

## **Reducing Anxiety & Stress**

We have outlined a number of effective techniques to help reduce the effects stress and anxiety or stop it occurring in the first place.

These are:

Exercise  
Relaxation  
Sleep  
Balanced Diet  
Talk About It  
Write It Down  
Get Out and About

If you would like information about Time Management, please go to the Study Concerns section on the website or find out when the next Time Management Workshop is being held.

It can take time to break out of old habits. So, don't put too much pressure on yourself to see results straight away.

If you feel that you need more assistance or information, give the Counselling Service a call on 9351 2228, email [consel@stuserv.usyd.edu.au](mailto:consel@stuserv.usyd.edu.au) or visit our website [www.usyd.edu.au/counsel](http://www.usyd.edu.au/counsel)

### **Exercise**

Regular exercise can improve your physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. This is because exercise keeps your body fit and active, and releases endorphins (natural morphine-like chemicals) which make you feel calm and contented.

To help you get started we have included a few pointers for you to think about.

There are many benefits of physical exercise. These include:

- being physically fit and healthy
- release of endorphins which make you feel calm
- reduction of muscle tension and headaches
- getting a more restful sleep
- assisting your metabolism to function properly
- increased self-esteem
- burns up the stress hormone 'cortisol'
- you have a forced break from stresses and worry
- forces concentration on a task

If you have an outcome to focus on you may be more inclined to exercise.

The following are some suggestions about where to start:

- Walk briskly for 20 minutes a day - even if you get off the bus a couple of stops earlier and walk the rest of the way to uni.
- Swim – join a swimming club or take swimming lessons if you aren't a strong swimmer.
- Go to the gym – ask for a program to be set up for you, this will give you a goal and also ensure you don't injure yourself.
- Go for a jog around your local park or oval
- Ride a bike – bike path maps are available from newsagencies.
- Speak to a friend about exercising together – it's easier to get going if someone else is depending on you to be there.

If you haven't exercised for a while, it's unlikely you will feel instantly fit and fabulous! Don't over do it and give your body some time to adjust. It may take a couple of weeks of regular exercise before you start noticing physical, emotional or mental changes.

## **Relaxation**

Relaxation techniques and gentle exercise such as yoga or tai chi are great ways to decrease stress and anxiety. Yoga and tai chi are taught all over Sydney and at various locations on campus. Check out the Yellow Pages or University of Sydney sport centre's and Union's website.

There are many simple relaxation techniques which you can do at home. If you are using the techniques below remember to:

- Be comfortable
- Make sure you won't be disturbed, even if it's for five or ten minutes
- Let your mind go, that is, let thoughts come and go without judging them

## **Slow Breathing**

When you are stressed or anxious your breathing quickens and shallows. One of the best ways to calm the body and mind is to focus on lengthening and deepening each breath.

Here's what to do:

Sit or lie down, whatever you are comfortable with

Turn your attention to your breath

Begin breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth, noticing the sensation of your chest rising and falling

Then start to lengthen each breath – count to three for each in and out breath  
Continue to focus on breathing in through the nose and then out through the mouth  
Do this for about five minutes at first, aim for about ten minutes after some practice  
You can also link each out breathe to a calming word such as ‘calm’, ‘slow’ or ‘release’ as a way of letting go of stress and anxiety.

### **Release of muscular tension**

Physical tension is an outcome of stress and anxiety. There is a very simple technique which can release tightness in the muscles and can be done just about anywhere.

Here’s what to do:

- Sit or lie down, whatever you are comfortable with
- Take a few deep breaths
- Tense your whole body and hold it for as long as you can but not to the point of pain – alternatively, you can tense one group of muscles at a time
- Release the tension slowly and feel it, or visualise it, leaving your body
- Repeat this three to four times

### **Meditation**

Meditation helps us to relax physically and mentally. It can assist you relax, concentrate and reduce irritability.

The intended outcome of meditation is to create mindfulness or the ability to remain focused on your inner experiences whilst the world moves around you. With practice you will be able to experience events or situations which previously caused you to feel stressed with calmness and clarity.

Here’s what to do (this is just one example of a meditation technique):

- If you can, sit on the floor or on a chair (if you lie down you might fall asleep!). Ensure that you are comfortable
- Focus your vision on the floor just in front of you or close your eyes
- Use the breathing technique above for a few minutes or until your breath is slow and even and your body is as still as possible
- After you have a rhythm to your breath, focus on a word such as ‘calm’ (or any words that have a calming effect such as ‘let go’ or ‘peace’).
- With each breath out say the word in your mind
- If you get caught up in a particular thought or emotion gently bring yourself back to focus on your breathing for a few moments then repeat the calming word

Start with a five minute session then gradually build it up to 20 minutes over a number of days.

## **Sleep**

Getting the right amount of sleep is important for coping with stress and anxiety as it gives you mind a chance to rest and recuperate. Most adults need around seven or eight hours sleep per night.

We also need to sleep to consolidate into memory all that we have learnt throughout the day.

If you are stressed you may have trouble relaxing your mind at night. Thoughts about different aspects of your life can keep you awake when you would rather be asleep! If this is the case, exercise and relaxation techniques can help you to release anxious thoughts and tension from your body. Try using the breathing technique outlined above as you are lying in bed.

Also, don't work or study right up to the moment of going to bed. Leave at least half an hour to relax before attempting to go to sleep.

If your sleep continues to be a problem or if you're waking early and can't get back to sleep please contact the Counselling Service on 9351 2228.

## **Balanced Diet**

Getting the right foods can help enhance brain function and help you cope with stressful situations.

If you do experience anxiety and panic it is important to avoid certain substances which can affect your brain's chemistry. These include:

- Caffeine
- Nicotine
- Alcohol
- Marijuana

Other things to avoid are:

- Sugar including soft drinks and packaged/tinned foods
- Processed foods such as white bread and chips
- Salt

The types of foods you should consume more of are:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables
- Cereals such as rice, pasta and grainy bread
- Lots of water
- Protein such as lean meat, fish and soy products

Remember – everything in moderation! A little bit of chocolate is fine as long as you are mostly eating the right foods. Your local GP can give you more information about eating the right types of food, or you can check out the Nutrition Australia website for more information: { HYPERLINK "http://www.nutritionaustralia.org" }

If your diet is preoccupying you , or you are spending a large amount of time worrying about the ‘right’ foods, please see the Body/Eating Section of our website – [www.usyd.edu.au/counsel](http://www.usyd.edu.au/counsel).

### **Talk About It**

In stressful times it can be useful to talk about how you are feeling rather than leaving it bottled up inside. A trusted friend or family member may be a good place to start.

If you don't feel there is anyone who would understand what you are going through please contact us on 9351 2228 or email { HYPERLINK "mailto:counsell@stuserv.usyd.edu.au" } to make a free appointment with one of the counselors.

Don't be afraid to speak up no matter how big or small you think the issue is.

### **Write it down**

If you can't or don't want to talk to anyone, it might be useful to write down how you are feeling. Often just seeing your thoughts on paper can diminish their effect and help you to understand that one issue or stressful event doesn't have to impact on all aspects of your life.

Sit somewhere quiet and just let the thoughts come. Try not to analyse the thoughts just write them down. Keep writing until you have had enough then put the paper down. When you feel ready (even if it's a day or two later) pick up the piece of paper again and have a look at what you have written. Does it still seem overwhelming? Or are you able to identify solutions?

Remember: whatever you are feeling is real. Thinking you shouldn't be feeling a particular way won't make it go away. Acknowledging your thoughts will make them easier to deal with.

### **Get Out and About**

If you feel highly stressed or anxious it's easy to hide away from social situations. Stress and anxiety can deplete your self confidence and you may feel unable to socialize even with close friends or family. However, being social can give you some time out from the things that may be making you anxious, such as study or a difficult situation at home.

Remember: if stress has caused you withdraw from social situations that you would normally take part in, speak to someone about it.

If you would like to find out more information about any of the above sections please contact the Counselling Service on 9351 2228.