

stress

A Short Guide for Students



The University of Edinburgh
Student Counselling Service

Stress –

A short guide for students

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1. Introduction

We have created this brief guide to stress, what it is and what to do about it when it gets too much so that you can get some idea of how to manage stress in your own life.

Stress is something that we all experience. It is something that we all need – the right amount of it is what helps us achieve the things we want. It keeps us engaged with our busy lives and allows us to fulfil whatever aims we have for ourselves. Sometimes – quite often in fact – we get the balance of challenge and wellbeing wrong ... if we are facing too much challenge our stress levels can rise to a point where they begin to have negative effects on our performance and on how we feel. If this becomes a prolonged situation then stress can have ongoing negative effects on our health and wellbeing.

Coming to university can be one of the most exciting, stimulating and potentially most stressful times that you will have encountered so far. There are many new situations to explore, many new things to learn to manage and all whilst you are studying and working hard. This isn't a comprehensive guide and will not tell you all there is to know about stress, but we hope it will give you some ideas about recognising when your stress levels are too high, and help you do something about it.



2. Becoming aware

The causes of stress

As a student you will inevitably have to deal with and juggle a variety of new situations. Adapting to life at university can mean learning to cope with social and academic demands, dealing with financial issues and perhaps working part time, managing examinations and deadlines, as well as having your own personal issues.

Everyone feels stress at different times in their lives. It is a normal human response to stimulus of all kinds and can be caused by positive life events as well as more difficult events. Starting university, a new relationship, moving into a new flat or even having a holiday can be surprisingly stressful as we expect ourselves to manage and enjoy positive events.

Effects of prolonged stress

To ignore stress increases the possibility of longer term health problems. Stomach problems and greater susceptibility to infections and viruses are some possible results of persistent and prolonged stress. In the short term stress can make you feel irritable, tense and low, affecting your relationships. This is why it is essential not to delay but to take action now.

Recognising stress

The first step in dealing with stress is learning to recognise your own personal signs and symptoms. You can then take steps to deal with whatever is causing the problem. **These early warning signals are an indication that some sort of change is needed.** Each person's pattern of response to stress is unique but some common signs of stress are:

Body

- Headache from muscle tension
- Back pain
- Digestive disturbances
- Difficulty getting to sleep or early morning waking
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Skin rashes
- Tiredness

Behaviour

- Withdrawal
- Hostility
- Eating disturbances
- Increased drinking or smoking
- Risk taking

Emotions

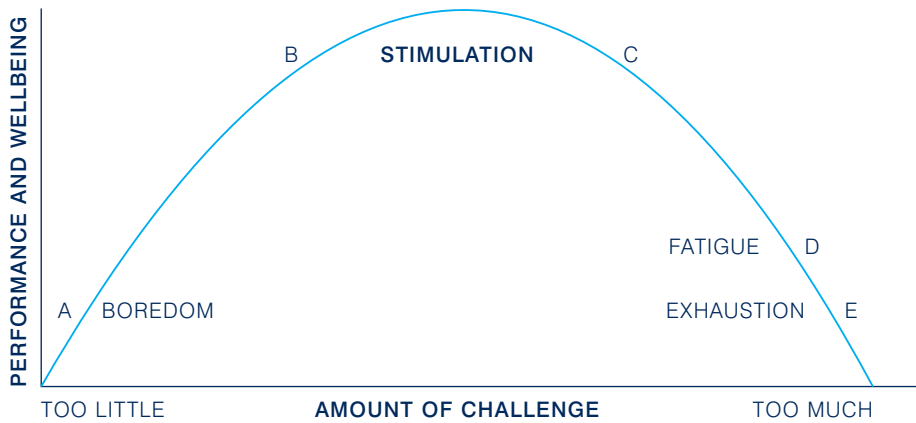
- Feeling overloaded or overwhelmed
- Anxiety
- Depression; apathy
- Negativity
- Lowered self esteem
- Feeling worthless
- Frustration
- Increased irritability

Thinking

- Rigidity
- Memory lapses
- Loss of concentration
- Inability to set priorities
- Impaired decision making

The following diagram illustrates how too little stress (A) can be just as much of a problem as too much stress (D). Too little stimulus can cause boredom and isolation. Too much can lead to exhaustion. The optimum level of challenge (B–C) is where you have a good level of stimulus but not too much.

The human function curve



3. What you can do

Constructive ways of managing stress

Sometimes stress can be the result of a situation that can be dealt with quite quickly. For example, a difficult work issue might be resolved by taking positive action; a relationship problem could be helped by talking to the other person. However stress can be caused by something ongoing or something that can't be changed (eg an assignment deadline, a relationship break up). Many people are tempted to use unhelpful ways to deal with their stress symptoms such as drinking alcohol, overeating, use of drugs, smoking (these will all change your mood not your problem) or even denying the problem.

Essentially, managing stress is about looking after yourself. There are a variety of strategies you can use that include:

- taking some regular exercise;
- learning relaxation techniques (see pages 10, 11 and 12) or practising slow breathing (see page 7);
- doing one thing at a time; looking at your time management;
- knowing your own limits, not being too competitive or having too high expectations of yourself;
- allowing yourself to say 'No';
- talking to someone;
- doing things you enjoy and having some fun;
- spending time with people who are positive rather than critical or judgemental;
- accepting offers of practical help;
- having massage or aromatherapy;
- doing something creative such as playing a musical instrument or painting, sketching, etc;
- reminding yourself that you have coped in difficult situations before; and
- giving yourself credit for what you have done.

Calming breath – a way of practising slow breathing

In a calm, relaxed state, breathing is easy and regular and movement comes mainly in the lower ribs. Under stress, breathing patterns often become disrupted. You may find that you hold your breath or that your breathing becomes rapid and irregular, with movement mainly in the top chest. This can cause changes in body chemistry such as an imbalance in levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide. In turn, this leads to further physical discomfort and feelings of increased tension and anxiety.

- By paying attention to breathing, you can interrupt this vicious circle and reduce unhelpful tension.
- Sit well supported on the chair, with your feet on the ground.
- Begin by noticing your breathing – where the breath goes in your body, the length of the inhalation and exhalation.
- Now pay particular attention to the exhalation and allow plenty of time.
- Let the inhalation be gentle and shorter than the exhalation. Allow your lower ribs to move out as you breathe in.
- As you exhale, let your shoulders drop.
- You may find it helpful to say to yourself the word 'Calm', repeating it inwardly with each exhalation.
- Enjoy a few minutes of this calming, steadying breath.

Taking care of yourself

We all have both physical and emotional needs and it is helpful to spend time identifying what these are. If you are consistently not getting what you need then you may end up feeling personally depleted, your mood low, and under some stress. If you are aware of your own physical and emotional needs you have a better chance of ensuring that they are met. We all have some pretty basic needs – sleep, nutrition, exercise, shelter – as well as other needs like social contact, time alone, relaxation and excitement. Your needs will be different from other people's and it is important to recognise this. Some people need a certain amount of solitude and quiet and some need much more activity and bustle. It isn't just about knowing your needs and making sure they are met, it is also important to be aware that we all have to make choices, and that we all have our limits beyond which we are bound to feel overstretched. We sometimes have conflicting needs – for example your desire for an exciting life may well conflict with your need to achieve academically. The important thing is to try to have a balance that suits you.

Being aware

Another useful thing to do is to be aware when your stress occurs: the time of day, type of situation, how you are feeling, how you managed and how you felt afterwards. This can give you an accurate picture of when and where you are most likely to get stressed and help you to find what helps you to manage it.

Positive thinking

During stressful times you can often actually increase your anxiety by the things you tell yourself. This can drag you into a vicious circle of increasing stress and anxiety. You may recognise some of the following or have others of your own to add.

- It will be catastrophic if I don't do very well in all my subjects.
- Everyone else seems to have settled in well while I am struggling.
- I should be out every night.
- I am the only one who is finding it hard to make friends.
- It's all too late, there's nothing I can do about it now.

You can support yourself by thinking in a different way and reminding yourself of your strengths.

- I have always managed to make friends before.
- I'm not alone in finding everything new and frightening.
- I've succeeded in exams in the past.
- There are practical ways I can cope with anxiety.
- I'll do better if I can calm down and take things a step at a time.
- There are people I can turn to for advice and support.

The following exercise – a way of reducing tension – can also be used as a way of short circuiting negative disabling thoughts.

Stop!

Feelings of stress are often reflected by increased muscular tension, eg in the face, shoulders and hands. By deliberately relaxing muscles, it is possible to halt and reverse this process of increasing tension and stress. The Stop! technique is a quick and effective way of doing so. Its aim is not to achieve complete relaxation, but to reduce unhelpful tension to a manageable level. The technique takes less than a minute and can usually be done without other people noticing.

- Say **Stop!** to yourself (out loud if the situation permits).
- Breathe in gently.
- Breathe out slowly, relaxing **shoulders, arms and hands**.
- Pause.
- Breathe in again.

- Breathe out slowly, relaxing **forehead and jaw**.
- Stay quiet for a few seconds.
- Carry on with whatever you were doing, deliberately moving more slowly. If you have to talk, speak a little more slowly and with your voice a little lower than usual.

You will find that, in spite of your feelings, the tension will lessen.

Physical exercise

Taking regular exercise such as playing sport or dancing, doing yoga or Tai Chi are all ways of keeping healthy. They increase your sense of wellbeing and reduce tension. Research into the effects of physical activity has shown that regular activity will help towards reducing depression.

Under our **Exercise Can Help Scheme**, you can speak to **June Adamson** at the Pleasance Sports Centre (contact details in the Resources section on page 14). She will arrange an assessment interview and discuss with you what activities are best suited to your particular needs. See our website for more details about the Scheme. Alternatively you could try one of the many University societies such as modern dance, hill walking, hockey etc, all of which could be effective ways for you to de-stress.

Relaxation and breathing techniques

The value of learning relaxation exercises is that they will produce in your body a physical state that is very different to the tension you feel when you are under stress.

It is useful to have a variety of relaxation techniques of differing lengths of time for different situations. It is important to remember that all of these exercises, particularly the longer ones, take practise in order to become effective. As with anything else suggested, if these exercises do not suit you do not continue with them. The Student Counselling Service periodically runs **Relaxation Workshops** called '**Out of Your Head**' where you could experience some of these exercises (see our website for more details).

Progressive muscular relaxation

Like any other skill, learning to relax takes practise.

Choose a time and a place where you won't be disturbed. Make sure that the room is warm, and loosen any tight clothing. You may like to cover yourself with a blanket. Lie down on your back on the floor or a firm surface, supporting your head with a pillow, if you wish. (You may prefer sometimes to practise relaxation lying on your side, or sitting in a chair.)

Be aware of the sounds that you can hear from outside the room, then sounds from inside the room. Now be aware of the sounds inside your own body – breathing, heartbeat etc.

Now begin to work round the different muscle groups of your body, tightening and releasing. Tighten enough to feel the difference between tension and relaxation, but not so that you cause cramp.

Right foot	Clench your toes. Let go.
Right leg	Pull your toes towards your face. Let go. Raise your leg keeping your knee straight. Let go.
Left foot	Clench your toes. Let go.
Left leg	Pull your toes towards your face. Let go. Raise your leg keeping our knee straight. Let go.
Pelvis	Tighten your abdomen (as if someone is about to punch you) and clench your buttock muscles. Let go.
Shoulders, back and chest	Pull your shoulder blades together. Let go.
Right hand	Make a fist. Let go.
Right arm	Press your elbow into the floor. Let go.
Left hand	Make a fist. Let go.
Left arm	Press your elbow into the floor. Let go.
Shoulders	Pull your shoulders up towards your ears. Let go.
Back of the neck	Press your head into the floor. Let go.
Face	Raise your eyebrows. Let go. Clench your jaw. Let go.

Be aware of your breathing, without trying to alter it. Just feel the breath entering and leaving your body. Feel how heavy and soft and relaxed your body is. After a few minutes, turn over onto your side and slowly get up.

Image work – the shop of colours

- Lie or sit comfortably. Allow your eyes to close. Notice any sounds that you can hear from outside the room, and sounds inside the room. Scan through your body, noticing any areas of tension or discomfort. Breathe gently, and with each exhalation, feel yourself letting go of tension. Just let it drain out of you, into the ground.
- As with all relaxation exercises, don't push yourself to do anything that feels uncomfortable for you. Trust your own wisdom.
- Let your eyelids feel heavy, and imagine that you are looking at a piece of black velvet.
- Using your inner eye, imagine that you are standing outside a shop, a special shop where you can get all the colours of the rainbow. You don't have to pay for anything you get there. For some people inner pictures will be very vivid, for others, less so. That doesn't matter. There's no right or wrong way of doing the exercise.
- Go into the shop and notice all the colours surrounding you. You may see the colours vividly, or you may notice feelings that you associate with the different colours ... red ... orange ... yellow ... green ... blue ... indigo ... violet.
- Now allow a colour to choose you. Whichever colour comes first is the right one for you just now. Each colour has its own healing, nurturing qualities.
- Imagine yourself breathing your colour, so that it circulates through your body, feeding every cell. Imagine yourself surrounded and bathed by your colour, by its healing energy.
- When you are ready, leave the shop, knowing you are taking your colour with you.
- When you return to an alert state, you may be particularly aware of colour in the environment.
- Become aware of your body supported by the chair or the floor. Take a couple of deeper breaths, feeling the breath energising you. Notice sounds from inside and outside the room. You may picture the room and other people in your mind's eyes. Begin to gently move and stretch, and when you feel ready, open your eyes.

Special place

- Settle yourself comfortably in a chair. Notice any sounds that you can hear round about you, and then take your attention inwards to your self. Feel the support of the chair and the floor. Breathe easily and gently. Scan through your body, noticing and releasing any areas of tension. With each breath, allow yourself to relax a bit more.
- Imagine yourself in your own special place, a place that is healing and nourishing for you. This may be a place that you remember, or a place that you create for yourself. It may be out of doors or indoors.
- Notice any sounds that you can hear round about you. Notice what you can see, different colours and shapes, light and shade. Notice any smells and tastes. Feel the different textures, notice how warm or cool things are. You may be sitting quietly in your special place, or you may be moving about.
- You know that this is a good place for you, where you feel safe and comfortable. Enjoy the feelings of safety and comfort.
- When you are ready, gently begin to prepare yourself to leave your special place. You know that you can return whenever you wish.
- Notice your breathing, and begin to pay more attention to the in breath, taking in energy to help your return to a more alert state. Feel your body in contact with the chair and feel your feet on the floor. Notice sounds round about you. Begin to move and stretch. Have a look round about you. Sit quietly for a few minutes before you get up.



4. Further action

Contacting your doctor

Sometimes if your stress levels are particularly high or go on for a long time you will need to contact your doctor. In fact, if you are in any way concerned about stress symptoms it is a good idea to get them checked out. It is possible that your doctor might offer medication. This could be a good short term measure but may not offer effective long term relief. The best way of achieving this is to be as aware as possible of your stress levels and take positive action to deal with them.

Contacting the Counselling Service

There may be some situations where you decide that the best way of dealing with how you feel is to approach the Counselling Service. In an initial interview you can discuss with a counsellor what would be the most helpful way forward for you. This might include short term counselling. (For contact details see the Student Counselling website.)

Doing something different

An alternative way of trying to de-stress might be to do something different. This could be – for example – to walk the Labyrinth in the corner of George Square Gardens. This is a path for contemplation and allows you time for reflection. If trying this alone seems a daunting prospect you could look on either the Chaplaincy or the Counselling website and sign up for a **Labyrinth Workshop**.

How about ‘messaging’ about with paint and pastels in a relaxed atmosphere? The **Art Workshop** run by the Student Counselling Service (see the website for details) offers space and materials for you to do just this. You don’t have to be able to paint or draw – the point is to just enjoy the experience of expressing yourself in a different way.

If procrastination adds to your stress you could attend a **Procrastination Workshop**. This focuses on the fact that procrastination is a habit that can be broken. See the Counselling or Teaching Learning and Assessment websites for details.

5. Conclusion

We hope that this brief guide to stress has given you some clues about how to manage the inevitable stresses of university life. We also hope that it has provided you with a sense of where and when stress is likely to occur as well as helping you recognise the personal signs and symptoms that tell you that it’s time to take stock ...

Whatever you decide to do to help your stress levels, making time for yourself or trying something different could be both a positive experience and a way of relaxing. There are many healthy ways of dealing with the effects of stress, and positive ways to comfort and sustain yourself during times of unavoidable stress. This booklet contains just a few of those and – we hope – some pointers to help you develop your own strategies.

6. Resources

Wellbeing

Salisbury Centre

2 Salisbury Road EH16 5AB
Tel: 0131 667 5438
www.salisburycentre.org

Chill Out Society

www.chillout.org.uk

Sport and exercise

The Centre for Sports & Exercise

46 Pleasance EH8 9JT
Tel: 0131 650 2585
Email: June.Adamson@ed.ac.uk

Dance Base

14–16 Grassmarket
Tel: 0131 225 5525
email: dance@dancebase.co.uk

Your comments

We would be glad to hear from you if you have any feedback about this booklet as it helps us to make improvements when we come to reprint. If you have any comments to make please contact us at the Student Counselling Service.

Welfare and Information

EUSA

Main office – Potterrow
5/2 Bristo Square EH8 9AL
Tel: 0131 650 2656
Email: enquiry@eusa.ed.ac.uk
www.eusa.ed.ac.uk

The University Health Centre

Richard Verney Health Centre
6 Bristo Square EH8 9AL
Tel: 0131 650 2777
Email: Health.Service@ed.ac.uk
www.health-service.ed.ac.uk

Chaplaincy

Tel: 0131 650 2595
Email: chaplaincy@ed.ac.uk
www.chaplaincy.ed.ac.uk

Student Counselling Service

31 Buccleuch Place EH8 9JS
Tel: 0131 650 4170
Email: Student-Counselling@ed.ac.uk
www.student-counselling.ed.ac.uk

Students Against Depression

www.studentdepression.org

Nightline

Tel: 0131 557 4444
Open: 6pm–8am

Acknowledgements

Centre for Teaching Learning and Assessment
stress and relaxation course for students

BBC Health Website on Stress

8. Notes to accompany the relaxation CD

The CD contains three relaxation exercises:

1. Progressive muscular relaxation
2. Centering
3. The Stop! technique

These notes are intended to help you get maximum benefit from using the CD.

1. You will probably find the CD most effective if you familiarise yourself with each exercise in turn. One exercise is usually enough for a relaxation session.
2. You are learning a new skill, and like any skill it takes time and practise to gain the full benefit.
3. Set aside sufficient time for your practice and make sure that you won't be disturbed.
4. Choose a quiet comfortable room where you can lie on the bed or the floor or sit in a chair. Make sure that the room is warm enough and dim the light.
5. Wear loose clothing and take off your shoes. Take out contact lenses when you are practising progressive muscular relaxation (your eyes may be closed for about 20 minutes).
6. It is suggested you lie on your back for learning progressive muscular relaxation but it can also be done sitting in a chair. When lying down, experiment with different positions and discover how you are most comfortable, eg lying on your back, or your side. If you have pain in your lower back, you may prefer to lie with knees bent, feet flat on the floor. If you need to change your position during an exercise, just do so. Make sure you have whatever support you need, eg a pillow under your head. You might also like to cover yourself with a blanket.
7. When asked to tense a muscle group, don't overstrain. If you have an injury, miss out the relevant section of the exercise. As you become familiar with progressive muscular relaxation, you will find that a very small amount of tension will be sufficient.
8. You may experience unusual sensations – floating, muscle twitching etc. These will become less noticeable with practise. If you become uncomfortable or anxious when using the CD, don't push yourself to continue. Just switch off the CD and sit or lie quietly for a little while.
9. If your mind wanders during an exercise, don't worry. Just gently bring your attention back to the CD.
10. Never use the CD when driving.

Large print version available