ACCESS
Study Skills Tip of the Week

Managing Stress

Stress is a natural reaction of the body to any demand, pleasant or unpleasant. Stress is simply your body’s reaction to external events (giving a speech, or taking an exam) or internal events (fear, worry or unresolved anger). Everything you experience stimulates your body to react and respond. Stress is natural and, in fact, necessary for a vital life. With too little positive stress, many people are bored and unproductive. The key is knowing how to channel stress. Prolonged stress can wear you down and produce burnout. It can lead to physical problems, such as migraine headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure, or serious illnesses. Too many negative or positive changes stimulate the production of certain hormones and chemicals that affect the body. We cannot avoid stress but we can acknowledge it and learn to manage and channel it.

**Stress Reduction Strategies**

**Become attuned to your body and emotions.** Stress produces physical symptoms. Are you having physical symptoms of stress such as frequent headaches? Are you finding it difficult to relax? Are you emotionally upset, depressed, or irritable? Give yourself permission to feel different emotions, but also learn strategies to pull yourself out of a slump. Remember that you have the power to change negative, hurtful thoughts and to create positive habits.

**Exercise regularly.** Experts say that exercise is one of the best ways to reduce stress, relax muscles, and promote a sense of well-being. Most people find that they have more energy when they exercise regularly. Sometimes that best way is to make exercise a daily habit and high priority in your life.

**Rest and renew your body and mind.** Everyone needs to rest, not only through sleep, but also through deep relaxation. Too little of either, causes irritability, depression, inability to concentrate, and memory loss. Yoga is a great way to unwind, stretch and tone the muscles and focus energy. Many people find that meditation is essential for relaxation and renewal. Other people find that a
massage relieves physical and mental tension. Visualization is another powerful technique for relaxation.

**Develop hobbies and interests.** Hobbies can release stress. Sports, painting, quilting, reading for enjoyment and collecting can add a sense of fun and meaning to your life. Many find satisfaction and focus by developing an interest in the environment, the elderly politics, children animals, or the homeless. Investigate volunteering opportunities in your area.

**Use breathing methods.** Deep breathing reduces stress and energizes the body. If you are like many people, you breathe in short, shallow breaths, especially when under stress. Begin by sitting or standing up straight, breathe through your nose, fill your lungs completely, push out your abdomen and exhale slowly and fully. Focus on a word, a sound, or your breathing, and give it your full attention for about ten minutes. You can do a variation of this any time during the day, even if you can’t escape to a quiet spot.

**Develop a support system.** The support and comfort of family and friends can help you clear your mind, sort out confusion, and make better decisions. Express your feelings, fears, and problems to people you trust. Dozens of support groups can help you cope with stress. A group of people with similar experiences and goals can give you a sense of security, personal fulfillment, and motivation.

**Take mini-vacations.** Next time you are put on hold or kept waiting in line, pull out a novel and enjoy a few moments or reading. Practice deep breathing or head rolls, or visualize the tension flowing out of your body. Get up and stretch periodically while you’re studying. These mini-vacations can keep you relaxed and expand your creativity.

**Rehearse the feared event.** When you mentally rehearse beforehand, you are inoculating yourself against a stressful event. Your fears become known and manageable. Visualization is an excellent technique for rehearsing an event.

**Exercise and stretch the mind.** Mental exercise can refresh and stimulate your life. Reading, doing crossword puzzles, doing Sudoku puzzles and playing challenging games renew the spirit and stretch the mind. Attend lectures, workshops and seminars and brainstorm creative ideas with friends. Make friends with creative people who inspire you and renew your perspective.
Create balance in your life. Peak performers recognize the importance of balance between work and play. They want quality and a balanced life, not one filled of unfulfilling activities. Assess your activities and determine if they are distractions or opportunities. Learn to say no to requests that do not enrich your life or the lives of others. Set a time limit on work, demands from other people and study and reward yourself for tasks accomplished.

Develop a sense of humor. Nothing reduces stress like a hearty laugh or spontaneous fun. Discovering the child within helps us release our natural creativity. Laughing produces endorphins, natural chemicals that strengthen the immune system and produce a sense of well-being. Laughter also increases oxygen flow to the grain and causes other positive physiological changes.

Plan, don’t worry. Leading a disorganized life is stressful. Write down what has to be done each day; don’t rely on your memory. Take a few minutes the night before to lay out your clothes, pack your lunch and jot down a list of the next day’s priorities. Get up 20 minutes early so you don’t have to rush. Worrying is stressful and depletes your energy. You can have only one thought in your mind at a time, so don’t allow self-defeating thoughts to enter. Set aside 20 minutes days to plan, solve problems, and explore solutions. Get involved in the solutions, not the problem. When you time is up, leave the problems until your next scheduled problem solving session.

Be assertive. Stand up for your rights, express your preferences, and acknowledge your feelings. Assertive communication helps you solve problems rather than build resentment and anger. It also increases confidence and a feeling of control over your life.

Keep a log. A log can be helpful in gaining insight into the types of situations that are stressful for you and how you respond to them. Write journal entries in this book. Be honest with yourself and record daily events and your reactions. Writing in a journal also helps clarify concerns and decisions and can give you a fresh perspective.

Get professional help. It is normal to experience grief after a loss or a major transition, and you should allow yourself time to grieve so that you can experience and release your emotional pain. However, if your sadness, depression, or anger continues despite your best efforts, or if you are suicidal, get professional help. Call a crisis hotline, health center, counseling center on campus or in the community, or mental health department for a list of agencies
that can provide help. With a counselor’s guidance, you can gain insight into your pattern of reacting to stress and modify your perception and behavior.

*Peak Performance, Success in College and Beyond, Sharon Ferrett*