



Coping with general and exam stress

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Stress affects everybody. Some people may notice symptoms of stress building up during demanding times at work or school, when managing their finances or when dealing with challenging relationships.

The origin of stress lies in a primitive response that was necessary for man's survival – the 'fight or flight' response. In prehistoric days, the enemy was a visible, external and dangerous adversary. Today, humans face different adversaries, such as unemployment, bureaucracy, rising costs of living, crime and poverty. Nonetheless, the stress response is the same – setting off a whole chemical and biological cascade that floods the body to anticipate and prepare for action.

What is stress?

Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension and the body's reaction to a challenge or demand. In short bursts, stress can be positive such as when preparing for an exam or facing a dangerous situation. However, persistent or 'chronic' stress that lasts for a longer time, can have damaging effects on a person's health and well-being. When a person has chronic stress, the body stays alert, even though there is no danger. Over time, chronic stress can lead to health problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, depression or anxiety.

Managing stress

When stress does occur, it is important for the individual to recognise and deal with it. People who say they are feeling 'stressed' need to make a conscious choice about doing something to relieve their stress.

Much has been written about stress management, but some simple stress management techniques include the following:

Regular exercise

Exercise is often considered the single most important aspect in dealing with stress. This is because stress is a result of the fight or flight response that essentially prepares the body for action. So, in order to counteract the effects of the fight or flight response, one needs activity so that the stress is 'released'. There is an added benefit to exercise and that is a moderate release of endorphins, which gives the person a natural lift in mood and a feeling of being better able to cope with the 'stress'. Exercise also benefits the heart and muscles so that there is an all-round increase in physical and mental well-being.

Nutrition

Stress and diet have always been linked. Invariably, excessive stress goes hand in hand with poor eating habits, and by focusing on better eating habits, this will in itself relieve some of the stress. Eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables may help ensure an adequate intake of the required nutrients, including vitamins and minerals. Focus on foods containing vitamins B, C and magnesium. B vitamins found in bananas, leafy greens, nuts, seeds, meat, fish and dairy products may help provide the body with energy after a period of stress. Eat plenty of vitamin C-rich foods such as oranges, tomatoes, peppers, leafy greens and broccoli. Magnesium can help to relax muscles and reduce anxiety. Nuts, particularly brazil nuts, are high in magnesium, as are beans and lentils, whole grains and leafy greens.

Substances that may have negative effects on the body when under stress include caffeine and alcohol. Caffeine reduces the ability to deal with stress because it acts as a stimulant. High levels of caffeine may also contribute to nervousness and insomnia, which are intrinsically linked with stress. Substituting coffees and teas for herbal varieties can help reduce caffeine consumption. While drinking alcohol may have an instant calming effect on the body, in the long-term, relying on alcohol increases the amount of stress. Drinking heavily can also lead to complications such as sleep problems, nervousness and alcohol dependence.

Time management

There are a finite number of hours in the day in which we can do productive work. By accepting this and planning accordingly may make the management of time a little easier. It may help to make a list of tasks that need to be done and then to do them one at a time, giving priority to the most important ones. Schedule time for recreation, rest and relaxation. Reading and activities such as meditation are ways of introducing the very necessary time of 'not-doing'.

Share the stress

It helps to talk to someone, perhaps a friend, family member or a teacher. However, if stress is having a negative effect on an individual's thinking ability, emotions, behaviour or physical health, professional help should be recommended.

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