

Stress-busting – tips to help you succeed

A self-help guide from the Welfare & Counselling Team



Welfare & Counselling Team
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We need some stress or pressure to be motivated. In fact, after a very busy time, many people feel flat and low when the pressure eases off and they find there is nothing much to do. The important distinction is that manageable levels of stress provide the adrenalin for motivation, whereas too much will make you feel overwhelmed & finding it hard to function. The key to psychological and physical health is how stress is managed to give the balance that is needed. Just like so many things in life, that word *balance* is the crucial element.

Step 1 – Recognise the signs of being over-stressed

Here are some common signs:

- Eating and sleeping problems;
- Tiny things seem too much;
- Feeling muddled and unable to act.

Make a list of how you know when you are getting over stressed; if you are unsure, keep a journal, noting when you are feeling stressed and the things that go with it. These differ from person to person: some feel compelled to eat too much, whilst others feel sick and do not want to eat at all; you may well have a permanent feeling of anxiety or agitation; finding every task too difficult no matter how small is also a common symptom.

Step 2 – Which situations stress you?

Here are some common situations:

- Public performance;
- Meeting deadlines or managing multiple deadlines in limited time;
- Being tested – interviews or exams.

What are the situations that stress you? These will vary from person to person, depending on age, personality, previous experience and your circumstances. Above are just a few examples to get you thinking about how it is for you.

Step 3 – Find your own mental and physical balance

- Effective stress management is finding the point of balance that is right for you;
- Too few demands can be as de-motivating and as stressful as too many;
- Leading a sedentary life, without much physical activity, is not helpful to most people;
- Nor is one where there are few if any mental challenges.

Of course being a student will usually mean that there will be enough mental challenges, in fact you may be finding that there are too many! We will look later at how this can be managed.



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Step 4 – Take control: recognise the signs & do something about it

- Know your signs of stress, the situations which stress you and how much stress/pressure you need to keep you motivated; these are all part of good stress management;
- Remove all “unnecessary” contributors - for example you may have a really important deadline to meet and someone else is making a demand on the time you need; this may well be less urgent, so you need to take charge and suggest it is re-arranged, and removing some of the pressure from you.
- It is equally important to think about the times when you feel less stressed, what works for you and learn to use this knowledge - we will be coming to this later on;
- It may well be that the demands are there but you also have the type of personality that makes you push yourself too hard - keeping a journal will help you identify if/when doing this is stressful to you.

Organising your time is crucial

This will give your mind and body the things they need to keep you fit and healthy and to help you meet your full potential.

A timetable will:

- Help you to organise your time;
- Give you permission to do or think about one thing at a time;
- Help you include the things that your mind and body needs in your week.

Often stress is caused by feeling overwhelmed by how much has to be done and organising your time will help to stop you feeling this way. It will also help you to review your work practices and avoid being too hard on yourself by studying for too long periods at one time.

Your timetable should include:

- **Exercise** - the mind and the body need exercise. Regular exercise, *enough to increase your heart rate & make you out of breath* will:
 1. Help remove unwanted adrenalin and keep stress levels lower to prevent you getting over stressed;
 2. Assist you to think more clearly and be a more effective student by creating new neural pathways in the brain;
 3. Give you the feel good factor by stimulating good endorphins and help to lift your mood;
 4. In fact, it will also help with anxiety and mild to medium depression - depending on how many times a week you do the exercise and if it is strenuous enough.
- **Study time** – be focused & don't be tempted to sit for too long trying to study:



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1. You will feel better & be more productive if you are properly focused, so remember the optimum time for concentration is really short, only 25-30 minutes;
2. Some people can concentrate effectively for longer; however, going too long without a break can lead to feeling frustrated and doubting your ability, simply because you are finding it hard to stay focused;
3. Sitting in one position for too long can lead to your body feeling tight and uncomfortable and possibly bring on headaches.

• **Include breaks & things you enjoy:**

1. Use breaks to give you something that you can look forward to, even if you are breaking up your study time for say just 15 minutes or so;
2. They will help you to be motivated to study and lift your spirits;
3. Also plan time to do things you enjoy, for example seeing friends and reading novels, or doing a relaxation exercise – a relaxation exercise for you to do will be included later on;
4. Doing things you like will help to relax you and provide a distraction to feeling stressed and under pressure from your studies.

• **Meals**

1. Make sure you plan time to eat, breakfast, lunch and dinner.
2. It is important to keep your blood sugar levels steady.
3. Fluctuating blood sugar levels through not eating properly can lead to you feeling stressed, tired, nervous and agitated.

Don't be afraid that you will be a slave to a timetable:

- It isn't set in stone and will be there to help you;
- Some people laminate a typed sheet showing the days of the week and add the details using a semi-permanent marker pen; this way it is easy to change things around if you want to.

For further information on time management go to: www.gre.ac.uk/studyskills.

Step 5 – Take control: change the way you think about a situation

- Write down what is worrying you. This is therapeutic and helps to keep things in perspective.



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- Distance it. Remember last year and how much you are now thinking about what was worrying you then. Think about how much it will matter in a year's time. Close your eyes and see yourself, happy and laughing without the worry that you have now and ask yourself how much it matters.
- Exaggerate the situation you are worrying about, asking yourself what is the worst that can happen and if it's really that likely?
- If you fail, what will that really mean? Don't be tempted to see yourself as a failure because you have failed something. No-one is a failure. You can learn from your mistakes and end up knowing more than a person who had better luck first off. The Chinese Philosopher, Confucius, is credited with saying "Failure is the mother of success". It is how you react to it that is important.

Step 6 – Do something to remove the stress of a particular situation

- Physical exercise will help to lift anxiety about a particular situation and help you to think more positively.
- Relax, breathe it away. Carry out the 7-11 breathing technique. [Here is the link:](#) This exercise focuses on breathing out for a longer count than breathing in, activating the part of the nervous system which will help you to relax. Do this until you calm down. It can also be done every day to help keep you calmer. Some people do it for a few minutes at the start of the day and again at the end of the day to help them start and end the day better.
- Learn to relax your body by a muscle relaxation exercise. [Here is the link:](#) Tension in the body is often the first sign that stress is increasing. Muscle tension and mental tension often go together and tension in the neck and shoulders can lead to headaches and other physical symptoms.
- Get help from other people. For example talk to someone about it – a friend, personal tutor if the problem is academic, or a counsellor. It helps to get things in perspective when you talk to someone. Worrying about it on your own can magnify the problem, often making it bigger than it really is.

To make an appointment to see a counsellor go to: www.gre.ac.uk/students/support/counselling
(Counselling sessions are in the strictest confidence.)

Ask yourself these questions – acquire self-knowledge & learn to use thought positively:

1. If the things that are stressing you changed for the better, what would be different in your life?



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2. What would you notice if things started to change? How would you be able to tell that change is happening?
3. Are there things you would notice yourself doing differently because change is happening?
4. What might be the first sign of change happening?
5. Have you already noticed any small change recently? Yes/No
6. What has changed recently?
7. Did you help this change happen? Did you do something that made a difference? Yes/No
8. What did you do?
9. Did you do anything else that made a difference? Yes/No
10. What did you do?
11. Many people say that however bad things are no two days are the same. Do you have better and worse days? Yes/No
12. What is different on a better day?
13. Do you help a better day happen?
14. Do you do something that makes a difference? Yes/No
15. What do you do that helps?
16. Is there anything else you do that helps?

Look at the answers to your questions and notice what they tell you about yourself.

**You may also find these web links useful: <http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/leaflets/Stress%20A4%202010.pdf>
[http://www.mind.org.uk/help/medical and alternative care/mind guide to managing stress](http://www.mind.org.uk/help/medical_and_alternative_care/mind_guide_to_managing_stress)**