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# Stress Management

## What is Stress?

Stress is your body's reaction to things you perceive as pressures. Stress occurs when you feel you cannot cope with those pressures. Our bodies are designed to react in two ways: to fight against the pressure, or 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 becomes 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:

- 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
- Workplace stressors e.g. long hours

The stressors you experience in college are workplace stressors, and the main thing likely to cause you stress at college is your assignments.

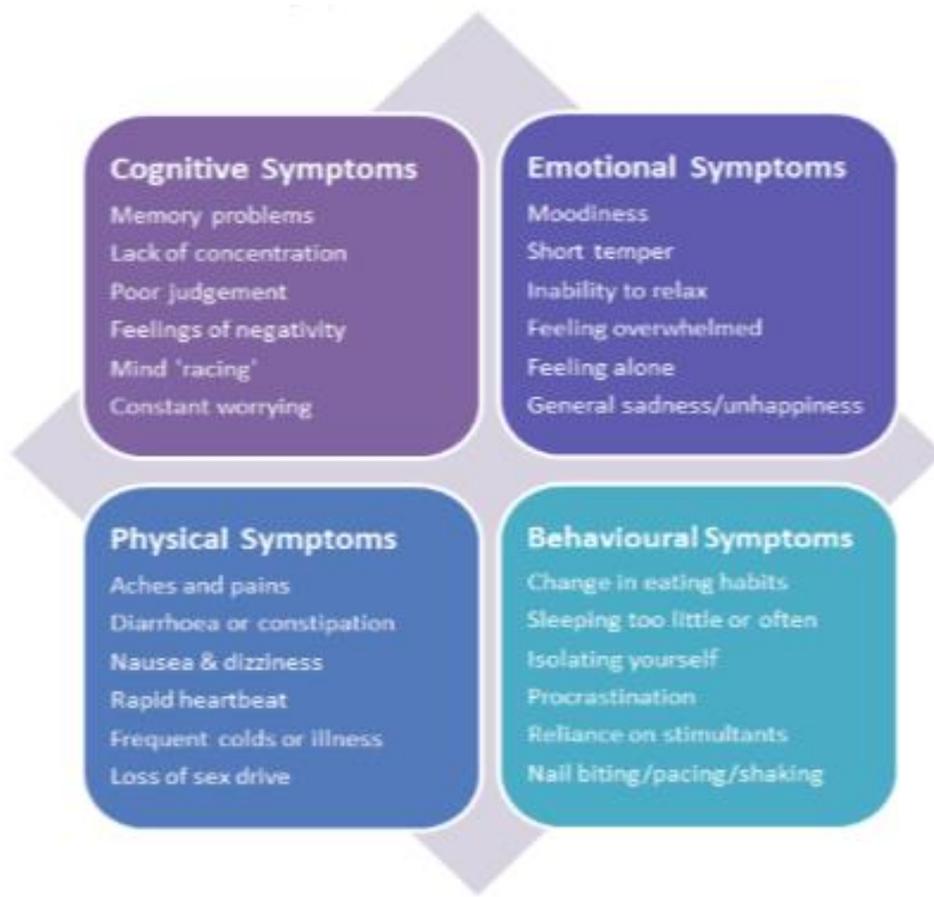
Different types of assignments will cause stress for different reasons:

- 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, but first you need to understand it.

## Recognising Stress

Recognising when you are stressed is the first step to stop it from becoming a problem. The table below describes some of the most common symptoms:



If you believe you may be stressed or are experiencing a number of the symptoms listed, it is a good idea to try out some strategies to manage your stress.

## Managing Stress

Managing stress is all about taking control and stress can manifest itself in different ways. You may need to take charge of your thoughts, emotions, your daily life, or your environment to overcome stress. This will involve looking at any stressful situation and deciding what you can change, what you can't and how you can deal with it rationally and calmly. The following approaches can help you to achieve lower stress levels.

## The four As

Using the four As below can guide you to prevent your stress levels from rising:

**Avoid** unnecessary stress.

This can be easier said than done as not all stress can be avoided. Learn to say no to tasks that are not essential and focus on tasks that must be completed to alleviate unnecessary stressors. For example, if a college friend has asked you to read over their work but you have yet to complete your own, explain that the deadline is concerning you and suggest they speak to another member of the group who has already completed their work.

**Alter** the situation.

If a stressful situation is unavoidable, it may help to look at it from another angle. Seek help from others who have been under the same set of circumstances where possible, and be willing to compromise and discuss realistic alternatives. If college is causing you stress, talk to other members of your class. You may find they are in the same position you are. Together, you may find alternatives to the situation or gain a better understanding of subject matter that you are finding difficult.

**Adapt** to the stressor.

If a situation just can't be changed, look to the positives. The problem is probably only short term. Is it really something to be upset about? Ensure you make time to remove yourself from the situation occasionally and do something you enjoy. For example, you may be given a deadline for a project. After the project is complete you could plan a trip or treat to celebrate.

**Accept** the things you can't change.

There will always be situations in life that you can do nothing about. Accepting the inevitable will create less stress than fighting against it. Sometimes the most stressful experiences are opportunities for personal growth. Exams are a good example of this. They have to be done and you have to be prepared but ensuring you are ready will ease a lot of stress.

## GPs

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 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 a Student Services Advice Centre at one of the College campuses. 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 way 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 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 etc. 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 problems 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](http://www.nilupul.org)

The Mental Health Foundation has detailed information on mindfulness at [www.bemindful.co.uk](http://www.bemindful.co.uk) and there are some books in the libraries 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 [uk.tm.org](http://uk.tm.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; 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 can be considered a form of meditation. You become so focused on the activity you tend to forget what is making you stressed.

It also helps you 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 adults do at least 150 minutes of exercise a week and you don't have to do it all in one go. You could exercise for 30 minutes a day, or two 15 minutes sessions a day, and this would mean you'd do 150 minutes per week. For more information go to [www.nhs.uk/livewell/fitness/Pages/Fitnesshome.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/fitness/Pages/Fitnesshome.aspx)

## College Based Stress

### Exam Stress

The most important thing to 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 you will 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.

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 Exam Preparation 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. 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 present, 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 to 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 that there is someone 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 others 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.

## Top Tips for Stress-busting

Whatever the cause of your stress there are things everyone can do to 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:** share your problems with a support network to help manage your stress
- **Have some 'me time':** 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:** the quality of your work is what counts, not the quantity. Use good time management and organisational strategies to produce better work in a shorter period of time
- **Try to accept the things you cannot change:** life isn't always under your control, recognise the things you can't control and the things you can
- **Be positive:** learn to appreciate the things you do have. The more you think about positive things, the more positive you will feel