

Vassar College Counseling Service

Coping with the Stress of College Life

What is Stress?

Stress is a person's response to any situation or event that requires adjustment or change. We often think of stress only in terms of negative events, but stressors can be positive as well. Stress is a natural response to a threatening situation. The result has more to do with the interpretation than it does with the stressor itself. For example, one student may see failing an exam as a warning to seek help while another student sees this event as a terminal blow to his or her life plans.

How is College Stressful?

During their college years students experience constant challenge and demand for adjustment and change. Along with academic pressures, students are seeking independence and autonomy from their parents and responsibility for themselves, acceptance from their peers in a world of mixed values, and more intimate relationships.

When we experience stress, most of us rely on our support systems to help us cope with or resolve the situation. Most students attend college away from their family, hometown, friends, local hangouts, etc. Thus, they experience the developmental and academic stressors of college life at a time when they are separated from most of their support systems.

How Does Stress Affect You?

We experience the effects of stress physically, emotionally, behaviorally and mentally. Physically, the body reacts to threat with an increased adrenalin flow. Muscles become tensed and heart rate and respiration are increased. Emotionally, you may experience anxiety, irritability, sadness and depression, or extreme happiness and exhilaration. Behaviorally, you may experience reduced physical coordination and control, sleeplessness, and irrational behavior. Mentally, you may have a severe reduction in your ability to concentrate, store information in memory and solve mental problems.

"Test anxiety" is due to the brain's reduced ability to process information while under severe stress. This can be of particular concern to college students.

How Do I Eliminate Stress?

Stress is a necessary part of life. We cannot and would not want to eliminate all sources of stress. Students can, however, learn to cope more effectively with stressors by employing effective physical, behavioral and cognitive coping strategies.

Box 706 124 Raymond Avenue Poughkeepsie, NY 12604-0706
Phone 845-437-5700

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Physically, one strategy is to learn to relax. With relaxation training, which is offered in the Counseling Service, students can learn to counteract the stress response and enhance their ability to think more clearly. Meditation is another effective method of achieving relaxation. Regular exercise is another physical coping and stress reduction technique. Getting an adequate amount of sleep is another technique.

There are a number of behavioral strategies that can be used to reduce the intensity of stress. Time management is a particularly effective method. Making a schedule of available time and prioritizing demands can put some sense of structure into a seemingly overwhelming semester. It is also important to establish realistic and achievable goals and to maintain a balance between academic, work, and social commitments.

One of the most important strategies for reducing stress is to examine the thoughts and beliefs we have about what is causing the stress. Putting the situation into its proper perspective reduces the perceived threat that it poses. Ask yourself, "What is the worst that could happen?" Usually the "worst" is not as bad as it first seems.

Finally, perhaps the best coping strategy is to talk over your problems with a good friend or counselor. Discussing your problems with someone can greatly reduce the tension you feel and provide you with valuable insight into the situation. The Counseling Service has a professional counseling staff who can help you cope with the demands of academic life.

Adapted from the Texas State Counseling Service