

End of Semester Tune-Up

Staying on Top of Stress

Bishop's University Counselling and Employment Centre

It's about that time of year again when stress seems to be catching up with everyone. A little stress is good for almost everyone, it keeps you motivated and challenged. However, if you feel you're in over your head, if there are too many papers, too many exams, etc...it is time to act

-Ask yourself these questions:

-Have you noticed any changes in your appetite or sleeping patterns?

-Are you drinking or smoking more?

- Does it seem like you fly off the handle for almost no reason?

- Have you experienced physical symptoms such as skin outbreaks, recurring colds, excessive perspiration, and heart palpitations? If so, you maybe over-stressed.

The following hand-out contains a few helpful tips for managing stress. Effective time-management, positive belief systems, healthy eating, and exercise, as well as relaxation techniques can all contribute to a balanced, healthy approach to the more challenging times in our lives.

Staying on Top of Stress: Time-Management

Learning how to juggle your time is a skill which can help you throughout life. Is it as easy as carrying an agenda? Only if you put it to use.

Here are some tips for effectively managing your time:

-The final exams are fast approaching. Time is FINITE. Do therefore spend some time over the next few days devising a strategic plan as to how best to use the time you do have.

-Make a list of all papers, assignments, final exams, etc... you still have to complete.

-Taking into account the mark value of each, the time required (to complete the paper, exam, etc...) and the importance of the course to you, establish a **priority list**, and **let your time plan reflect this.**

-Mark in important dates, events, and assignments into your agenda.

-Next, break down each task into sub tasks & schedule these into your planner.

-Block in regular study periods.

-Set specific goals for each study period.

-Be aware of blocks of time during the day when your concentration is at its best; reserve these times for the most difficult or boring work.

-Study or work on difficult or boring material before you do your more interesting or easier work.

-Use a regular study area that works for you - one that makes it easier for you to stay on task and

not be tempted by whatever you find distracting.

***NB.** While there is much to do academically over the next few weeks and the time is short it is important that you **pace** yourself - this is still a marathon not a sprint race.

-This means that you must not only schedule in study work time, you also need to include:

- 1) Down time; relaxation time, time when you do quiet, relaxing things you enjoy, not things you “have to do”.
- 2) Recreation time; re-energizing time, when you do more active, physical things that you enjoy and that give you an energy boost.
- 3) Socializing time; it is important that you spend time on a regular basis connecting with others in ways that are meaningful to you.

To help you get started on learning how to best manage your time, a blank, one-week planner is included at the end of this handout. You will notice that in addition to a “To Do” area, there are 2 columns for each day, one for your planned activities, and one to indicate how you actually spent your day. Comparing these will help you determine ways of improving your management of time.

Staying on Top of Stress: Turning Negative Thoughts into Motivating Thoughts

Stress can sometimes be caused or worsened due to rigidly held beliefs that many of us have. **Three common and perhaps maladaptive beliefs are: “I must be perfect”, “Everyone must like me”, and “I should always be in control”.** These types of beliefs are related to black & white thinking where there’s no room to err or to be human.

The alternative is to try for a more flexible and balanced way of thinking. Ask yourself if there is a more positive way of looking at things. What is the evidence that your thought is true? That it is untrue? What would you tell a friend who thought the same thing? What is the most likely outcome of this first thought being true? Could you handle that? Asking yourself questions like these can help you to see things in a more realistic and positive way.

Here are some examples of stress-causing thoughts as well as their more positive, realistic counter thoughts.

Stressful: I’ll never be able to finish this paper”

Motivating: If I take one small piece at a time, I’ll be able to finish it. I’ve been in this situation before.

Stressful: Sarah didn’t say hi to me at the library last night, she must be avoiding me.”

Motivating: Sarah could be pretty busy right now; she had a whole bunch of books and paper on her table. I’ll ask her about it later.

Stressful: If I don’t get an 85% on this mid-term, I won’t be able to maintain my target average. I’ll be a failure.

Motivating: One low grade on a mid-term won't ruin my life. I can get a tutor if I need a little help.

Attempting to look at your negative thoughts in a more realistic way will help you to feel better, avoid over-stress, and solve the real problem.

Staying on Top of Stress: Healthy Eating

A healthy diet is important, especially when you are under stress. When people are under emotional stress, they often forget the physiological burden their bodies have to bear. During the fight or flight reaction, stress hormones released into the system slow down the absorption of nutrients. It is at this time that your need for nutrients actually increases, especially calcium and vitamin B. Lack of such vitamins can leave you feeling tired, anxious, and irritable.

The keys to healthy eating are, again, variety and balance. The latest research leans towards suggesting a "grazing" approach, where 4-6 small meals are eaten throughout the day. This gives the body constant fuel and lessens the chance that we'll be starving by the next meal, which is when we're tempted by junk food.

Here are some quick tips for healthy eating:

1. **Eat a variety of foods** from the four food groups (Fruits and vegetables, grain products, dairy products, and meat/poultry/fish)
2. **Avoid excessive alcohol and caffeine intake.** These products can have adverse effects on your body. It may be difficult to eliminate them from your diet, but aim for moderation and reduction where possible.
3. **Don't binge when hungry, grab vegetables** until you can prepare your next meal.
4. **Start your day with a healthy breakfast** and avoid fast food meals where possible.
5. Don't pressure yourself to prepare a gourmet meal from scratch. **Take advantage of healthy pre-prepared meals,** make quick nutritious salads.

You may decide to make one or two changes to your diet, which is a good way to start. It's a lot less stressful than trying to change everything at once! **Again, key concepts to remember are variety and balance.**

Staying on Top of Stress: Exercise

You may have heard that exercising stimulates chemicals and neurotransmitters that are believed to mediate moods and feelings. Did you know that one exercise session can generate 90 - 120 minutes of an endorphin response or post-exercise euphoria? Exercise is good for many reasons. One of these is that it gives us an outlet for the hormones released during the fight or flight response (our body's stress reaction). Self-esteem is also raised when we're physically active, and this, combined with a healthier body makes us more resistant to stress.

Here are a few tips for exercising:

1. **Start slowly** and set small goals for yourself.
2. **Try to balance your program** with varying activities.
 - Aerobic exercise strengthens your heart and cardiovascular system, so choose activities like running, cycling, racquet sports, aerobics, etc...
 - Muscle-strengthening exercises like a weight-training will build stronger muscles and contribute to a feeling of power and personal control.
 - Stretching will allow you to be more flexible and can prevent injury so don't overlook this important aspect of exercising both before and after any session.
3. **Choose exercises that you will do** and that benefit your lifestyle. For instance, if you spend a lot of time alone during the day, why not choose a sport or exercise area that involves interaction with others?
4. **Have a variety of activities to choose from** in case you can't do one on a given day for some reason.

Again, start slowly, and pay attention to the many benefits that regular exercise can bring you!

Staying on Top of Stress: Relaxation Techniques

Okay, so you can't always fly away to Mexico or the Dominican Republic when you need to relax. Why not bring a little of that state of well-being to where you are through relaxation and imagery exercises? Having a relaxed state of being can help you sleep better, and to see problems more realistically. It can help you to perform better on tests, and take the edge out of potential conflict situations.

The basics of relaxation involve being comfortable, using your imagination, and relaxing your muscles as well as your breathing. You may want to start by lying down if possible, or getting comfortable in your seat. Aim to enjoy the process but don't force it. You might buy one of those Nature Escapes cd's to enhance the experience.

Here are more basics:

1. **Start by enjoying your breathing.** Let your stomach out as you are breathing in. Aim for

smooth, regular breaths. Picture waves rolling in on the beach. Exhale the tension and picture it leaving your body as steam or smoke.

2. **Allow your muscles to relax.** Be aware of the tension and let it go. You may try contracting various muscles for several seconds, and then releasing. Move from one body part or muscle group to another, from head to toe.

3. **Picture lying on the beach** or any other scene that is appealing to you. Use all your senses to make the scene more real. What do you smell? How do your bare feet feel on the ground/sand/grass? What sounds do you hear? Let your worries float across your view like clouds and out of your sight.

You may have to practice several times like this before achieving the desired state, but do try it as an experiment. 10 - 20 minutes sessions can do wonders for a tense body and mind.

If you are interested in reading about stress-prevention or any of the concepts in this newsletter, below is a list of some of the books available in the Counselling & Employment Centre. They can be lent out for a week at a time and are renewable. Also, if you would like to speak to a counsellor about stress-management or other concerns, visit the office in Marjorie Donald Building, Room #214. You may also call 819-822-9695.

1) **When Perfect Isn't Good Enough; Strategies for Coping with Perfection**

by Martin M. Antony and Richard Swinson

2) **The Relaxation Response**

by Herbert Benson

3) **Smart Guide to relieving Stress**

by Carole Bodger

4) **Feeling Good**

by David Burns

5) **The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook**

by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, and Matthew McKay

6) **Mind Over Mood**

by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky

7) **Eating Smart**

by Jeanne Jones

8) **Stressed Out: Taking Control of Student Stress**

by David Rainham