



# I FEEL STRESSED!

*Some ideas on how to feel and perform  
better under pressure*

## **What's going on? Why am I feeling this way?**

We often talk and read about stress and its bad effects - 'stress' has been shown to contribute to headaches, stomach aches, insomnia, and other health problems. Feeling really stressed also makes it hard to concentrate, solve problems or study effectively--so it's really not a great state to be in!

However, stress isn't all bad. It can come from excitement, challenge and change, as well as worries and problems, and can really give us a kick-start to get going and perform well. It's really a question of balance.

Here's how it works: As human beings, we respond to any demand for action or change with an automatic set of changes called the stress response. The stress response is a survival mechanism, a total response getting us ready for fast, physical action. Imagine you are crossing a street and you see a car bearing down on you. As soon as you recognise the danger, there is a sudden surge of adrenalin and noradrenalin into your blood stream and in an instant your body is ready for action. Your heart rate increases, body temperature rises, oxygen consumption increases; glucose is released for quick energy; pupils dilate; blood pressure goes up, breathing is faster, perspiration increases, muscles tighten. When the danger is past, everything settles down again.

Great - but think about what happens if that stress response is switched on very intensely, or for long periods. For one thing, it's very good for fast, physical response - but not so good for learning, clear thinking or memory. So we can try harder and harder to study, but achieve less and less. Also, it's a major strain on the system to be in 'overdrive' all the time, and after a while we'll begin to show signs of that strain. And it can be very hard to switch off, because we can switch the stress response on just by thinking about the worries or all the demands on us.

So if life is particularly difficult, if there are major problems or even too many minor ones that go on for too long, we can get into trouble. We can end up feeling terrible and also realise that we aren't performing as well - there may be problems in exams, or at work, or in relationships. If things are really bad, we can feel out of control or start getting really depressed.

## **What can I do about it? I can't change the world!**

There are changes we can make that really do help.

### **Recognise your own 'stress signals'**

Watch out for your own early signs of excess stress. These could be:

- **Physical:** No energy; can't sleep; too many aches and pains; getting sick all the time; headaches; stomach aches; skin rashes
- **Emotional:** Irritable; easily upset; worried all the time
- **Cognitive:** Can't switch off; study more but remember less; make more mistakes; forget things
- **Behavioural:** 'Comforting' yourself in ways that aren't really helping - more coffee, alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, etc.

### **Stop and think about it. Can you change anything?**

Take stock of what's stressing you. Can you change any of the stresses, in any way? Have you said 'yes' to too much? Can you cut your hours at work, even temporarily? Do you really need to apply for an extension? Be creative - sometimes even relatively small changes can really lighten the load. If some problems are really worrying you - get help.

### **Can you change any of your reactions to the stresses?**

Sometimes we actually add to the stress in our lives by the way we think and react. We can be too conscientious - insisting that we do everything very well, even when that's impossible. Or we can go the other way - "If I don't think about it, it will go away..." Unfortunately, that doesn't often work. Again, stop and think about it, and be creative. Talking to someone can often help. It may be a friend, or someone in the family, or a counsellor.

### **Improve your own 'fitness' for coping with stress**

Remember, it's a question of balance - between the demands on us and the resources we have to deal with them. A balanced life really increases our resources. So -

- Get enough sleep - see a doctor or counsellor if necessary
- Eat well enough for good nutrition - and watch the excess coffee, etc.
- Get some exercise frequently. It releases a lot of the built-up tension and lifts the spirits, too.
- De-stress with things that you know help you relax - Music? Time with friends?
- Learn a relaxation exercise, or meditation, to allow mind and body to rest and
- restore themselves. This can take a little practise, but can really make a difference.

### **I've tried everything...**

Sometimes the pressures are such that it's really hard and maybe not very productive to keep on trying to do it alone. Friends may not have the answers, or the problems may be really private ones - or it's all getting too hard and you can't see a way through. If you are beginning to feel like this - DO GET HELP. The counsellors are available to talk with you confidentially about the problems, and help you find some answers - they can also help with any academic problems that may have developed.

Counselling Support is available to assist students with personal difficulties that are affecting their study.

The service provides:

- Individual Counselling by appointment
- Telephone Counselling by appointment
- Mental health emergency response

**Counselling Support**

**Ground Floor, Horace Lamb Building**

**The University of Adelaide**

**Ph: +61 8 8313 5663**

**After hours support: 1300 167 654 or sms 0488 884 197**

This pamphlet was written by Flinders University Health and Counselling Services and has been reprinted as part of a collaborative project between the counselling services at Flinders and Adelaide University. Modified by Student Life Counselling Support.

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