

The keys to success

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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Stress: a necessary evil?

Is it possible to avoid stress? You guessed it - that's a trick question.

Stress is a set of responses produced by your body when it encounters a situation that it must adapt to. People often differentiate between two forms of stress: good and bad.

"Good stress" is motivation, the desire to succeed, as well as the other positive reactions that take place during an encounter with a stimulating situation - surprise, interest, increased creativity, outdoing yourself, persistence (just to name a few).

As for "bad stress," it includes anxiety, fear of failure and the plethora of reactions that make difficult situations even more difficult - headaches and stomach aches, dark thoughts, irritability, difficulty concentrating, etc.

So does that mean stress is a necessary evil? What it comes down to is us - and how we choose to react!

Stress is a normal reaction. It's there whenever we mobilize our personal resources to perform better. It is mostly associated with times when we feel overwhelmed, when our ability to adapt is put to the test.

It is also a subjective reaction. For example, when talking about their university education, some students will say that they're above all excited by the opportunity to meet new challenges. For others, the idea is inevitably accompanied by anxiety-inducing questions: "How will I get it all done?" "When will I find the time?" If you belong to the second category, this guide is for you!

To manage stress effectively, you need to go through two steps: first, you need to recognize the signals sent by your body; second, identify the stressors provoking them. Once you've accomplished these tasks, you'll be able to diffuse the situation before it becomes problematic.

The signals: my stress reactions

Each one of us reacts differently to new or demanding situations. We can classify these signs of stress into four overarching categories: physiological, cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions. Try to estimate how intensely you react to each of these forms of stress in normal circumstances.

Physiological reactions. The body's reactions to stress are the easiest to recognize. In the past, they would prepare us to fight or to flee: our heart rate and breathing accelerate, blood pressure increases, muscles become tense.

It's pretty uncommon nowadays to find yourself in a life-or-death situation in a university hallway. This is why fight-or-flight symptoms like abundant perspiration, headaches (caused by blood pressure), the need to urinate, and stomach aches (caused by muscle contractions) are often more disturbing than they need to be.

Intensity	1	2	3	4
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Cognitive reactions. Stress also affects our thinking. When confronting an obstacle, some people might over-estimate its difficulty, feeling rapidly overwhelmed by negative thoughts and predicting the worst.

This kind of stress causes memory lapses, impedes concentration, makes decision-making difficult and induces insomnia. Not really what you want during exam season!

Intensity	1	2	3	4
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Emotional reactions. Stress is the source of a number of emotions. Some of these will

appear suddenly - surprise, anger, fear. They can be difficult to control.

Others, like irritability and impatience, can set in progressively. They are sometimes the sign of a steady accumulation of small worries and frustrations that eventually can severely affect quality of life. For some people, prolonged exposure to stress can even lead to depression.

Intensity	1	2	3	4
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Behavioural reactions. Stress can lead us to modify our everyday habits.

Some people, for example, will lose their appetite, while others won't be able to stop snacking.

Behavioural reactions to stress can have consequences on your health and the health of those around you. This is what happens, for example, when one increases one's cigarette or alcohol consumption "to relax." Luckily, there are better ways to relax and resolve your long-term difficulties.

Intensity	1	2	3	4
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You've probably recognized yourself in a few of the stress responses above. These no doubt familiar reactions will give you an indication of your sensitivity to stressors.

The source: my stressors

Let's not lie to ourselves: the sources of stress in a student's everyday life can be numerous.

Try to pay attention to the moments when the first signs of stress reactions appear. What are you doing? What are you thinking? With whom are you interacting? This exercise will help you recognize the

stressors in your environment. Evaluate your sensitivity to each of the following broad categories of stressors.

Academic life. University is an obvious source of stress in the lives of students, who often face a lot of pressure to perform well. This pressure can be external - from colleagues, teachers, family members - or it can come from self-imposed standards.

Does it ever seem like exam dates and assignments deadlines always come too soon? Not surprising, since time management is the primary recurrent source of stress for students.

Sensitivity	1	2	3	4
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Big events. Being in school does not mean that the rest of your life stops. Events, expected or otherwise, continue to shake things up. Some - like a marriage or a birth - will be pleasant; others, less so, like losing a job, divorce, a loved one's passing.

Whether joyous occasions or not, these things will require you to take the time

to think about them if you want to move onto something else afterwards. It's hard to even hope to concentrate on one's studies when the many thoughts and feelings provoked by such events are there to distract.

Sensitivity	1	2	3	4
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Financial health. In addition to being exposed to life's chance events, students are often vulnerable to financial difficulties. It's a great idea to invest in your future - but that doesn't mean you'll have fewer bills to pay today!

Tuition, school books and lunch with colleagues all pile up, adding to your regular expenses. To avoid nasty surprises, it can be especially useful to keep a budget during your university years.

Sensitivity	1	2	3	4
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Interpersonal relationships. Social support is one of the most important factors in educational success. Unfortunately,

interpersonal relationships can also be a major source of stress.

Some people have a way of "getting on your nerves." These people often seem impolite or aggressive. It goes without saying that when we're stressed, our chances of becoming one of those irritating people are that much higher!

However, problems with a friend or relative are a more insidious source of stress. When an important relationship starts to deteriorate, whether with a family member, a friend, a teacher, colleague or employer, it's normal to feel the consequences in the short- and the medium-term.

Sensitivity	1	2	3	4
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Have you ever noticed how a sound or one cup of coffee too many can become major irritants when you're feeling tense? Having stressors present in your everyday life increases your vulnerability to stress more generally.

Too many people let recurring everyday problems accumulate and as a result

watch their quality of life decline bit by bit. Now that you have a better idea of your reaction to stress and what causes you to react that way, let's take a look at some strategies that can help you manage stress effectively.

How to fight stress

Do you want to have fun? Do you want to improve your health and your academic performance? Spend quality time with your loved ones? Put your credit card away! The benefits of effective stress management can't be bought!

Stress reactions are conditioned responses and behaviours. This is why they seem difficult to avoid and take time to change. Luckily, it's possible to fight stress on three different levels in order to increase our chances of modifying our behaviours. We can:

Eliminate stressors.

If you want to get stressors out of your life, do it! This is the most effective way of decreasing your stress levels.

Before you sit down for a study or work session, put luck on your side and make it easier to concentrate. First, make sure your work environment isn't hurting you - eliminate distractions, choose appropriate lighting, etc. Second, banish the parasite-ideas that sap your mental energy: settle all of the little problems that might bother you (shopping lists, e-mails to read, important discussions with loved ones, etc.).

For more information about ways of maintaining your concentration, see our guide on work habits.

Reducing your stress reactions.

You can't always avoid stressful situations. Some will occur unexpectedly (that's why they're so stressful!), while others we will have chosen to enter into because they seem profitable in the long term (exams, job interviews).

In such conditions, it might be useful to know a couple quick ways of fighting stress symptoms.

Relaxation. Give yourself the time to perform an activity that helps you relax. Reading a novel, practising a sport, meeting up with a friend who will take your mind off things, or any other pastime will do. You'll see that a half hour is enough to feel the beneficial effects of relaxing.

Positive internal dialogue. When you identify a stressor or when you start feeling the first symptoms of a stress reaction, it's important not to let yourself be overtaken by panic.

A positive internal dialogue will help you keep your cool. When you're preparing for a stressful activity, think about what's motivating you to take up this challenge. If a stressful event happens unexpectedly, remind yourself that you can deal with it. Try to avoid jumping to conclusions too quickly, especially if they're negative!

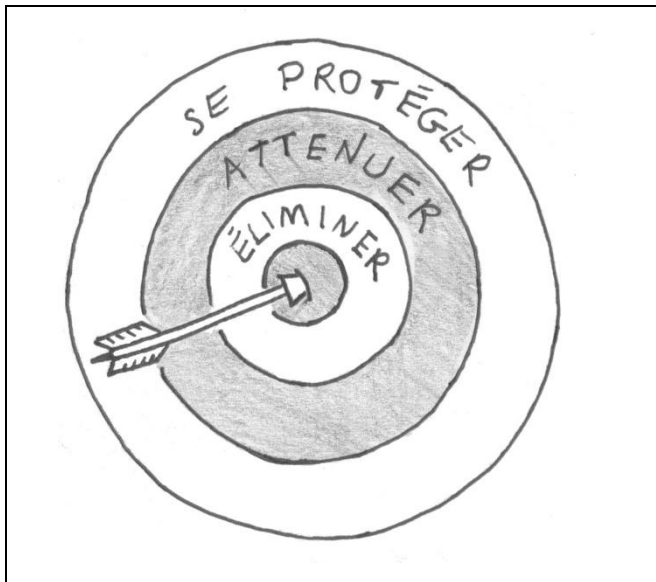
Relaxation and visualization. Relaxation techniques can help you prepare for intellectual work and help you regather your concentration when stress crops up. You'll find some useful routines at the end of this guide.

Adopt an anti-stress lifestyle.

Healthy habits. Proper personal health practises are the best defence against stress. When you feel good, it's easier to deal with life's everyday surprises. You know the habits you should pick up: eat healthily, sleep enough, exercise regularly, and avoid alcohol and cigarettes. Obviously, no-one expects you to do all of that overnight!

Develop your skills. Seeing the good side of things is a talent that can be developed. A positive internal dialogue often goes hand in hand with good communication, negotiation and problem-solving skills. Speaking in the first person - "I," as in "I'm not happy about this delay" - rather than calling the other person out ("You're always late!") is an example of a social skill that allows you to make interactions less tense. Surrounding yourself with friends who possess these qualities can help you develop them yourself.

Some people will need to develop more effective time-management and budgeting skills if they want to decrease their long-term stress. If you consider planning one of your weak points, see our guide to motivation and time management for additional advice.



Managing your stress in exam situations

Very few students see exam season coming without feeling just a little bit of anxiety, and it's hard to believe people who claim not to!

Exams are stressors that we can't cut out of our lives. We can, however, make these difficult situations less trying.

Being well-prepared

You're in class, sitting in front of your copy of the test. As time passes and your memory gets overheated, you notice the student sitting next to you. Her breathing is steady and, unlike you, she's not drenched in sweat. What's her secret?

This efficient student probably got a good night's sleep. Because she started her studying well in advance, she felt confident and didn't have to stay up late the night before.

This morning, she made sure she had enough time to gather her things and fill up her water bottle. Rather than muddling things in her mind with last-minute studying, she chose to relax by listening to music.

Responding strategically

Rather than starting to write as soon as she received her copy of the test, your

neighbour read the entire exam over with care. As for you - you had already crossed out two responses to the first question. But what was she doing?

She had planned out her strategy. This way, she was sure to feel in control throughout the exam and to earn the most points possible.

Efficient students will first read the instructions for each question. This will allow them to have an idea of the number of multiple choice and essay questions as well as their respective weighting. Next, they will estimate the amount of time necessary for each part of the exam and allocate some time for reviewing their answers.

For multiple choice questions, they use a process of elimination. Having eliminated certain answers, they thoroughly check each remaining proposition (*Which is most important? Least important?*) to decide between them.

For essay questions, they plan out their text. By setting their ideas out on paper, they can concentrate on each element of the

essay separately without fearing that they'll lose the big picture.

Even when they're unsure, efficient students put luck on their side by answering each question. And finally, they look over their exams and correct careless mistakes.

Having a positive attitude

When you've prepared yourself for a test and you tackle it in an organized way, there's no reason to let panic get the better of you - you're already doing your best. Now repeat that sentence until you're convinced!

If, during an exam, you feel tension gaining ground, take a break. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. It could also be beneficial to stagger difficult questions to maintain a more motivating work rhythm.

If necessary, a relaxation technique might help you collect yourself and concentrate. Afraid of wasting time? This rest time is actually an investment -

you'll be more efficient afterwards, and less at risk of making mistakes!

And as for oral presentations...

For a lot of people, oral exams are particularly stressful situations.

When you're going to be the centre of attention, it's normal to worry about mumbling or failing to capture your audience's interest. But you should ask yourself if this possibility would be as dramatic as you imagine.

Listen to a teacher. He or she will probably stumble or search for their words at several points during a lesson. If you pay attention to professional speakers, you'll notice that they perform so well because they react appropriately to the inevitable little hiccoughs that happen during their presentations.

To decrease your stress, it's important to set realistic goals. You can't guarantee yourself an exceptional performance every time you speak. However, you can avoid being paralyzed by stage fright by practising not

only the content of your presentation, but also your reaction to any problems that might come up.

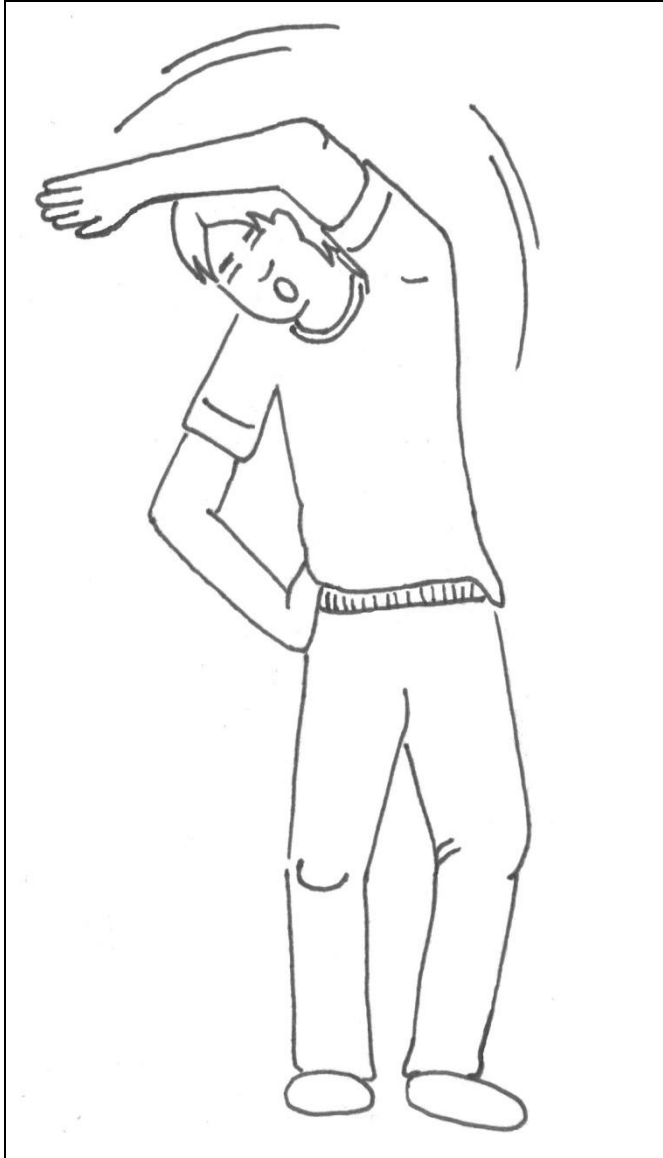
When fear of speaking poorly comes to mind, don't try to push the idea away. On the contrary: close your eyes and take control of the situation. See yourself pausing, looking at your notes, and taking up your talk again with enthusiasm! The more you practice this visualization, the easier it will be for you to keep calm when something similar happens.

Relaxation techniques for students dealing with stress

Relaxation is the name we give to various activities that decrease stress levels and muscular tension. Numerous massage, stretching and visualization exercises can help. So can other relaxation activities (reading, physical activity, etc.) and sex!

Here are two routines that you can easily practice at your work desk during an

exam or at home during a study session.
Enjoy!



At your desk

Preparation. If you're at home or in front of the computer, turn yourself away from your work. Support your back against the back of your chair, hold your feet flat against the ground and put your hands on your

thighs. When we ask you to hold a position, do so for five seconds before slowly releasing your muscles.

Breathing. Close your eyes. Slowly breathe in through your nose, counting to five, and then holding your breath for five more seconds. Slowly breathe out, again counting to five. Repeat the exercise for each stretch.

Legs. Contract your toes and tense the muscles of your legs and thighs. Feel the tension and stay in that position. Release. Next, stretch your legs out in front of you, placing your heels on the floor. Stretch your toes forward and then bring them back toward you, still counting to five with each motion.

Abdomen. Remaining seated with your back straight, contract your abdominal muscles. This should force you to hold your breath. Hold this position and then relax your muscles while breathing out.

Arms. Contract the muscles of your arms and hands by clenching your fists. Your arms can be held out in front of you, space permitting, or simply

alongside your body. Hold this position and then relax your muscles. Finally, roll your wrists while opening and closing your fingers.

Shoulders. Contract the top of your back by bringing your shoulders back as though you were trying to make your shoulder blades touch. Hold this position, and then release. Contract your shoulders by lifting them toward your ears as if you were shrugging and hold the position before slowly releasing. Straighten your neck by slowly tilting your head backward. Slowly relax your muscles. Do this stretch again by tilting your neck forward, to the right, and to the left.

Face. Open your mouth wide. Hold and release. Lift your eyebrows high and then release. Close your eyes forcefully. Release.

To help you concentrate

Preparation. If necessary, start with a few stretches to relax yourself. Choose a comfortable position. You can keep your back straight or place your elbows on your desk while supporting your forehead on one

hand and placing the other on the nape of your neck.

Breathing. Close your eyes. Slowly breathe in through your nose, counting to five, and then holding your breath for five more seconds. Slowly breathe out, again counting to five. Repeat this exercise four times. Try to keep this rhythm during the entire visualization.

Visualization. When you breathe, your abdomen will inflate like a balloon. When you exhale, the balloon deflates. Choose the colour of your balloon and picture it in your mind. It inflates and deflates slowly with each breath.

Thoughts will appear in your mind when you try to "think of nothing." These parasite-ideas make it difficult to concentrate. In your mind, write each of these irritants down on a piece of paper when they appear. Then fold each note and place it inside your balloon. Repeat this visualization until you've emptied your mind. When you're reading, breathe in deeply in order to fill the balloon, then let it fly away. Slowly open your eyes.

Conclusion

Modifying your reactions to stress and adopting habits that will improve your quality of life is long-term business. Let yourself accomplish these changes slowly, starting with the easiest parts to avoid becoming discouraged. After all, it's not helpful to stress out about relaxing!

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