



# Stress and Stress Management



**Stress:** it can seem almost inevitable given all you have on your plate. In the following pages, we talk about what it is, the consequences (and even advantages), and then offer practical ways to mitigate your stress.

## What Is Stress?

Like art, stress is one of those things that you know when you see/feel it, but can be hard to define.

One definition of stress is the physical, mental, and emotional factors that cause bodily or mental tension. Stresses can be external (from the environment) or internal (illness, psychological). Stress initiates the "fight or flight" response by releasing a complex reaction of neurologic and endocrinologic changes. These changes include (but are not limited to): acceleration of heart rate, inhibition of stomach and upper-intestinal action (i.e., your digestion slows down or stops), constriction of blood vessels in many parts of the body, and redirection of nutrients (particularly fat and glucose) to your muscles for muscular action.

In other words, stress prepares your body to flee or fight. This response can be very helpful when you are being chased by a lion or jumping out of the way of a moving car. It is less helpful when it is long term or chronic. Chronic stress can cause or exacerbate many psychological conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety) and medical problems (e.g., irritable bowel syndrome, high blood

pressure, etc.). There is a great deal of research indicating that stress is a factor in numerous physical conditions including cardiovascular disease, hypertension, obesity, infectious diseases, and cancer.

Everyone experiences stress differently. How does stress feel for you? Some common symptoms include:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Weight gain or weight loss
- Stomach pain
- Irritability
- Teeth grinding
- Panic attacks
- Headaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sweaty hands or feet
- Heartburn
- Excessive sleeping
- Social isolation
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Obsessive or compulsive behaviors

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It is not uncommon for people to realize they are stressed only after they recognize that a particular symptom they are feeling or irrational behavior they are exhibiting (e.g., snapping at your partner, crying with little to no reason) is due to stress.

Stress is a normal feeling and, evolutionarily speaking, serves us well. It is a protective mechanism that warns us of danger. It does serve a purpose, and when used appropriately and at the right time, stress can improve mental and physical performance.

## *When Assessing Your Stress Level, It Can Be Helpful To Look at Your Stress as One of Two Kinds:*

**Acute stress** – This is short term stress that goes away quickly. This is what you feel when you hear screeching brakes right behind you, when you have a confrontation with your boss, sit down to take an important exam, or even when you launch your skis off a steep slope. Acute stress helps you react quickly and appropriately to dangerous or challenging situations. Everyone has periods of acute stress at some point.

**Chronic stress** – This is stress that lasts for a longer period of time and the one that can cause physical and psychological problems. You may be experiencing chronic stress in response to concerns about your current debt, school grades, the NAVLE®, or your current relationship. Many people have chronic stress so long that they cease to notice it and don't realize it is a problem.

Clearly, this is a stressful time – you have numerous reasons to feel stressed. You are likely trying to survive your senior year, while trying to find time to study for the NAVLE as well as manage all the other areas of your life that call

for your attention. The result for many is an overwhelming feeling of stress. High stress can get in the way of using your time constructively and being able to focus on studying.

You can, however, do things to lessen or mitigate your stress.



# Stress Management

Stress management consists of making changes to your life that allow you to manage your response and prevent stressful responses in the future.

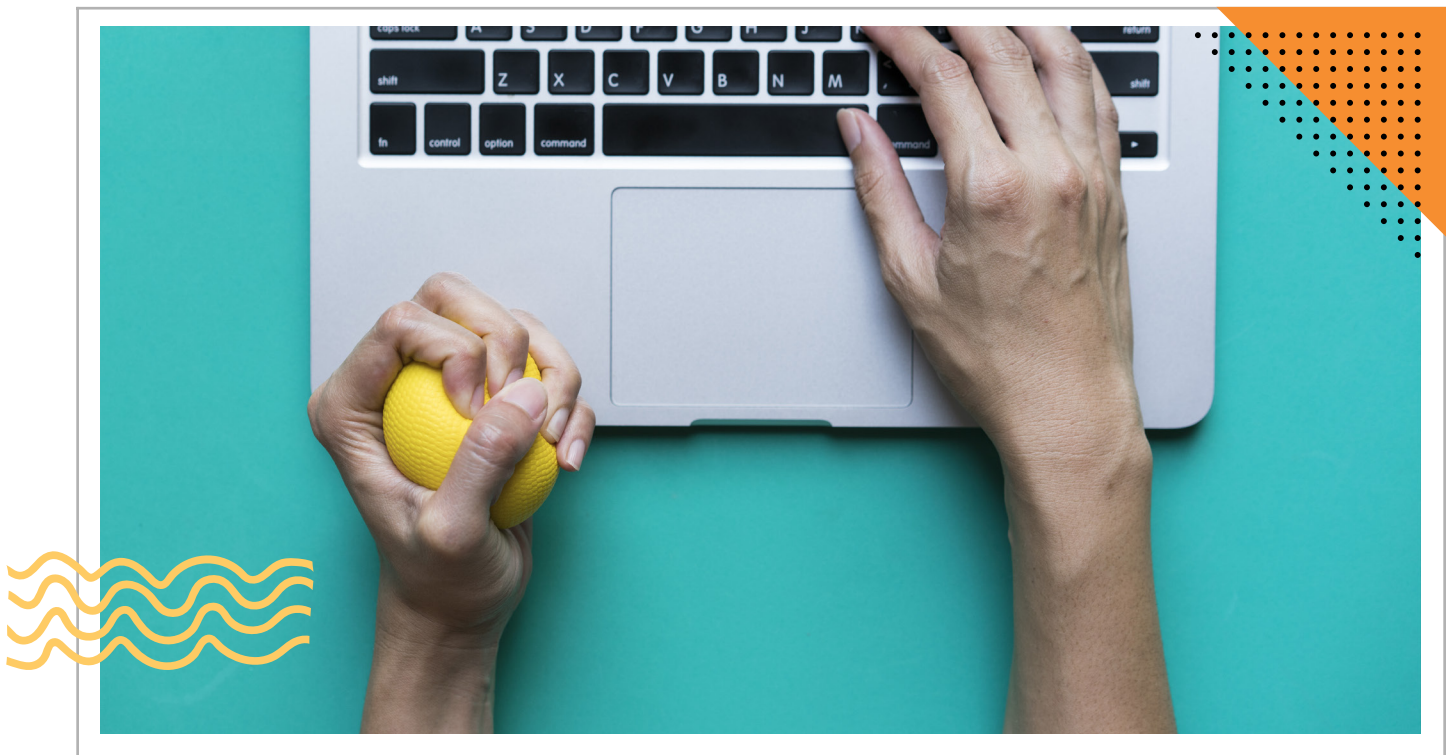
There are numerous techniques that have been found to be useful for stress management. The key is to determine what will work best for you. Everyone is different and what works for your best friend might not work for you. This is about honoring yourself. You need to make self-care a priority – especially now, during this high stress period in your life. As a result, you will not only feel better now, but will learn how to mitigate future stress as you navigate an internship or your first job after graduation.

Where do you begin? First, you need to recognize that part of determining the best stress management strategy is trial and error. I encourage you to view your stress management techniques as miniature scientific experiments.

Try a couple of strategies; really commit to their regular use/practice. Critically evaluate after 1-2 weeks; how do you feel? When you used them (key point here – you have to use these methods for them to work), did you feel better? Be honest. If not, try new ones. Although I offer numerous options, most people find one or two that they can implement, stick with, and use to see results. I encourage you to look over the list and select a couple to try.

One way to look at stress management tools is to break them into 3 groups:

- Behavior oriented approaches: behaviors you can do when in a stressful situation
- Thought oriented approaches: how to change how you think about stressful situations
- Lifestyle oriented approaches: how to implement habits and lifestyle changes to better deal with ongoing and future stressors



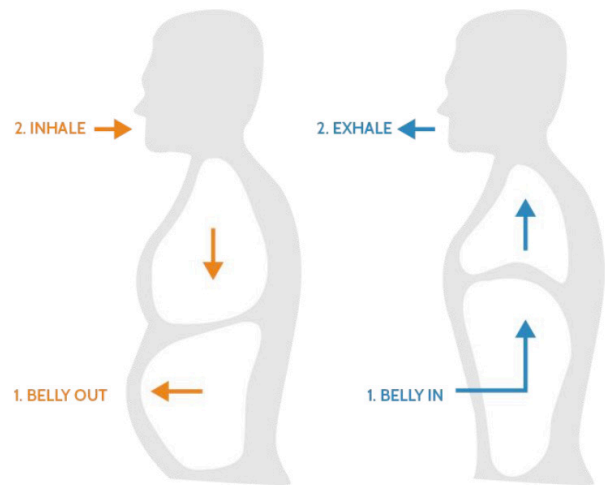
# Stress Reduction Techniques

## Behavior Oriented

**Diaphragmatic Breathing:** The act of breathing as a means of relaxation has been used for centuries. One type of beneficial breathing is diaphragmatic breathing, defined as abdominal/belly or deep breathing, and is marked by expansion of the abdomen rather than the chest when breathing.

Diaphragmatic breathing has been shown to decrease oxygen consumption, heart rate, and blood pressure and reset the autonomic nervous system. Diaphragmatic breathing can be paired with “4 x 4 breathing”. When you’re feeling stressed, breathe in deeply (put your hands on your stomach and feel it expand out), for four seconds, then exhale evenly for four seconds. Maintain this for 2-3 minutes to help lower your physical stress response and regain

control. Practicing this type of breathing at least a couple of times a day when you are not feeling stressed will make it easier to do when you *are* feeling stressed.



## Thought Oriented

**Monitor your self-talk:** It matters what language you use when you describe events, both to others and to yourself. Do you generalize? If you did poorly on one test, do you feel you will fail at everything? How do you treat yourself when you perform under your expectations? Are you mean to yourself in an attempt to motivate yourself to do better next time? Encouraging self-talk is much more effective. Think for a moment how you might encourage a small child to perform better. Would you yell at her and tell her how stupid she is? Of course not. Yet, that is how many people attempt to motivate themselves. Treat yourself with the same respect as you would someone else.

It can also help to rationally look at the situation and decide what you need to change (if anything). One technique used by many involves asking yourself “What would (insert name of someone you admire) do?” By using this tool, you minimize the chances that you will respond based on your emotions rather than choose constructive behaviors.

Another way to use self-talk is to think about a past success. Focus on it. What did you do? How did you manage? Realize that you have been through situations in the past every bit as stressful as your current one, and you made it. You can do it again.

**Embrace the stress:** Just as it matters how you talk to yourself, it matters what you tell yourself about stressful situations. Studies have shown that how people view stress actually changes how their bodies respond. Viewing stress as a potentially positive element can help prevent negative physical and psychological damage. There are reasons to reframe how you feel; stress is not always a bad thing. One study found that what affected negative health outcomes related to stress the most was not amount of stress but how people viewed this stress. Those who felt that their stress was detrimental to their health suffered more negative effects. People who reported a great deal of stress but little to no perception that their stress had a negative impact on their health had the least negative health effects, even less than those who reported having actual minimal stress in their lives.

Another benefit of stress is that it can help you perform better, both physically and mentally.

## *Lifestyle Oriented*

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR):** is a technique for reducing stress and anxiety that involves alternately tensing and relaxing your muscles. Because tense muscles often accompany stress, learning how to relax muscular tension, especially when paired with deep breathing, can be helpful. It is suggested that in order to see the effects, the technique should be practiced regularly (at least once a day if not more) for 10-15 minutes per session.

Specific steps include:

- First, focus on your breathing (use deep/ belly breathing or 4 x 4 breathing as described above).

Some amount of stress helps you perform at your optimal level. It has even been suggested that intermittent stress helps keep your brain more alert. These bursts of stress can also strengthen your immune system by causing the adrenal glands to release hormones that move immune cells into a response mode even before there is evidence of an infection.

Other studies show that stress can improve learning and memory, perhaps partially due to the fact that stress increases the presence of glutamine, which is known to improve working memory. Studies exposing students to brief stress found they performed better than those who did not experience a stressful event before being tested. These benefits of stress suggest that one key component in managing stress is to be proactive in how you view it. Stress is not all bad, and by focusing on the benefits it can offer, you can minimize the potentially harmful effects.

- Loosen your clothing and get comfortable.
- Tighten the muscles in your toes. Hold for a count of 5. Relax.
- Flex the muscles in your feet. Hold for a count of 5. Relax.
- Move slowly up through your body – legs, abdomen, back, neck, face – contracting and relaxing muscles as you go.
- Remember to keep breathing deeply and slowly.
- When done with your entire body, take a minute longer to relax before slowly coming back to your present environment



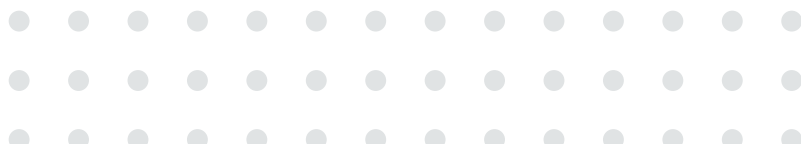
**Prepare:** One tangible way to reduce stress is to prepare. Taking a few minutes at the end of the day to prepare for the next day can help you feel in control. Write things down so you don't worry about forgetting them. First thing in the morning, look at your list. Note your priorities and make sure you allocate time for them. Be reasonable about what you can accomplish in one day and reward yourself for achieving your goals.

**Eat well and stay active:** It can be challenging to eat healthily while at school, but you know that to maintain concentration and emotional stability throughout the day you need to make healthy food choices. Bring food to school so you don't have to rely on fast food or caffeine. Try to keep three or four healthy snacks on hand that you know you'll probably want – nuts, string cheese, trail mix, etc. Along with eating well, exercise, in any form, is important. Even if you feel you don't have the time, some type of workout (even walking each day) can reduce stress.

**Present moment:** When you are feeling stressed, try performing some type of repetitive task like dishwashing, knitting, or even brushing the dog/cat. While doing these, focus on your breathing (slow, deep) and force yourself to pay attention to the task at hand. Don't let your mind wander to things it might want to worry about; train it to be in the moment. This type of mindfulness has been shown to lower blood pressure and slow heart rate and breathing. Some people find it useful to repeat a phrase or mantra. It can also be helpful to focus on your senses while doing your task. What do you see, feel, hear, smell? By focusing on these things you help your mind stay in the present moment.

While you are doing your repetitive task, you may choose to listen to music. Choose a form of relaxing music you enjoy or experiment with white noise, or the newer “pink noise” which is a mix of high and low sound frequencies. Pink noise has shown promise in scientific studies where it appears to enhance the slow brain wave characteristics of deep sleep.

**Make time for fun and relaxation:** This is likely a time that feels like you just can't justify any down time or time for yourself. Don't get caught in this mistake. Taking time to “sharpen the saw” as Stephen Covey says in the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, is critical. The story behind this principle is the man who was sawing down a tree and not making much progress. When asked why he didn't stop to sharpen his saw, he answered that he was too busy. Don't get so caught up in your to do list that you forget to take care of yourself. Trying to function on an empty tank does not work for long. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury. I suggest that you schedule time for fun and relaxation, just as you schedule other obligations. Then the key is to honor these commitments. Recognize that honoring commitments to yourself is just as critical to your long term success as honoring the commitments you make to other people. I suggest setting aside a short period of time every day and then a longer period of time at least once a week. What you do during these times is up to you, but for those daily short periods, examples include: playing an instrument, reading a (fun) book, playing a video game, working on a craft, or taking a yoga class. The key is to detach from the day's events and let your brain unwind.



## Summary

Everyone struggles with stress at some point in their lives. The key is not to hope it goes away by itself, or worse, feel that there is something wrong with you for feeling stressed. It should be pointed out that it is important to recognize if your stress has turned into depression or anxiety. If that is the case, please seek help through your school's counseling services or an outside counselor/psychologist. Know that you never have to suffer alone. There is help available.

But for those of you feeling overwhelming stress, know that given your current situation, this is normal. How you handle this stress is what makes the difference. While you can't change much of what is causing you stress right now, you CAN change how you respond. You can be proactive and take steps to mitigate the negative effects of stress. The good news is that ways to alter how you react to stress are simple, straightforward, and readily available. Yet, they all take work. It is not realistic to think you can

take any of these strategies, try them once or twice, and permanently cure your stress. They take consistent effort and commitment. Yet, those are the very factors that got you where you are. You are all about effort and long term commitments. This is a chance to take these attributes, turn them inward, and help yourself. This is an exciting yet challenging time in your life. You can make it a positive one.



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### About the Author

Cathy Barnette is a freelance veterinary writer and contributor to XPrep Learning Solutions. She is a graduate of the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine and spent 15 years working in small animal general practice before transitioning to a career in writing. Cathy is passionate about veterinary medicine and education; she enjoys working to provide valuable information to veterinarians, veterinary teams, and pet owners.