

Stress

Stress is your physical, emotional and mental response to any change you must adapt to whether or not the change is real or imagined, positive or negative. Stress serves a vital purpose in our lives. We actually need a certain amount of stress in order to be motivated, productive and challenged. The most significant aspect of how stress will affect us is how we *choose to respond* to the stress in our lives. Excessive or poorly managed stress can affect health and contribute to illness. There are healthy ways to help you manage your stress.

Stress in College

Although many stressors that college students face are common in everyday life, students also have stressors that are unique during their higher education experience. Academic demands of tests, papers and projects, competitive nature within your chosen field, financial worries about school and future job prospects, roommate challenges, social and intimate relationship stress and time spent away from family and pleasurable activities. The National College Health Assessment survey conducted at MU consistently identifies stress as the number one factor impacting academic performance (ie received an incomplete, dropped a course, received a lower grade in a class, on an exam, or on an important project.)

Studies suggest that excessive chronic stress affects your immune and nervous system, metabolism, and hormone levels. When chronic negative stress is allowed to continue without effective stress reduction strategies imbalances are created and these important systems begin to malfunction leading to illness and disease.

Signs of Stress

- Loss of appetite
- Overeating
- Difficulty sleeping
- Anxiety
- Increased boredom
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Headaches
- Neck pain/backaches
- Muscle tension
- Stomachaches or upset stomach
- Increased procrastination
- Inability to get organized
- Elevated heart rate

- Frequent cold or infections
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- Increased frustration with minor annoyances

Maladaptive Coping

So how do we cope when faced with stress? Many times we engage in behaviors, triggered out of unawareness, which can impact us and others in unhealthy ways. Some examples include overworking, overeating, not eating enough, over exercising, using drugs and alcohol to self-medicate, tobacco use, caffeine, violent communication or behavior. These coping choices usually compound and exacerbate stress. They prevent us from seeing clearly, from solving problems creatively; from expressing our emotions effectively when we need to communicate with other people and ultimately they prevent us from attaining peace of mind.

Adaptive Coping

Mindfulness is a way to break free of a lifetime of stress reactivity. Being mindful of what is happening while it is happening allows us an opportunity to step back and *respond* versus *react* to daily stressors. Awareness of body sensations is critical in order to understand how thoughts, beliefs, emotions play a role in our reactivity causing more stress. Many people try to *think* their way out of stressful feelings. An alternative is bringing awareness to body sensations. We may not always be aware, but our emotions are manifested in the body as “felt senses.” This mind/body awareness offers the prospect of coming at thoughts and emotions from a fresh perspective. Body awareness allows us the opportunity to pause, step back, and approach our emotions in a welcoming manner. We cannot “will” ourselves into relaxation. Relaxation occurs naturally as we invite all sensations just as they are. The MU Student Health Center offers a variety of mind/body practices that hundreds of students have found extremely beneficial for stress reduction. These mind/body practices such as yoga and meditation are considered ancient wisdom for modern times. Join the community of students who have found the life-long benefits of these practices.

[Therapeutic Yoga](#)

[iRest \(Integrative Restoration-Yoga Nidra\)](#)

[Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction](#)

Stress Reduction Strategies

In addition to the mind/body practices offered through the Student Health Center, you can learn a variety of strategies to reduce stress.

The following are brief descriptions of healthy coping strategies that whole books are written about. They are listed to give you a sense of the comprehensive strategies that can be used to reduce stress.

Know what is important

Take time to find out what is important and what is not important in your life. Get in touch with your core values. What gives meaning your life meaning?

Leisure activities

Block out time and give priority to activities that give you pleasure. Play. Have fun. Recharge.

Time management

Develop better time management habits. Prioritize, plan ahead, construct "to do" lists. Using your time efficiently may free up additional time to plan leisure activities.

Assertive communication

How you interact with others can be a source of considerable stress in your life. Assertive communication can reduce that stress by allowing you to stand up for your legitimate rights without hurting others. Setting limits on commitments ("saying no") is also easier when you practice assertive communication.

Develop a support system

Talk out problems, share your thoughts and feelings with someone who knows you, understands you, and will listen to you.

Humor

Use humor to lighten your emotional load. Laughter can help open to the unpleasant, cope with the unexpected, and smile through the unbearable. The ability to laugh at life is right at the top, along with love and communication, in the hierarchy of our needs.

Get enough sleep

Lack of sleep can leave your nerves on edge and in no shape to meet the challenges of daily living.

Exercise

Exercise is one of the simplest and most effective means of stress reduction. If your day has been stressful, it can feel great to take 20 minutes or more to enjoy a

brisk walk, bike ride, or other aerobic exercise to release the stress toxins out of your system.

Maintain proper nutrition

When you are under stress, your need for all nutrients increases. When your body is depleted from important vitamins and minerals, you feel run down mentally and physically. Caffeine is a stimulant that can cause increased tension and anxiety. Reduce caffeine intake or better yet, avoid entirely.

Relaxation techniques

Practice daily one or more of the following relaxation methods: deep breathing, meditation, visualization, autogenics (self-suggestion), massage, or progressive relaxation.

Campus Resources

Student Health Center – 882-7481

Counseling Center – 882-6601

Stress and Mental Health websites

Stress Assessment <http://wellness.uwsp.edu/Other/stress/>

The American Institute of Stress <http://www.stress.org/>

The National Institute of Mental Health <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>