

Reducing Anxiety

What is Anxiety?

For the purpose of this newsletter, the words anxiety and stress would be used interchangeably. There are several definitions of anxiety, but we found a few that are helpful for our purposes. Anxiety is an emotional state that may be experienced by any individual under certain circumstances. It can be a reaction or response to events or situations that threaten to disrupt your normal pattern. A physical, emotional, or chemical factor that causes bodily or mental tension. Finally, it can be described as worrying. All of these definitions are useful to us when we are trying to understand and manage our anxiety, and the levels at which

it occurs. When you know what is going on physically and mentally it is easier to control, and eventually reduce the effects that are produced. Causes of anxiety can include but are not limited to the following. The change from high school to college is a major cause of anxiety. Now you have to meet new people, you are probably living away from home, you have to adjust to the classes, the environment, and to your new peer group. The leading cause of anxiety for college students are tests. If you are a new freshman or a returning student you are not quite sure what to expect, and this causes a lot of stress. Then you start to feel comfortable with the way a certain professor teaches and how they give tests and then the semester is over. Now you have to start all over again with a new professor. The

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perform academically cause stress. This is especially true if you set unrealistic goals. The expectations that your parents place on you is another cause of anxiety. You are constantly worrying is this good enough for my parents, will they still support me even though I am making C's, and am I still lovable even though I am not meeting their expectations. Feelings of helplessness cause stress. Constantly trying to be a perfectionist causes anxiety. Finally, feelings of loneliness or not "fitting in" cause anxiety. So how do we cope with anxiety?



Taking Charge of Stress

You have been coping with stress since you were a child, usually by imitating what you saw others doing. You may feel that some of the techniques you have learned- letting others make decisions for you, skipping school or overeating- are not as effective as you once thought they were. Or maybe you just want to learn some new ways of dealing with stress. Since stress deals with physical health as well as mental health there are several ways to deal with managing it. In addition to creating potentially stressful situations, college gives you an opportunity to evaluate and change the ways in which you manage stress.



Short Term Ways to Handle Stress

These techniques will be described in detail so that you may do them alone in your room without the assistance of someone else.

- **Relax where you are.** Sitting in a comfortable position, place your left hand over your naval and rest your right hand on top of your left. Breathe deeply through your nose, feeling your hands rise as your abdomen fills with air. Still inhaling, count to three and feel your chest expand. Hold your breath momentarily then release it. Repeat four times, but stop if you become light headed.
- **Take a break.** Get some exercise or fresh air, or go somewhere private and yell or cry.
- **Ask yourself whether it is worth being upset over the situation.** You can choose

to stay calm and ignore it. If this issue is important, confront it directly, talk it out with a sympathetic friend, or write it out in a letter that you do not send.

- **List all the things you think you need to do in order to complete the previous techniques.** The rest can be the first priority tomorrow.

Now that you know some helpful short-term tips for managing you anxiety, when do you use them? These are short-term ways of dealing with your stress, and should be used when there is no other method. You can also use the relaxation technique right before an exam. These techniques are good for an immediate reduction in your stress level, however there are some longer lasting techniques.



Symptoms of Anxiety

- Nervousness
- Anger
- Inability to sleep
- Fatigue
- Stomach aches
- Worry
- Rapid breathing
- Sweaty palms
- Inability to concentrate
- Burnout
- Depression
- More self-critical
- Impatient
- High blood pressure
- Headaches
- Muscular aches
- Increase or decrease in appetite
- Cotton-mouth
- More easily confused
- Frequent absence from work or school

Dealing with Stress Physically

First Breathe deeply, feel the breath as it enters and leaves your body. Feel your lungs expand and deflate, and feel yourself relaxing. Next relax your muscles. Beginning with your feet, relax all the muscles until they feel limp. Work your muscles. You can do this through physical activity. By using your muscles you release the tension built up in them. Finally, express how you feel. When you feel dizzy or have a headache focus on the physical sensations and describe them in great detail. These are some ways to help you deal with the physical symptoms of stress.

Dealing with Stress Mentally

First take control of your feelings. When you begin to feel tense, realize that you have control of your feelings and do not let the situation get the best of you. Next, mentally escape. Visualize a spot where you can really relax and take yourself there mentally. Contemplate the “worst case” scenario. This approach lets you explore just how awful the situation could be and at times may become humorous; indicating just how unrealistic your fears may have been. Give yourself some encouragement. Finally, picture your-self succeeding. The key here is detail.

Long Term Ways to Handle Stress

There are some long-term ways to reduce stress. A certain amount of stress can be healthy, and this level is different for everyone. Below are twelve ways to help handle stress.

- 1) **Seek your own stress level.** Strive for excellence within your limits.
- 2) **Choose your own goals.** Do not live out choices others have made for you.
- 3) **Become part of a support system.** Look out for yourself by letting friends help you when you are under too much stress and by helping when they are over loaded.
- 4) **Think positive.** Your mind signals your body to prepare for danger whenever you think about negative outcomes, and you become tense regardless of the type of situation.
- 5) **Make decisions.** You can either learn to live with the

consequences of your decisions or you can change your mind. In general any decision, even if it is a decision to do nothing is better than not making a decision at all.

- 6) **Keep your expectations realistic.** Do not expect perfection from yourself or others. Expect some problems reaching your goals, and realize that you can solve most of them yourself with practice.
- 7) **Accept what you cannot change.** If a problem is out of your control accept that and move on for now, instead of spinning your wheels trying to solve it.
- 8) **Anticipate potentially stressful situations and prepare for them.** First, decide whether the situation is one you should deal with, post-pone, or avoid. If you decided to deal with the situation, practice what you will say or do.

9) **Live in the**



present. Learn from the past and move on.

10) **Manage your time.** Prioritizing and planning can keep the demands of college life from becoming overwhelming. The better you get with managing your time the easier life will become.

11) **Take care of your health.** Exercise regularly, eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep, and avoid alcohol and other mood-altering drugs.

12) **Take time for yourself.** Make yourself a priority. Find time to relax– even if only for a few minutes every day.

Beating Procrastination

What is procrastination? This is when you delay doing assignments and studying, because you want to do something else. The following three are a good place to start.

1) **Buy a calendar.** Set up a daily or weekly schedule for yourself, allowing time for

classes, study, and things that are fun to you.

- 2) **Keep a To-Do list.** Prioritize your tasks and try to get the most important done on time.
- 3) **Ask for help.** Do not be afraid to get help if you need it.



Suggested Activities

Use the following exercise to examine the stress in your life and determine how to make your level of stress more manageable.

- 1) List all the things that are causing you stress right now. Take at least 15 minutes to generate this list.
- 2) Put a check mark beside the items that you have control over. Circle the items that are out of your control.
- 3) Examine the items that you have circled. If you have no control over a problem or its outcome, then it is time to reflect on what you have learned, if anything, and spend your energy on the items with check marks beside them.
- 4) Develop an action plan for those items that are checked. What are you going to do about this? You may

find that the action is quite clear— it is just a matter of taking action.

- 5) Prioritize the checked items. Mark the problem that is causing you the most stress with a 1, and begin the plan of action now. Feeling in control is much better than feeling overwhelmed.
- 6) Identify a person who can help you resolve this situation. Next to each check mark, identify who could help you and contact that person. Also recall the last troublesome experience. What were the anxiety cues you experienced? Determine what behaviors and thoughts you would have to go through to get through the event if it happened again. Finally, rehearse the sequence of events in your mind so that you have no doubt what to do.



Resources

Adapted from Slippery Rock University Reducing Anxiety

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