

Vassar College

Counseling Service

Stress Management

What Is Stress?

Stress can be thought of as an evolutionary advantage to dealing with threatening situations. It is an important, normal part of living. Stress protects us and makes us creative and motivated. However, experiencing too much stress can get in our way. We cannot eliminate stress, but we can manage it.

When you are stressed or anxious, your body goes into an automatic response referred to as the “flight or fight response.” Through this response, your body prepares to protect itself from an enemy. Your body cannot distinguish whether the enemy is physical or psychological, so fear within yourself elicits the same response as an outside threat. Your body’s automatic primitive response looks something like this:

Your heart rate increases and you begin to breathe faster so more blood can be pumped to your extremities. Your digestion stops so all functions flow to the primary systems that get you out of danger. You may also have other physiological responses. You may begin to sweat so you can regulate your body temperature. Your limbs may tingle as energy is directed to your limbs to be activated to respond to the crisis.

All of this happens automatically, and halting this response is as simple as taking a few deep breaths.

Symptoms Of Stress

Muscle tension, clenching/grinding teeth, rapid heart beat, tics, stomach/intestinal upset, headaches, sleep disturbance.

Manifests in job performance, relationship problems, decreased productivity, problems with professor/boss.

Burnout – exhaustion, loss of passion, apathy, mood swings, difficulty concentrating, self-destructive behavior, slow recovery from illness.

Things To Do:

Learn to identify your early stress signals.

Stop what you are doing and ask yourself “What’s going on?” “What internal messages am I giving myself?” → change internal messages to be more positive and realistic

Engage in relaxation techniques such as deep breathing (see other side of paper)

Contact the Counseling Service x5700 and schedule an appointment to learn additional effective coping strategies.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

10 Second Breathing

When your mind or body is racing, slow your breathing. Inhale slowly for 5 seconds, hold your breath gently and picture the oxygen moving to the places of tension in your body and relaxing them, then breathe out slowly for 5 seconds. Allow the breath to carry away the tension as you exhale.

5-Minute Vacation

Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Then visualize the place (real or imagined) that is most relaxing to you. Let your imagination carry you to that special spot. Allow your senses to soak in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches of this place.

Bother List

Write a list of all the worries, pressures, and concerns that are crowding your mind and clamoring for attention. As you write, imagine the worries moving from your head to the page. Then tuck the list away.

Peaceful Focus

Focus on something pleasant and beautiful in your immediate environment (a blade of grass, a color, a painting). Concentrate on the beauty you see and breathe it in. Allow that beauty to slow your pace and relax you.

Pretzel

Imagine that your body is tied in knots and only you know how to undo them. Beginning with your toes and gradually moving up your body, tense and relax each set of muscles. Visualize that you are tightening the knots as you tense the muscles and picture yourself undoing the knots as you relax the muscles and let go.

Self-Massage

Reach across your body and massage the muscles of your neck and shoulders with long, firm strokes. Knead any especially tight areas with firm, circular or back and forth motions. Then repeat the process on the other side. With both hands, massage the base of your skull with circular strokes. Continue over the scalp and the face, stopping to give special attention wherever you notice tension. Don't forget your jaw.

Shake A Leg

Stand up and shake an arm, a leg, the other arm, the other leg, your whole body. Then take a deep breath and let yourself go limp all over.