



UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING STRESS



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1. Introduction

While university life is often very enjoyable it can also be very stressful. You may have heard fellow students say that they are 'feeling so stressed' or that another student is having a 'brain melt-down'. What exactly do they mean by 'feeling stressed'?; What causes stress?; Is stress harmful?; Can stress be managed? These are important questions for you to have insight into as answers to these questions could help you help your peers or even yourself cope better with the demands of being a university student. This booklet addresses some of these questions with the intention of making your time at university a manageable and pleasurable experience as well as a successful one.

2. What is stress?

Stress is defined as the physical and mental response of the body to a demand that is placed upon you. Not all stress is harmful and mild amounts of stress can be advantageous or even necessary in that it can stimulate, challenge and motivate you, leading to improved academic performance. At times you need some stress in order to complete tasks and some of you may even work better when under pressure. That extra adrenaline rush that you may feel which helps you complete your tasks is often referred to as positive stress. After the completion of these tasks, the short-term physiological tension and mental alertness that you felt subsides and you begin to relax and continue with your daily life activities.

However, if, after the completion of the task, you are unable to return to a relaxed state of mind then the stress becomes negative. Prolonged negative stress could be detrimental and could lead to physical and mental exhaustion or illness.

2.1 How does stress affect you?

Stress may affect you physically, mentally or emotionally. Some signs of physical, mental and emotional stress are listed below.



Physical:

When experiencing physical stress you begin to feel your heart pounding as it begins to beat faster. Your breathing becomes faster and this may result in

breathlessness. An elevated heart beat causes your blood pressure to rise. Your muscles become tense often leading to dizziness and headaches; your mouth becomes dry; you may experience excessive sweating; and you may have the feeling of 'butterflies' in your tummy.



Mental: While some stress can be mentally stimulating, too much of it can affect your ability to think logically and rationally as your thoughts often become jumbled and confused. Challenges seem insurmountable as your thinking becomes focused on worrying, fearing the worst and thinking negatively. Hence, decisions become harder

to make and you are less likely to find solutions to your problems.



Emotional: Enhanced stress may cause moodiness: you may become jumpy, irritable, impatient and even excitable with an inability to relax.

You may also experience self-doubt, fear, and frustration; feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness; and depression. Some of these feelings may result in you becoming less social and or withdrawing from people or even becoming more hostile towards and less tolerant of others. You may also resort to 'unusual' behaviour, for example, eating or smoking too much, sleeping too much, or change in dress

pattern. Students who are emotionally stressed find it difficult to concentrate and often begin to miss lectures and deadlines.

3. What causes stress?

Stressors are anything that cause or increase stress. Some examples of common university stressors include:

Academic stress:

- examinations,
- meeting deadlines,
- increased workload with insufficient time,
- difficult lectures,
- poor performance/grades,

- poor time management,
- lack of organisational skills, etc.

Social stress:

- lack of parental support,
- separation from home environment,
- poor living environment,
- balancing university work with time with friends or part-time jobs,
- difficulties with personal relationships, etc.

Other stresses:

- financial challenges,

- studying long hours without achieving much,
- commuting difficulties,
- difficulty in bridging the gap from school to university, etc.

Using the above list write down which category the main stressors in your life fall into – some may fall into more than one category. You may find that there are items on your list of stressors that you can let go of, some that you can reduce the strength of and some you may learn to cope with. For example, if you find the resident that you are living in far too

noisy, then you may want to get a pair of earplugs that block out the noise while you are studying.

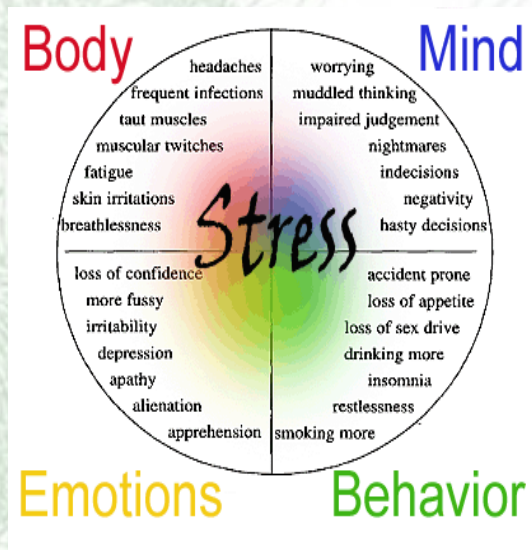
Now go through your list and identify your stressors that you can eliminate by marking them with an 'E', those that you can reduce the strength of with an 'R' and those that you can learn to cope with mark with the letter 'C'. Then write down what you can do to accomplish achieving your own ideas eliminating, reducing or coping with your stressors.

There are several techniques that can help you stay calm when under pressure and as you learn to cope with your stressors they will pose less and less of a threat.

4. How do I know when I am stressed and how do I identify the cause of my stress?

You know when you are stressed when you begin to experience the signs listed in the section “How does stress affect you?” of this booklet.

To identify the source of your stress you could keep a stress diary or a schedule of recent experiences. In your diary you could jot down what caused your stress, exactly how you felt both physically and emotionally, how it affected your behaviour (i.e. how you reacted) and how you managed to get over it or make the situation better.



After a week or two of keeping your diary, list and prioritise the sources of your stress (refer to Section 3 of this booklet). Thereafter, identify appropriate

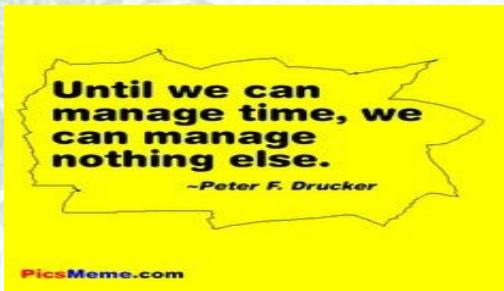
stress management techniques that could help you deal with the stress. Once the techniques have been identified, you would be in a position to create your own stress management plan.

5. Is there a way to manage stress?



Stress is a part of our daily lives and is unavoidable. However, being stressed is something you can control and yes, there are many techniques that can assist you minimize the stress that you feel. Below are some tips on how you can manage your stress.

Time Management:



Create a work schedule (planner) for each term or

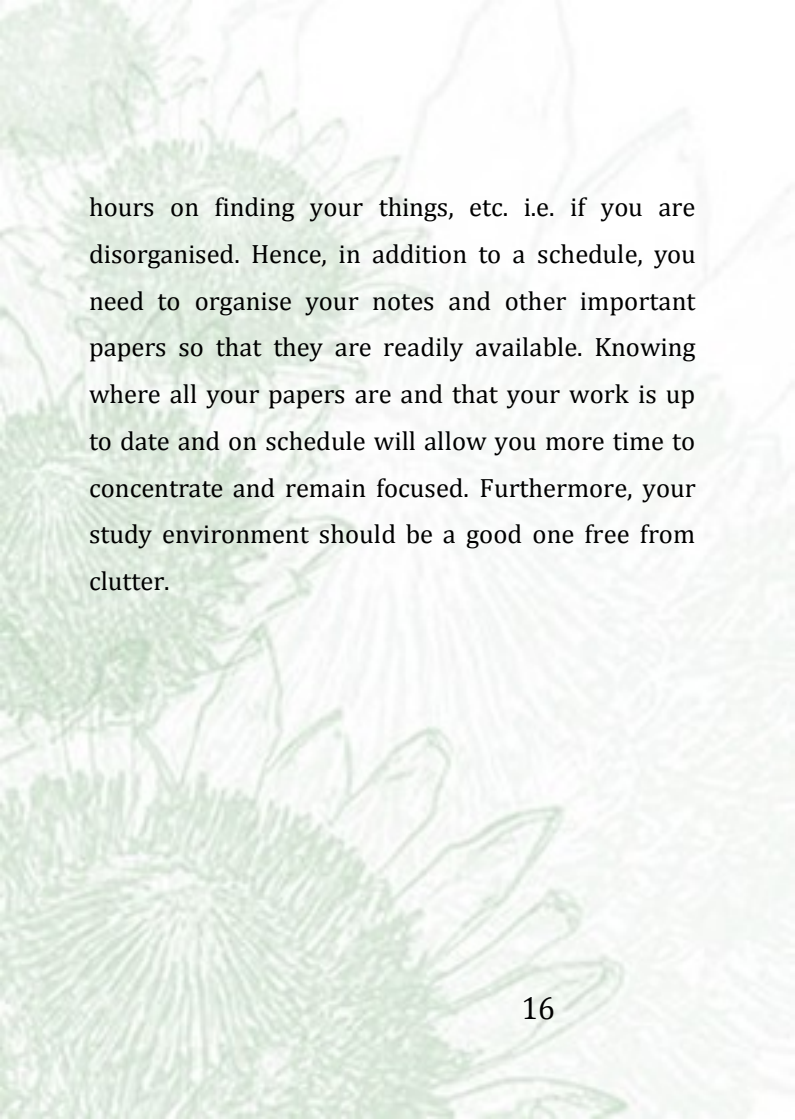
semester taking into account your assessment tasks, tests, study time, research time, personal time, etc. This will give you an idea of what the term/semester looks like and will also allow you to plan ahead. Using this term schedule you can then work out a weekly schedule and then a daily schedule which could take the form of a 'to do list'. Think carefully about your weekly schedule. Don't be unrealistic. Give yourself enough time to complete tasks. Check your 'to do list' each morning, as this would give you an idea on how to plan your day. As you get tasks done, tick them off your list. Avoid procrastination. As far as possible stick to your plan as incomplete tasks on one day will impact negatively on your plan for the next day and once you are stretched too thin,

it will be difficult for you to stay calm and focused. Kindly refer to the time management booklet for detailed time management techniques.

Be organised:



Your term/weekly schedule will help you keep track of important dates and tasks to do. However, the schedule becomes less effective when you spend

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hours on finding your things, etc. i.e. if you are disorganised. Hence, in addition to a schedule, you need to organise your notes and other important papers so that they are readily available. Knowing where all your papers are and that your work is up to date and on schedule will allow you more time to concentrate and remain focused. Furthermore, your study environment should be a good one free from clutter.

Get to know your learning style:



Find out whether you are an auditory, visual or kinaesthetic learner:

An auditory learning style is a style in which a person learns through listening. This type of learner depends on hearing and speaking as a main way of learning. Such learners often talk to themselves and perform better talking to a peer / colleague and

hearing what is being said. These learners may have difficulty with reading and writing tasks.

Visual learners could be visual spatial or visual linguistic. The visual-linguistic learners like to learn through written language such as reading and writing tasks while visual-spatial learners prefer using images, colours, pictures, maps etc. to organise information and communicate with others.

Kinaesthetic learning is a style in which learning takes place by students actually 'doing' something (i.e. carrying out physical activities) while learning rather than just listening to a lecture. These learners easily lose concentration if there is little or no external stimulation or movement.

Attitude: It often happens that a situation that stressors one person may not affect another person. This difference is usually explained by the way the individual thinks about the situation. Changing the way you think can help you manage the stressors in your life. Develop a positive attitude. The mind is a powerful tool and negativity can weigh you down. You can develop positive thinking by:

- a. Getting rid of negative thoughts by:
 - *First identify your negative thoughts.* Once identified, you would be in a better position to challenge them.

An example of a negative thought: When the lecturer gives you the date of an upcoming test

you think “I’m going to fail this test. I have just too much work to cope with”.

- *Challenging your negative thoughts:* When you have a negative thought stop and ask yourself whether the thought is true or accurate. Imagine your friend voicing this thought to you. Offer your friend an objective rebuttal to her thought/negativity. Then consider your rebuttal for yourself.

Example: Your objective rebuttal to your friend’s negative thinking could be that there is still sufficient time to study for the test.

- *Replace the negative thought with a positive thought.* Once you have identified and challenged the negative thought you are now in

a better position to replace the negative thought with a positive thought.

Example: Your negative thought was “I’m going to fail the test” and you challenged this thought by acknowledging that you still have sufficient time to study for the text. You can now replace the negative thought with “I’m going to prepare for the test by studying in advance and more time to it so that I can do well”.

- b. Avoid ‘black-and-white’ thinking: This kind of thinking can lead to people feeling that they have to do something well or not do it at all.

Example: Thinking that the only outcome of taking a test is to pass with an A or to fail. As an illustration: If you feel you don’t have sufficient

time to study for an upcoming test, you may be tempted not to study for the test at all. If you fail, it is because you did not try. However, if you did study for the test you could have passed, even with a lower grade.

- c. Avoid 'personalising': When you personalise you make the assumption that you are to blame for anything that goes wrong. Such thinking can make you paranoid to the extent that you feel that people do not like you or are against you.

Example: "Jack rushed passed me this morning. I must have done something to upset him". It may just be that Jack was in a hurry and did not even notice you.

- d. Avoid 'catastrophising': This is when you think of the worst possible outcome and is usually related to anxiety about performing poorly.
Example: 'I'm going to fail this exam and this will mean that I will be kicked out of university and will not be able to get a job". The chances are that you will be given another opportunity to write. If not, you cannot be sure that you will not find a job.
- e. Avoid 'filter thinking': This is when you choose to ignore the positive and choose only to focus on the negative side of the situation.
Example: You receive feedback on a draft essay. The tutor gives you both constructive and developmental feedback (positive and

negative). However, you don't acknowledge the positive and then begin to focus on the negatives and think that your essay is a poor essay. This kind of thinking can hold you back.

**IF YOUR ATTITUDE IS
BAD, YOU WILL NOT
FIND ANYTHING
WORTHWHILE
ANYWHERE**



positive thoughts
generate
positive feelings
and attract
positive life
experiences

Eating and drinking

healthy: Healthy eating plays an important role in your ability to deal with stress.

Maintain a balanced diet. Carbohydrates, fats,

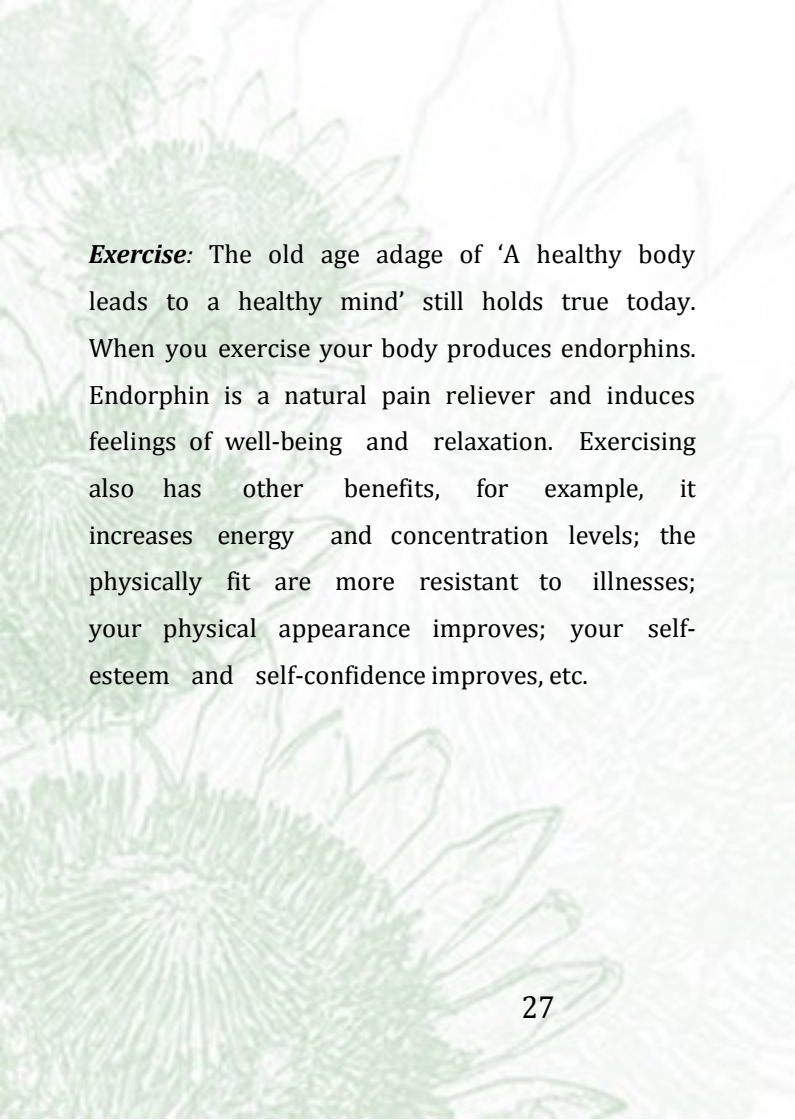
proteins, vitamins and minerals are all essential for energy, emotional stability and mental concentration. Therefore avoid 'junk' food as these foods generally lower your energy levels and reduce your threshold for stress. Avoid unnatural energy boosters, such as caffeine pills or prescription medication to keep you awake for an all-night study session. While these drinks may help you stay

awake, over time they may result in an energy crash which would put you at a greater risk for stress. Avoid alcohol and cigarettes. These substances act as temporary relievers (quick fix) and do not take away the stress or solve your problems. Once the chemicals wear off, you are back to feeling stressed and may even feel worse off than before.



Eat Healthy!
Feel Healthy!
Be Healthy!

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Exercise: The old age adage of ‘A healthy body leads to a healthy mind’ still holds true today. When you exercise your body produces endorphins. Endorphin is a natural pain reliever and induces feelings of well-being and relaxation. Exercising also has other benefits, for example, it increases energy and concentration levels; the physically fit are more resistant to illnesses; your physical appearance improves; your self-esteem and self-confidence improves, etc.

THE BRAIN BENEFITS OF EXERCISE



INCREASES PRODUCTION OF
NEUROCHEMICALS THAT
PROMOTE BRAIN CELL REPAIR



IMPROVES
MEMORY



LENGTHENS
ATTENTION SPAN



BOOSTS DECISION-
MAKING SKILLS



PROMPTS GROWTH OF
NEW NERVE CELLS AND
BLOOD VESSELS



IMPROVES
MULTI-TASKING
AND PLANNING



Sleep: You need at least 7 to 8 hours of sleep for your body and mind to function at its optimal. Insufficient sleep can increase your stress levels as it reduces your ability to handle the stressors of the day. In addition, insufficient sleep makes you more of a risk

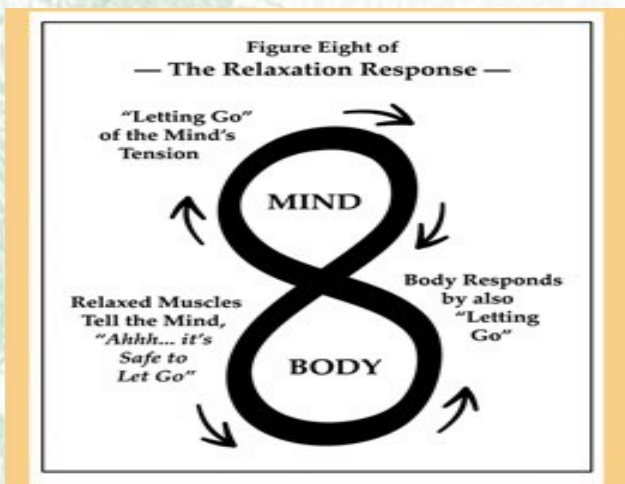
for illnesses such as obesity, diabetes and depression. If you feel tired during the course of the day or when you get home from campus, have a short nap for about an hour. Avoid naps longer than an hour as this may interfere with your sleep pattern at night.



Relax your body and mind: You can relax your body and mind through deep breathing. Lie on your back with a pillow under your head. Bend your knees and relax your stomach. Place one hand on your stomach just below your rib cage. Slowly breathe in through your nose. When doing this your stomach would rise. Then breathe out slowly through your mouth, emptying your lungs. You may repeat this several times until you feel calm and relaxed. Practise this technique as you can use it almost anywhere and at any time even in a seated or standing position.

Allow yourself some 'me' time: Just as the saying goes 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy' you need to find a balance between work and play. So, as

far as possible, try to find a couple of hours each week to pursue your hobby or an activity that you enjoy. This 'me' time should help you unwind.





Form healthy relationships: Make friends and keep the ones that help you succeed – friends that you can relate to, share your concerns with, and who provide you with emotional support. Such friends have a positive influence on your well-being. Venting your frustrations to a trusted friend/relative someone who acts as a support system - can assist you in

fighting stress. Avoid friends who are judgemental and who try to give you way too much of advice.



**A healthy
relationship
doesn't
drag you
down. It
inspires you
to be better.**

PLUSHANDRE.COM

Know your limit and be true to yourself: Know your limit and avoid taking on more than you can handle. For example, if you know that you are not going to manage with all the courses that you have registered for, it would be wise to drop a subject rather than continuing with all and not being able to

give full attention to each one, thereby failing most. Learn to say “No!” to friends when you don’t have the time to accommodate them.

Don’t stress about being stressed: When you are stressed you begin to feel overwhelmed, you are on edge, and are often unable to move forward. This is a normal response so don’t stress about being stressed. Admit that you are stressed, try and find out why you are stressed and decide how you are going to handle it.

Seek help: Do not be afraid to seek help when feeling overwhelmed – you are not alone. The University has resources that you can make use of.

6. University Resources

Centre for Student Support Services (CSSS)

Reception contact details:

Tel: 021 - 959 2299/3587,

Email: csss@uwc.ac.za

Director: Ms Laetitia Permall

Tel: 021 - 959 2299

Email: lpermall@uwc.ac.za


Location: 2nd floor, Community and Health Science Building, and open 8h30-4h30

7. Sources Consulted

“Stress Management.” Academic Skills Centre. California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California. Kennedy Library 112~805-756-1256. Accessed, 05 January, 2016 from <http://sas/calpoly.edu/asc/ssl.html>.

“Stress Management.” University Health Centre at the University of Georgia. 11 July 2005. Accessed, 05 January, 2016 from <http://www.uhs.uga.edu/stress/>.

Georgia Southern University. “Suggestions for reducing stress.” Counselling Services. <http://students.geogiasouthern.edu/counsling/workshop/stress/suggestions.html>.

The background of the page features a light green, sketch-like illustration of several sunflowers. The sunflowers are rendered with fine lines, showing the texture of their petals and the dense centers. They are scattered across the page, with some appearing more prominent than others. The overall style is soft and artistic.

“Stress Management.” www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/indepth/positive-thinking/art-20043950.



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FROM HOPE TO ACTION THROUGH KNOWLEDGE