

# Managing your stress



**Student Counselling**

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**COUNSELLING  
WITH  
PLYMOUTH  
UNIVERSITY**

**MANAGING  
YOUR  
STRESS**



## **How to manage your stress**

We all have felt stressed at some point in our lives. Some of us could write a book about stress, if we weren't so stressed, had enough time and so on and so on...

Fortunately we don't feel stressed all of the time. When we are stressed we know that it is having a negative effect on how we think, feel, and on our behaviour. We will also be aware of the physical sensations that stress causes us.

This leaflet will help you to start to recognise your stress triggers and how to manage stress differently.

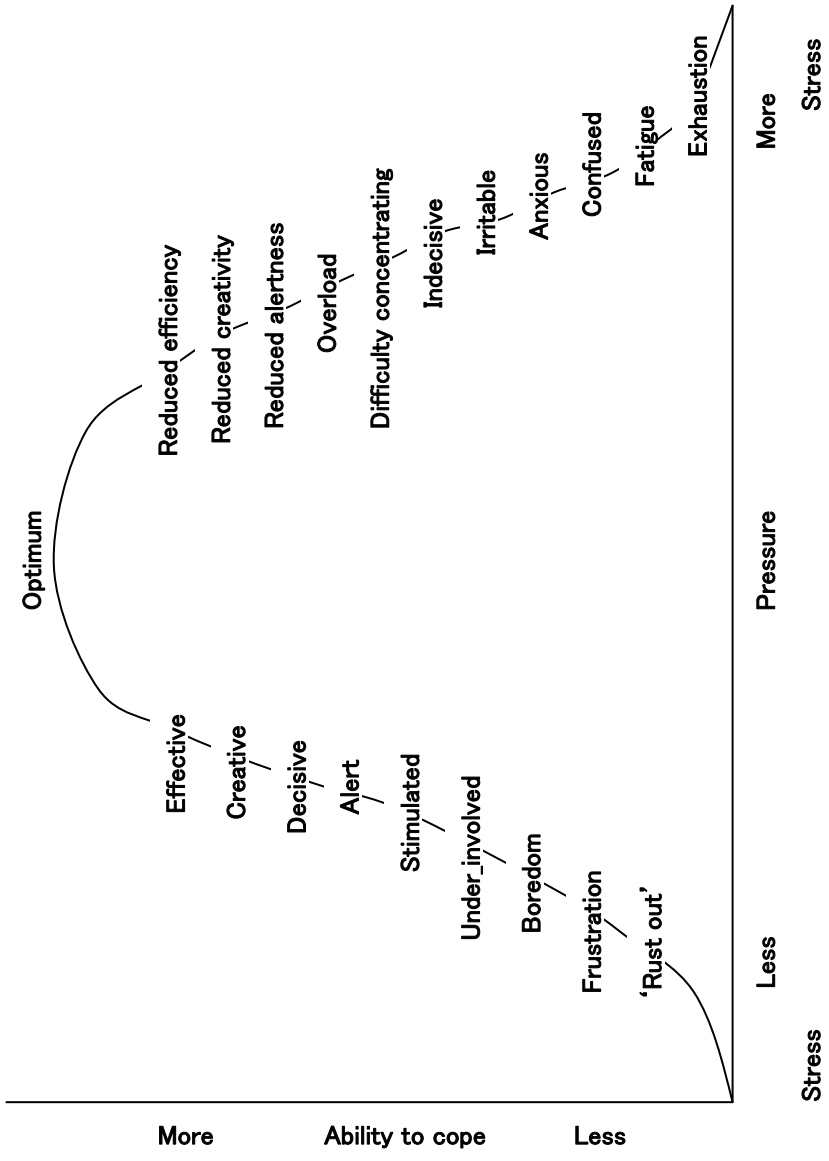
## **What is Stress?**

You will find different definitions of stress in the many books and articles written on the subject. It is generally accepted that stress is when we think and feel we have more to do than we can cope with. It's when you find yourself saying, 'It's all too much' or, 'I just can't cope any more'.

Some books use the term 'stress' and 'pressure' interchangeably, but this is misleading. There is a difference. Stress is always bad for us but pressure can enable us to give of our best.

In order to be successful and achieve your goals you will need to manage the diverse demands placed on you in an academic environment: you may have several pieces of writing or tasks which have to be submitted at around the same time; you may have to work in new ways such as giving presentations, working in small groups; you will have to be able to manage a budget, look after yourself i.e. shopping, cooking, cleaning; you will need to manage your time; you will need to manage relationships; you may need to work part-time or look after a family etc. How you think about these things will influence how you will manage them: whether they will be seen as stressful or whether they will be seen as pressures that excite you and that enable you to achieve.

Look at the graph overleaf to see the relationship between stress and pressure.



We are at our best when we are working at our optimum, when the tasks we have to do excite, stimulate and challenge us and we feel we can achieve them. When we think we can't do what we have to do we end up exhausted, demoralised and 'burnt out'. Most of us can probably recognise some of the feelings on the right hand side of the graph but we are probably less familiar with the idea that not having enough to interest and challenge us can also be stressful. This state is known as 'rust out'. Take a moment to look at the diagram and work out where you would place yourself.

It is known that there are some events in life that will raise our stress levels, for example, death of a loved one, divorce or relationship break down, moving house, leaving home, the birth of a child, redundancy. If too many of these events happen close together then we may become stressed. We can all probably name people, however, who seem to thrive on what we may consider to be very stressful events. How can this be?

Well, although there are certain events that might make us vulnerable to stress, in the end it is how we perceive events rather than the events in themselves that cause us to feel stressed.

Just think about it: I bet some of the things that wind you up will be different to those that wind your friend up ...

Look at the following diagrams illustrating how two students differ in the way that they think, feel and react to the same situation.

**Student "A"**  
**TRIGGER/SITUATION**  
Essay deadlines approaching

**Thoughts**

Oh my God...I'll never get them done on time. I have so much to do...I'm going to fail. There's no point starting now there's too much to do..

**Behaviours**

Avoidance—do everything and anything except look at the essay.  
Play games on the internet at night; speak to friends on Facebook/MSN  
Watch TV. Sleep late;  
drink too much  
Procrastinate  
Miss deadlines

**Feelings**

Anxiety  
Low mood  
Shame  
Hopelessness

**Physical Sensations**

Feeling Sick

Butterflies in stomach,  
heart racing and hands  
sweaty

Tired, limbs feel heavy

**Student "B"**  
**TRIGGER/SITUATION**  
Essay deadlines approaching

**Thoughts**

What do I still have to do?  
I'll be able to meet the deadlines if I plan my time properly  
I may not be able to go out clubbing this week but I'll be able to celebrate when I get this work finished.

**Behaviours**

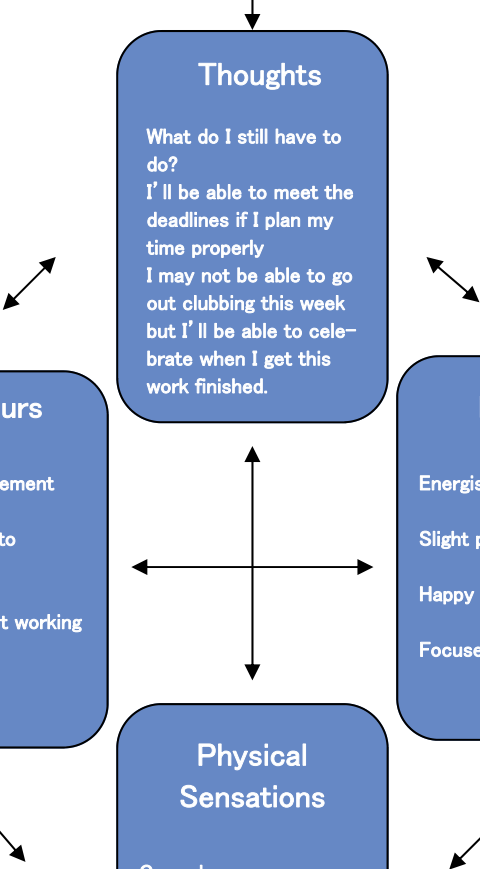
Good time management  
Backing work up  
Breaking work into achievable and manageable goals  
Avoiding late night working  
Sleeping well  
Rewarding self

**Feelings**

Energised  
Slight pressure but ok  
Happy  
Focused

**Physical Sensations**

Geared up  
Alert  
Ready to meet task.





Which scenario seems most familiar to you?

It isn't the essay deadlines that cause the stress, it's more about how we think and feel about those deadlines and what we do or don't do about them which will also cause the physical sensations commonly described as the 'flight or fight' response.

## **Dealing with Your Stress.**

### **What can you do?**

Start to become aware and recognise when you are becoming stressed.

Recall the last time you felt stressed. Give yourself a moment or two to think about or visualise that time.

Below are some of the reactions you might have felt when you recalled the last time you were stressed.

Look at the list and put a tick against the reactions you recognise that affect you. In particular notice which responses you feel first. This will help you to become more aware of when you are becoming stressed.

### **Thoughts**

Daydreaming

Finding it hard to focus & concentrate

Forgetful

Negative

Self critical

Suicidal

Worrying

Ruminating

## **Feelings**

Irritability/ Impatience/ Anger

Depression

Hopelessness

Despair

Fear

Anxiety

Shame

Apathy

## **Behaviours**

Procrastination

Avoidance

Sitting for hours in front of a book or a computer but achieving nothing

Sleeping too much or too little

Eating too much or loss of appetite

Missing lectures

Not seeking help

Drinking too much coffee and or/ alcohol

Using street drugs

Doing anything to avoid doing what you need to do

Withdrawing from others

Stopping doing the things that give you a sense of achievement

Stopping doing things that give you pleasure

Not managing time

## Physical Sensations

Tiredness

Increased heart rate

Flu-like aches and pains

Frequent colds or flu

Dry mouth, clenched jaw, grinding teeth

Problems sleeping

Appetite affected

Headaches/ backaches/ tension in shoulders

Stomach upset

Skin problems

How many effects did you tick?

Now is the time to take stock and think about changes you need to make.

Sometimes when we are stressed we think, 'I have so much to do, I haven't the time to stop and think. I will do it later.'

Later never comes...

It really is important to take time now in order to save time later and to manage time better.

Often a few changes can make quite a difference.

It is important, however, to check that stress is not trying to tell you that there is a difficulty in your life that you are ignoring and for which you need to seek help e.g. an abusive relationship; financial problems; being bullied. Do seek help to deal with these problems or they will keep you stressed, anxious and low in mood.

## **Actions you can take to manage stress:**

Look through the suggestions below and note ones that apply to you. Commit to making the changes you need. Start today.

- Cut down on your alcohol intake. Alcohol exacerbates sleep problems, low mood, anxiety and panic.
- Limit your daily intake of coffee. It is a stimulant which affects the central nervous system. Avoid energy drinks and tablets.
- Do not use street drugs such as cannabis to help you to relax. Street drugs will affect your motivation and may lead to severe mental health problems.
- Manage your time. Prioritise tasks; plan ahead; avoid procrastinating. Don't wait until you feel in the right mood because you never will! Just make a start on whatever you have been avoiding.
- Reward yourself when you have achieved what you set out to do.
- Say 'No' when you need to. Put yourself first. Be assertive. If being assertive is a problem for you read our leaflet on Assertiveness. Sign up for our popular Assertiveness Workshop.
- Develop a routine. No matter how boring this may sound, being organised means being on top of your situation, which in turn will help your mood and your confidence.
- Manage your time. If you struggle with this, a common student problem, make an appointment with Learning Development who will be able to offer help on this and other study skills matters.

- Set aside time to attend to routine things like shopping, cooking, cleaning and laundry.
- Eat healthily. Cut out junk food.
- Exercise is a good way to de-stress. Find a form of exercise that you like and build it into your week. The best and cheapest form of exercise is walking. Build a brisk half hour walk into your daily routine. You will notice the difference to your mood in no time if you make this a habit.
- Practice relaxation exercises or mindfulness. Look at the Student Counselling website to find out more about our Relaxation Workshops. Listen to and, if you wish, download the Relaxation CDs on our website. Relaxation needs practice like any other skill.
- If Mindfulness meditation interests you and you would like to learn more, go to the Student Counselling website for more information.
- If you are a worrier, ask yourself, 'Is there a problem I am avoiding that I can start to do something about today'? If the answer is 'Yes', then start problem solving. If it is something beyond your control then let the worry go. Life is uncertain and worrying about uncertainty won't change anything other than make you feel low, suffer from sleep disturbance and become overwhelmed by anxiety. If worry is an issue for you, then look at the Student Counselling website for further details. If you are having problems sleeping, look at our website for further help.

Note the changes you need to make

Practice any new behaviours regularly and diligently, and your mood will lift, and you will become less anxious and/or irritable. You will also have fewer physical sensations. This cycle of change brought about by a change in your behaviour will start to change the thoughts or images going through your mind. You will become less negative and more realistic, which will again lift your mood.

### **Challenging our thoughts or thinking errors**

We have looked at actions you can choose to take to tackle stress, so now let us think about the type of thinking that we do when we are stressed and how to tackle our thinking errors. Below are some of the negative thinking patterns we get into. Put a tick by those that seem familiar to you.

Do you:

- Use a lot of 'shoulds', 'oughts', and 'musts' which piles on the internal stress
- Jump to conclusions and 'mind read' or 'fortune tell'.
- Dwell on the negatives and dismiss the positives.
- Over-generalise and see everything in catastrophic terms, e.g. 'This is awful' or 'I can't stand it'.
- Blame yourself or label yourself e.g.. 'I'm an idiot' or 'I'm a loser'.
- See everything in all-or-nothing terms, there is no middle way.
- Think that if you feel 'I'm an idiot' then you must be one

Tackle your thinking errors by adopting some of the following strategies:

- Talk to a friend. Check out how they are coping. Are you alone? Are they having similar struggles? Do they think you are an idiot or a failure because you are struggling with an assignment?
- Ask yourself if you would be as harsh a critic of others as you are of yourself?
- When you start being self-critical, ask yourself, 'Where is this thought getting me?'
- Try not to think in absolute all-or-nothing terms, see the subtleties in between. Ask yourself, 'What's the evidence for my view?'
- Be the friend to yourself that you are to others. Don't beat yourself up. Turn down the volume on that critical inner voice.
- Test out your assumptions, e.g. if you think you are the only one who does not like giving presentations do a straw poll amongst your peers. Are you really the only one? It's unlikely...
- Ask yourself what is the worse that could happen?
- Ask yourself if this will still matter to you in a year from now? Put things in perspective.

Old habits don't change overnight. Practice is required and practice makes perfect.

Recognise and reward the progress you make.

Remember – worries, problems don't go away because you try to avoid thinking about them. In fact it gets harder and harder not to think about them...they simply won't go away.

Try this experiment.

Imagine a pink elephant. Can you picture it your mind?



Now, try not to think about that pink elephant for one minute. What happened? Normally people can't last more than a moment or so before they break into laughter as they can't keep the image of the pink elephant out of their mind. So trying not to think about your problem won't help. It just makes matters worse. It is avoidance that keeps people in the grip of stress, anxiety and low mood.

Reading this leaflet is the first step towards taking control of your stress. It may be all that you need to do to help yourself. Some of you, however, may be interested in learning more. If that's you, sign up for one of our popular Managing Your Stress Lectures where you will be given in depth information about the things mentioned in this leaflet. You will be given a Managing Your Stress Handbook and a Relaxation CD. As this is a lecture you won't be asked to talk about yourself and your problems.

If on reading this booklet you think that you would benefit from talking one-to-one with a member of the counselling team, please contact the Counselling Service to make an appointment.



## Further Reading

- Brosan, L. & Todd, G. (2009) *Overcoming Stress: A self-help guide using Cognitive Behavioural Techniques*. London: Constable & Robinson
- Burns, D. D. (1999) *The Feeling Good Handbook*. New York: Plume
- Butler, G. & Hope, T. (2007) *Manage your Mind: The Mental Fitness Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Cooper, C. L., Cooper, R.D. & Eaker, L.H. (1998) *Living with Stress*. London : Penguin
- Cooper, C. & Palmer, S. (2000) *Conquer Your Stress*. London: Institute of Personnel.
- Leahy, R. L. (2006) *The Worry Cure*. London: Piatkus
- Leahy, R. L. (2009) *Anxiety free: Unravel your fears before they unravel you*. London: Hay House
- Palmer, S. & Dryden, W. (1995) *Counselling for Stress Problems*. London: Sage
- Palmer, S. & Strickland, L. (1996) *Stress Management*. Buckinghamshire: Folens
- Powell, T. (2000) *The Mental Health Handbook* Milton Keynes: Speechmark

[www.livinglifetothefull.com](http://www.livinglifetothefull.com) is a very useful, free and confidential self-help web site.

If you would like further help with Stress or any other problem, please go to the Student Counselling website at [www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/counselling) for details about all the services we offer.

**This booklet was produced by the  
University of Plymouth Counselling Service.  
August 2010**