

FAST FACTS**Stress**

Stress is an adaptive mechanism through which the body attempts to protect itself in threatening situations. A certain amount of stress is necessary in daily life; in fact, you must experience some minor degree of stress just to get going in the morning. Some studies suggest that up to a point stress can improve performance, and so is actually a good thing. Beyond that point, however, stress only makes things worse.

It's Monday morning and you've been up all night studying for a physics exam you have later this afternoon. Your eyes are having trouble focusing and there's an odd buzzing in your ears. As you pour what must be your hundredth cup of coffee, your roommate bursts into the room, ecstatic over the new heavy metal CD he's just bought. Despite your protestations, he jams it into his billion-watt stereo and cranks the volume. The noise is so loud you can actually see waveforms resonating in your coffee. Any fragment of concentration you may have had is instantly gone.

You toss your notes into your bag and storm off to the library. As you pass Entropy along the way, you suddenly realize how incredibly hungry you are. When was the last time you ate, anyway? Hard to remember; sometime over the weekend, not counting the HoHo you had for breakfast this morning. A Carnegie Club sure sounds good about now. But when you turn your pockets inside out the only thing to emerge is an old gum wrapper. Flat broke. Lunch will have to wait.

Three o'clock. The physics exam is history. You *think* you did okay; you're so tired that everything is starting to blur together. It was admittedly difficult trying to concentrate with your stomach growling through most of the exam. It's good that you can relax, now, and grab a bite to—wait a minute! How could you forget? You've got an oral presentation in English class this afternoon! Holy smokes. Talk about lack of preparation—you're not even sure what the topic is supposed to be. Well, you've got an hour and a half to come up with something.

The Effects of Stress

It's no secret that life at competitive institutions like Carnegie Mellon can be very stressful. Rigorous coursework and hypercongested schedules coupled with fears of failure cause all students to feel stressed at some point in their college careers. Pessimistic thoughts and unhappy feelings can also generate stress and contribute to its symptoms.

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We're all familiar with the symptoms of stress: shortness of breath, upset stomach, heart palpitations and other physical responses. Happily, these symptoms usually go away when the cause of the stress is removed. When stress continues over a longer period of time, however, chronic effects may result: restlessness, sleeplessness, recurrent headaches, lack of concentration, depression, anxiety and a host of other problems that Carnegie Mellon students know only too well.

Understanding the causes of stress can help you thwart its symptoms. It's therefore important for you to learn what your individual "stressors" are. The usual concerns that affect each of us—about school, money, housing, the future, life transitions and so forth—affect each of us differently and to different degrees. Learning to recognize your specific sources of stress can help you devise ways to cope with its effects.

Students sometimes unconsciously attempt to deal with stress in ways that are ultimately self-defeating. Putting off work that needs to be done—i.e., procrastinating—is one example. Negative avoidance mechanisms such as this often create vicious cycles that are difficult to break. The trick is to fight stress with *positive* techniques.

Combating Stress

So what can you do when you're feeling totally stressed out?

The secret of reducing stress is *gaining control*. The more in control you are of a situation, the less likely you are to find it stressful. You can acquire better control of your life in many small but significant ways:

- Before registering for a class that may turn out to be a killer, for instance, talk with someone who's already been through it so that you'll better know what to expect.
- Maybe you're finding yourself lost in a particular class. Ask the instructor for detailed feedback on your performance so that you can get a better idea of the problems you need to address and how best to tackle them.
- Tensions in personal relationships can sometimes be reduced through simple discussion. Politely asking your roommate to turn down loud music, for example, may help make a bad situation better.
- And if you find school to be a generally exasperating and anxiety-inducing place, you may be able to gain better control by *getting involved*—taking part in forums and seminars and in student groups such as the Student Senate.

Stress Management Methods

Here are a few specific techniques you should try whenever you're feeling particularly stressed:

Calm down

The best way to manage stress is to replace it with something that's incompatible with it. Rent a video, take a walk through the park, repot a plant that needs to be transplanted. Listening to soothing music is always a calming experience. Many books and other materials are available that instruct you on meditation, progressive relaxation and other anti-stress techniques; locate these

materials and learn from them.

Think positively

You'd be surprised at how much influence thinking has over one's life. We often undermine ourselves with negative thoughts. A positive attitude dramatically improves all aspects of your life.

Talk things over

Sharing your feelings with friends and fellow students can help dramatically. You may be surprised and relieved to find that others are feeling pressures similar to yours.

Sleep well

Try to get at least six hours of sleep each night. You'll be at your best both mentally and physically when you're well-rested.

Eat right

Try to follow a balanced diet. Limiting your intake of alcohol and caffeine will help you maintain a more relaxed mental state.

Exercise

Even regular short walks can be enormously beneficial to your mental outlook.

Set attainable goals and reach them

Control your environment rather than be controlled by it. Checking off items on a to-do list can be a boost to your well-being.

Enjoy life

What are you working so hard for, if not to better enjoy life? Strive for balance between work and relaxation. Though of course you must set limits to your recreational activities, remember to spend time with your family and friends.

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For More Help

If you find that the causes of your stress aren't easily identifiable and simple coping strategies just don't seem to work, a consultation with a counselor in the Counseling and Psychological Services Center may help. It's easy to arrange an appointment; simply dial extension x8-2922.