

# Stress & What You Can Do About It!

## Common Misconceptions About Stress

- We always know when we are under stress. Often people become so accustomed to stress that they become unaware of it. Many of us suffer the debilitating effects of stress even though we don't feel tense. Stress can change the way you treat others or damage your body even in the absence of feelings of frustration or anxiety.
- Stress is something which affects only those who have high pressure lives. Many ordinary individuals experience the constant stress of worry, leading unfulfilled lives, or of not being what they would like to be.
- The only way to lower stress is to change your surroundings or to take medication. Changing your outlook on life is the most reliable and effective way of reducing stress. Stress comes from the way we perceive the world, not from the way the world really is.
- Stress is caused by events that happen to us. To paraphrase the Stoic philosopher Epictetus: it is not events in themselves that cause our distress, but rather the views we take of events.
- Emotions have a will of their own and cannot be controlled. We can change our feelings by first changing our behavior or by changing our thinking. For example, getting some work done can keep us from worrying about it. Creating a new understanding of a situation can make it less threatening or stressful.

## Tips for Reducing Stress

### Nutrition Tips

The key to eating for stress reduction is to avoid food that aggravate our stress response and increase our bodies' stores of the nutrients we need to handle stress.

- Limit caffeine and alcohol. Caffeine, like adrenaline, is a stimulant. Too much caffeine acts in the same way as too much stress, so caffeine can make stress symptoms worse. All too often, people rely on caffeine to "pick" them up and alcohol to bring them down. Avoid this stress by restricting your use of both.
- Eat vitamin C rich foods. Your adrenal glands use vitamin C during episodes of physical stress. Illness or injury can deplete vitamin C. Eating a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables can help ensure that your body has an adequate amount.
- Eat protein and complex carbohydrates. Your body also uses more protein and complex carbs when under stress. Good sources of protein include beans, fish, poultry and lean meats. Complex carbohydrates are found in fruits, vegetables, breads, cereals, and pasta.

### General Tips

- Learn to plan. Disorganization can breed stress. Having too many projects going simultaneously often leads to confusion, forgetfulness, and the sense that uncompleted projects are hanging over your head.
- Recognize and accept limits. Most of us set unreasonable and perfectionist goals for ourselves. We can never be perfect, so we often have a sense of failure or inadequacy no matter how well we perform. Set achievable goals for yourself.
- Learn to play. Occasionally you need to escape from the pressures of life and have fun.
- Be a positive person. Avoid criticizing others. Learn to praise the things you like in others. Focus on the good qualities that those around you possess.

- Learn to tolerate and forgive. Intolerance of others leads to frustration and anger. An attempt to really understand the way other people feel can make you more accepting of them.
- Avoid unnecessary competition. There are too many competitive situations in life that we can't avoid. Too much concern with winning in too many areas of life can create excessive tension and anxiety, and make us unnecessarily aggressive.
- Learn a systematic, drug free method of relaxing. Meditation or a variety of relaxation techniques can be learned from various sources around campus.
- Talk out your troubles. Find a friend, faculty member, counselor, or coach that you can be open with. Expressing your 'bottled up' tension to a sympathetic ear can be incredibly helpful.
- Change your thinking. How we feel emotionally often depends on our outlook or philosophy of life. Changing one's belief systems is a difficult and painstaking process. There is little practical wisdom in the modern world to guide us through our lives and no one has all the answer, but seek them out and be open minded in your search.

## Relaxation Exercise

Here is a procedure you can use to relax before you study or as a refreshing study break. You can also use it to help you go to sleep at night.

Set yourself in a comfortable chair in a quiet room. Tense or contract each muscle group for the count of 10. For each group, notice the difference between the feeling of tension and the warm, soft feeling of relaxation. Go from tension to relaxation slowly. Think of a balloon slowly leaking air and collapsing or of a flower bud opening and folding back.

- ❖ Tense and slowly relax your fists and forearms.
- ❖ Bend your elbows and tense and relax your biceps.
- ❖ Straighten your arms and tense and relax your triceps.
- ❖ Wrinkle up and relax your forehead.
- ❖ Clench and relax your jaw.
- ❖ Shrug and relax your shoulders.
- ❖ Fill your lungs and let air out slowly.
- ❖ Pull in and relax your stomach.
- ❖ Push down your feet to tense and relax your thighs.
- ❖ Tip up your toes to tense and relax your shins.
- ❖ Raise your heels to tense and relax your calves.

The whole procedure should take about twenty minutes the first time; it will take much less time later. Eventually you will be able to put your body in a state of complete relaxation almost at will.

When you have relaxed, think of getting ready to study. Mentally see yourself walking to your study areas. See yourself slowly approaching the desk. See yourself opening the book and beginning to study. You should feel no discomfort, no anxiety. And you will now get up and go to work. This should also work great before taking a test.

Remember, you need to practice this when you're not feeling stress so that when the stress comes, you're prepared and it will be easier to work on the relaxation!