

Stress & Time Management for College Students



Attending college can be a stressful experience for many new and returning students. Heavy academic workloads and the feeling that you're constantly racing to meet another deadline can be daunting. And this is in addition to campus activities, new friendships, the pressure to go out multiple nights a week and variable sleep schedules that often come with the fast-paced college lifestyle. No wonder so many college students feel stressed out.

It's important to pay attention to stress because it can affect your health. Read on to learn about how stress can affect your body, why sleep is so important and how you can incorporate important stress-busting techniques, including useful time-management tips, into your life.

Stress . . . It's Personal

One person's stressor can be another person's motivator. The way you respond to potentially stressful situations is determined in part by your personality, genes and life experiences.

Stress typically occurs when the demands facing you (stressors) exceed your ability to cope or adjust. When the stressors in your life meet your coping abilities, you feel stimulated, engaged and appropriately challenged. Too many stressors in your life, however, can overwhelm your attempts to cope and result in depression or anxiety.

The Stress Response

When you feel stress, hormones including adrenaline and cortisol flood the body, causing:

- the body's need for oxygen to increase
- heart rate and blood pressure to go up
- blood vessels in the skin to constrict
- muscles to tense
- blood sugar level to increase
- blood to have an increased tendency to clot
- the body's cells to pour stored fat into the bloodstream

Prolonged stress can take a terrible toll on your physical and emotional health, as well as on your relationships. This is especially true if you don't have an outlet through which to release anxiety. Chronic depression and anxiety have been linked to other physical problems and conditions, such as:

- cardiovascular disease
- chronic pain
- stroke
- diabetes

Too much stress can also affect your immune system, weakening it and making you more susceptible to colds, coughs and infections.

While stress doesn't cause depression or anxiety disorders, it can activate these brain disorders in people who may already be prone to them. Depression can feel like a pervasive sense of hopelessness, a feeling of wanting to give up, tearfulness or a sadness that does not seem to go away after a couple weeks. If you or one of your friends have any symptoms of depression or anxiety, it's important that you go to your student health center for help.

Recognizing Stress

Physical Symptoms

- shallow, rapid breathing

- increased muscle tension and heart rate
- headaches
- stomach upsets
- sleep disturbances
- appetite changes

Behavioral Signs

- feeling anxious, depressed or irritable
- being overly sarcastic or flippant

Cognitive Signs

- problems concentrating
- becoming easily distracted
- negative, self-defeating thinking

Stress-Busting Tips

Controlling the stress in your life and learning how you react to it are important. By incorporating the following simple stress-busting techniques into your daily routine, you can learn how to break free from anxiety-ridden thoughts and behaviors.

- Keep a stress journal. One of the first steps in managing stress is to identify situations, experiences or people that tend to trigger tension or worry. Once you do this, you can figure out how to reduce these stressors.
- Learn relaxation exercises, including deep breathing, muscle relaxation, stretching, visualization and meditation.
- Avoid drinking too much caffeine, which can increase feelings of anxiety and agitation.
- Get enough sleep (more on sleep below).
- Eat a nutritious diet and exercise regularly. Not only will this prepare your body to withstand the physical effects of stress, but it will also strengthen your mind to cope with stress and stay on an even keel.
- Try to stay on top of your schoolwork as a way of decreasing your overall stress and worry.
- Forget perfection. Talk about pressure! Learn to feel good about doing the best you can.
- Make the most of a busy schedule but don't go overboard. Many college students take on too many activities and find it hard to keep up with everything.
- Take breaks to reenergize and gain perspective. De-stress by listening to music, watching your favorite show, talking with a friend, reading a magazine or taking part in other activities that help you relax.
- Seek help. Talk about the stress in your life with your health care professional.
- Build a network of friends who can help you cope in a positive way. In talking with friends, you'll most likely find out that they also feel overwhelmed from time to time.

Focus on Sleep

Getting plenty of restful sleep, like maintaining a healthful diet and exercise routine, is critical for good health. Without it, stress and anxiety only worsen. Yet most college students don't get enough. In fact, they have twice as many sleep problems as the general public, and women are more prone to difficulties sleeping because of changes in hormone levels related to menstruation.

You may find yourself burning the midnight oil in an attempt to balance a budding social life, part-time work and accumulating coursework. Some of your classmates may even pull "all-nighters" to cram for exams. But sacrificing a good night's sleep can take its toll. Trying to function on limited sleep can result in lower grades, drowsiness in class, difficulties concentrating, forgetfulness and increased irritability. Too little sleep also reduces your immunity to illnesses and makes you more susceptible to injury. Being persistently tired can take away your enjoyment of college, too.

The Science of Sleep

We spend a third of our lives sleeping — that's a lot of ZZZs. Sleep recharges the brain. It also promotes relaxation and healing. Here's how:

- Blood flow to your muscles increases, helping to repair them.
- Secretions of growth hormones occur during deep sleep, allowing for tissue growth and repair.
- Immune response to infections is enhanced.
- Rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is the stage of sleep when you dream, facilitates and recharges your memory, retention and new learning.

Poor Sleep Practices

Surveys of college students reveal poor sleep habits and practices including:

- taking more than 30 minutes to fall asleep
- trouble falling asleep more than three nights a week
- morning tiredness
- waking up too early
- variable sleep schedules
- environmental noise

Emotional responses to stress may be the best predictor of sleep complaints.

Getting Enough ZZZs

Here are some helpful tips to get the ZZZs you need:

- Avoid caffeine and alcohol within four to five hours before going to bed.
- Maintain regular sleep and wake times. Aim to get at least eight hours of sleep a night and try not to vary sleep times by more than two hours. Contrary to popular belief, sleeping late on the weekends won't make up for lost sleep during the week.
- Don't pull the famous college all-nighters, and fight the urge to take long naps.
- Keep your dorm room quiet, dark and cool. If noise outside your room is disrupting your sleep, try using ear-plugs or a small fan to mask the noise.
- Take a hot bath or shower before bed, which can help you relax.
- Exercise regularly, but not too near bedtime.

If you can't fall asleep, don't lie awake in bed and worry. This only makes it that much harder to get to sleep. Don't try to "fix" sleep problems on your own. Consult your student health service or health care provider before using any over-the-counter sleep aides.

Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider

- How can I better manage my life and stress levels at school?
- What activities can help relieve anxiety?
- Are there additional resources available on campus?
- What are common signs of a sleep disorder?
- Should I consider using a sleep aid?

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