



Managing stress



Have you ever found yourself in a situation where that to-do list seems endless and impossible to complete. Assessment deadlines are fast approaching, exams are around the corner, and you find yourself saying “This is too much, I am so stressed!”? But what is stress really, how does it affect us and what can we do to better manage stress levels?



What is stress and what are the signs of stress?

We are all familiar with stress and it is important to recognise that stress is not necessarily a ‘bad’ thing. It is a normal response that we all experience frequently. Stress is primarily a physical response. It is the body and mind’s way of preparing us to face a challenge.

When stressed, the body thinks it is under attack and switches to ‘fight or flight’ mode, releasing a complex mix of hormones and chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol to help us to prepare the body for physical action.

These hormones cause physical changes in our body to help us react quickly and effectively in response to the stressful situation by increasing our heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, metabolism and muscle tension.

However, if the stress is ongoing and the physical changes don’t settle down, stress can cause other physical or psychological symptoms including:

- Poor concentration
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling overwhelmed/ out of control
- Anxiety
- Upset stomach, diarrhoea
- Irritability
- Headaches and other aches
- Feeling tired
- Low self-esteem, lack of confidence.

Stress can come from a huge range of sources (stressors), such as:

- Study and university demands
- Relationships with others
- Work-related issues
- Coping with illness
- Day-to-day activities and tasks
- Life changes e.g. starting university, moving house, relationships
- Juggling many roles or tasks at the same time.



Strategies for managing stress?

We need a certain level of stress to not only function, but to motivate us to reach our full potential. However, if we become over-stressed, it can also be harmful and impact on our quality of life. Once stress overload is recognised there are skills you can acquire to address the problem. Below are some techniques you can try to help reduce stress and its impact on your health.

1. Maintain self-care

- Ensure you are getting enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly (2-3 times weekly).
- Eat regular meals and limit junk food.
- Avoid using substances to cope.
- Spend time with people you care about.
- Take time out to do activities you enjoy.

2. Notice your thinking

When we experience stress, we can start to get stuck in negative self-talk, which may not reflect the reality of the situation.

- Notice when you are using negative self-talk and replace it with the advice you would give a friend in a similar situation.
- Keep things in perspective by asking yourself whether it will matter in one month, six months, five years from now.

3. Problem-solve

Problem-solving techniques can help to clarify the problem, generate possible solutions, and then take action.

- Focus on things within your control.
- Make a plan with actionable steps.
- Identify people who can assist you in resolving the problem.

4. Learn relaxation techniques

When you're in 'fight-or-flight' mode, relaxation techniques can help to calm your body's reaction and give you a chance to think and respond more clearly. There are plenty of guided relaxation apps – for example, try MyCalmBeat, Breathe to Relax or Jacob the Frog.

Regularly practicing relaxation techniques will help your body to settle and readjust.

- Learn progressive muscle relaxation, meditation or yoga.
- Absorb yourself in a relaxing activity such as listening to music or reading a book.
- Practice deep breathing.

5. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a stress-management technique that involves observing your thoughts, feelings and breath. Find a mindfulness app online to guide you through the process. This Way Up provide a free self-guided course, Introduction to Mindfulness course which you might like to try:

- <https://thiswayup.org.au/how-we-can-help/courses/intro-to-mindfulness/>

Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

+61 2 8627 8433
caps.admin@sydney.edu.au
sydney.edu.au/counselling

Level 5, Jane Foss Russell Building
Opening hours: 9am to 4.30pm,
Monday to Friday

Crisis contacts

Ambulance/Fire/Police: 000
Lifeline (24 hours): 13 11 14
Mental Health Access Line: 1800 011 511