Time Management & Stress Reduction
What is stress?

Stress is your body’s reaction to the things which you perceive as pressures. Stress occurs when you feel that you cannot cope with those pressures. Our bodies are designed to react in 2 ways to stress: to fight against the pressure, or to run from it.

This is called the fight or flight response and it is controlled by the release of a hormone called cortisol. Cortisol makes your body react in ways that allow you to fight harder or run faster and it focuses your attention on the thing causing you stress. This response enables you to deal with stress effectively by either battling to get through the problem, or by removing yourself from a situation which is causing you to feel stressed.

Sometimes we see so many pressures around us that stress can become a long term problem. Although being stressed for short periods of times can be good for us, long term stress can have negative consequences and lead to problem such as high blood pressure, anxiety and depression.

Stressors

Stressors are the things around us which can cause a stress response. There are different types of stressors, some of them are environmental (e.g. too much noise), daily pressures (e.g. being late), life changing events (e.g. divorce), social stressors (e.g. family commitments), chemical stressors (e.g. alcohol) and workplace stressors.

The stressors you experience in college could be called workplace stressors, and the main thing likely to cause you stress at college is your assignments. Different types of assignments will cause stress for different reasons:

- You might worry about your mind going blank during an exam
- You may experience nerves when standing up in front of a group for a presentation
- Organising yourself to meet a deadline may feel stressful

Whatever the reason for your stress, there are techniques you can use to try and manage it.
Dealing with deadlines

As a student it is likely you will have many conflicting demands – college, work, social events, children – whatever the reasons it is important you manage your time effectively, otherwise your deadlines will get closer and you will begin to feel stressed by them. It can be difficult to juggle deadlines as many of them will come at the same point in the year, but by learning to manage your time your deadlines will not seem so stressful.

You may not believe it but you are already an expert in time management. Setting your alarm clock to get out of bed in the morning, making it to the cinema for a screening at a particular time, arriving in time for a doctor’s appointment - these are things we all have to do which means everyone is capable of managing their time effectively.
Good time management often begins by thinking about everything you must do in a particular time period. The easiest way to do this is by keeping a ‘to do’ list, once you have written everything down you can prioritise tasks depending on how soon they need to be done. This is a very simple, but very effective, way of managing your time.

By making sure you keep a note of your activities and removing them from the list when you are done, you will never feel overwhelmed by your tasks. Remember, there are many ways you can make your to do list – some people like to carry an organiser or notepad, others keep notes on their computers or smartphones. The important thing is to find a method which suits you and refer to the list every day.

Your to do list should help you to:

- Focus your mind on important objectives
- Not forget to do tasks
- Order your thoughts
- See the bigger picture
- Save time
- Decide on priorities: the most important and the most urgent
- Avoid becoming side-tracked
- Feel more in control
- Keep a record of what you’ve done

Once you have your to do list written you should feel more organised, but one of the difficulties with college work is procrastinating. Everyone finds reasons to put off their college work sometimes but when these reasons become a regular occurrence you might find yourself rushing to get assignments done at the last minute and that can cause your stress levels to rise.

The key to overcoming procrastination, or putting off your work, is to understand why you are doing it and then taking active steps to overcome it. Procrastination is usually caused by ignoring what you should be doing, in favour of something you enjoy more or you feel more comfortable doing.

For most college assignments you will have a lengthy deadline to begin with, a month or even two. That’s a lot of time when you think about it as a whole, but what if you were to break your assignment down into chunks?

If, for instance, you have an essay to write, there are various research activities you must undertake to get it written and each of these activities take time. Below is an example list of tasks with approximate times:

- Finding your resources – 4 hours
- Assessing how useful they will be – 2 hours
- Reading them – 8 hours
- Writing your notes – 4 hours
- Writing your essay – 8 hours
- Proofreading your assignment – 2 hours
Using the above example, we can see that writing this essay might take you **28 hours** in total. If you think about getting that done alongside all of the other tasks you have to undertake, it may seem difficult to find the time. However, when we look at it over a **longer period** of time it seems much **more manageable**.

If you have **4 weeks** until your deadline, that’s **7 hours per week** which isn’t much time at all! If we break that down even further and anticipate you will study for **1 hour a day**, you can comfortably achieve your goal in that time. Especially when you consider that the time does not need to be spent in one solid block.

For some tasks it could be two periods of 30 minutes or even four 15 minute periods, how much better does that sound than 4 days of solid working and late nights? Not only will you find your stress levels are lower, you will also feel better for having achieved something **constructive**. Learning how to manage your time effectively can have a very **positive effect** on your performance at college and also your stress levels.

### Exams stress

The most important thing you can remember when it comes to exam stress or anxiety is:

It’s not the end of the world!

Sometimes we don’t succeed, but the world does not stop turning. You may have high expectations for yourself – you’ll get over it. Your parents may have high expectations of you – they will forgive your mistakes. You might be banking on a place at university – there are other universities/years/courses.

Whatever your reason for feeling nervous, not passing or perhaps not getting the grade you expected, **it is a challenge you can overcome** by changing your plans or re-sitting the following year. It may feel like the worst thing that’s ever happened but you will move on, even if it doesn’t feel like it at the time.

### Revise wise

**Being prepared** is the key to managing your exam stress. It allows you to stay calm because you are **secure in your subject knowledge**. This may sound obvious but it really is the best way to cope. It is very important you **get enough sleep**. Although cramming or revising through the night may seem like a good idea at the time, you will always **perform better if you are rested**. Your mind will be more active and your body more alert after a good night’s sleep.

Another thing to avoid is **excessive caffeine consumption**. Caffeine is a stimulant and, in small measures, can make you feel more alert but if you drink too many coffees or energy drinks you may feel **shaky and anxious** – not something you want in an exam!

You should also **try not to compete** with others when revising. It may seem like some of your classmates are putting in many more hours of revision than you but remember **everyone has different study habits**.

What works for them may not work for you, you may achieve more over three hours of well-planned revision than in a whole day of unstructured revision. The key to revision is not the number of hours you put in, it is **how well you use your time**. For more tips on exam success see our **Study Skills guide**.

### Your mind has gone blank

Have you ever found yourself in an exam and your **mind has gone blank**? You feel like you have forgotten everything you learned? You are not alone. This is a very **common problem** and it happens when you allow exam nerves to overwhelm you. Your initial reaction is probably to panic, heightening the stress that you are already experiencing, but the best strategy is to **try and relax**.
You can then attempt to overcome your nerves both physically and mentally:

- **Physical** – begin by breathing very deeply. Just allow your mind to remain blank for a few minutes, close your eyes and relax. Once your body has relaxed you should feel calm enough to attempt your exam paper.
- **Mental** – use a page as scrap paper and begin writing down what you can remember. Try not to worry about sentences and structure as anything you can think of, even random words and phrases, will do. The purpose is to start making notes, not start writing an essay. This should help to jog your memory.

These tips should help you to focus and become calm. Also remember, if it is a particular question you are stuck on and there are others, moving on is a good strategy. You can always come back to that question later and it is best to waste as little time as possible.

### Presentations

Much like exams, presentations are all about preparation. If you have rehearsed properly and are comfortable with your delivery you will feel more confident on the day. Deep breathing is the best way to help calm your nerves before you perform, so try taking a few long, slow breaths. This also has the added benefit of stopping your voice from quivering - the vibrations are caused by shallow breathing. If you still have a build-up of nervous energy try and move around while you present. This will help use up some of that energy while also making your presentation more dynamic; just make sure you aren’t blocking the screen!

The best possible technique you can use to calm your nerves is to stop thinking about yourself. Your audience are the focal point, not you. If you keep them in mind, respond to their needs and make sure they receive clear and interesting information, then you will be too busy thinking about your actions to notice your nerves:

- **Breathe** deeply
- **Speak** slowly and clearly
- **Make** eye contact with your audience
- **Respond** to your audience’s reactions
- **Use prompts** if you need them
- **And above all, smile**, it will calm you down and make a good impression on anyone watching you.

Remember that nerves are a natural part of giving any performance and everyone experiences them, but the trick is looking confident by learning how to control them. The fear you feel, often called performance anxiety or stage fright, is usually experienced because you feel vulnerable.

There is a person, or people, judging your performance. The most important thing to remember is that it is not personal; they are not judging you as a person. Rehearsing in front of other people really helps with this, the more routine your presentation becomes, the less you will be concerned with your nerves. For more advice on presentations see our Presentation Skills guide.

### Dealing with stress

If you find that you have followed the tips in this guide for your assignments but you still feel like your stress levels are too high, you may need to seek further help to manage your stress. There are a variety of ways to do this which are detailed in the following sections.
Many people turn to their GP in times of stress. They can offer you medication to manage it but this should only be sought out as a last resort. Most often they will offer you some kind of counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy.

**Counselling**

Counselling is a type of talking therapy which allows you to talk about your feelings and emotions in a safe and confidential environment. Counsellors are trained to listen and give you advice on how to deal with your negative thoughts and behaviours.

Unfortunately, the College doesn’t currently have an on-site counselling service. However, if you find you are struggling and you need to speak to someone about it there are options. You can either ask your group tutor or a member of staff with whom you feel comfortable for advice, or visit the College’s Guidance Team. They will be able to assess your needs and possibly refer you on to a counselling service.

**Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

CBT is another talking therapy but it is different from counselling as it helps you to manage your problems by changing the ways you think and behave. CBT aims to break down the factors that are causing you stress by making them seem more manageable. It helps to show you how negative patterns of behaviour or thoughts are affecting you and how to change them.

**Mindfulness**

Unlike talking based therapies, mindfulness is a mind-body technique which focuses on awareness of the present. The basic principles are drawn from Buddhism and it combines a variety of techniques, including meditation and yoga, in order to reduce stress.
The strategies employed in mindfulness allow you to take time out of your daily life to focus on a singular thing – a thought, your breathing – so that you remain in the present moment. The aim is to simply observe what is going on around you and not feel emotionally or physically affected by it.

This objective approach to your state of mind can help you to break down your problem and address them, making them seem more manageable. Nilupul is a Dundee-based charity which aims to improve the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged groups through mindfulness. For more information on Nilupul, go to www.nilupul.org.

The Mental Health Foundation has some detailed information on mindfulness at www.bemindful.co.uk and there are some books in the library catalogue which are a good starting point for information.

Meditation

Meditation is a relaxation technique which allows you to use a mantra (short phrase) or an image, to focus the mind and free yourself from distractions. This creates a relaxed state of mind and reduces stress. For more information on meditation contact Nilupul or the Transcendental Meditation Centre at www.tmscotland.org

Physical activity and stress

Everyone knows that being active is good for you but did you also know it’s a great way to reduce stress? You don’t have to become an athlete either; there are plenty of low-impact forms of exercise which can help to reduce your stress levels, such as walking or gentle yoga. Exercise releases hormones called endorphins into your body. Endorphins are the ‘feel good’ hormone; they make you calmer, happier and less prone to becoming stressed.

Exercise could also be considered a form of meditation. You become so focused on the activity you are performing you tend to forget about what is making you stressed. It also helps you to sleep better because you are more physically tired, and a lack of sleep definitely doesn’t do anything to improve your mood!

The Department of Health recommends that adults do at least 150 minutes of exercise a week to benefit from it and, much like for your assignments, you don’t have to do it all in one go. You could exercise for 30 minutes a day, or even two 15 minutes sessions a day, and this would be enough for you to commit to 150 minutes per week. For more information go to http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/fitness/Pages/Fitnesshome.aspx

Top tips for stress-busting

Whatever the cause of your stress there are certain things that everyone can do to help relieve some of the symptoms:

- Be active: burn off some of the stress and benefit from the endorphins
- Take control: doing something about your situation will always make you feel better than doing nothing, try not to think of yourself as a victim
- Connect with people: sharing your problems and having a good support network will help you manage your stress
- Have some ‘me time’: even if it’s only a couple of hours a week, take some time out to do things that you find relaxing and enjoyable
- Challenge yourself: by setting yourself goals and challenges you will increase your self-confidence and this will help to reduce your stress
• **Do some volunteer work**: helping others, who are in situations worse than your own, can help to put your problems into perspective

• **Work smarter, not harder**: it is the quality of your work that counts, not the quantity. Use good time management and organisational strategies to produce better work in a shorter period of time. This will free up time to do things that make you feel good

• **Try to accept the things you cannot change**: life isn’t always under your control, learn to recognise the things you can’t control and the things that you can. Understanding your situation will help you to cope with it

• **Be positive**: learn to appreciate the things you do have. The more you think about positive things, the more positive you will feel

### Last word

This guide is designed to be *an introduction* to various time and stress management strategies which you can use to help manage your time at college and outside of college. There are plenty of places you can find more help and advice, but if you feel you can’t cope make sure you talk to someone about it. It could be the Guidance team, your group tutor or any member of staff you feel comfortable with, but if you are finding things a little bit too hard *don’t think you’re alone.*