using stairs rather than elevators, biking, parking further from the building, etc. There are also fun recreational activities such as gardening, dancing, hiking, etc. that you can engage in.

Restful sleep. Sleep is often the first habit that is compromised when students enter college. However, time and time again research supports the importance of sleep—for memory consolidation and recall, increasing learning abilities, energy conservation, muscle growth, and tissue repair, just to name a few. Long-term sleep deprivation is associated with many illnesses and overall poor health and mental health. To work and live at your optimal level each day, build enough time into your schedule for 7 to 9 hours of sleep every night and protect and prioritize that time.

Use problem-solving techniques

Often, students find themselves in situations where they feel stuck. When a problem arises, they have a difficult time solving it. Students often overthink problems, which causes more stress and anxiety. Rather than engaging in negative thinking patterns, it is more helpful to strategically approach problems. While problem solving, focus on what you can and cannot control. Creating goals around things you can control will allow you to accomplish more, while thinking or worrying about things you cannot control will take away energy you need.



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Try relaxation techniques

While in the previous tips we talked more about preventing stress, using relaxation techniques will help calm you when you are actively stressed. Studies show that engaging in mindfulness significantly helps reduce stress. The following are examples of mindfulness relaxation techniques that can help calm you when you are stressed:

- Diaphragmatic Breathing (click on the following link to access a short video on how to do this:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg2ar-7_HfA)
- Love and Kindness Meditation (click on the following link to access a 5 minute guided meditation:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LDs7jglje_U)

These techniques may be helpful during exam times.

Make connections

Creating meaningful connections with other people improves overall wellbeing. Two ways to create meaningful connections are by providing service to others and creating a supportive network. Humans are inherently social; we need connectedness to survive and thrive. For this particular reason, peer support and self-help are often effective. There is great power in knowing that you are not alone. Everyone needs a supportive person with whom they can reach out to during the good and bad times. There are many ways to connect with your peers, whether you choose to meet in person, make time to schedule a video chat, or play online games together. Belonging to a community is essential to handling stress.

Material in this section was sourced from:

The Learning Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

<https://learningcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/managing-college-stress/>