

The impact of stress on learning

	<p>> Excessive stress can result in a reduced quality of work as concentration, memory capacity and thought processes are affected. Prolonged stress can sometimes lead to 'burn out'. We all need a certain amount of pressure to work, but stress occurs when we feel more pressure than we can cope with. Individuals vary in their capacity to absorb pressure, but the goal of optimum performance is achieved when there is an ongoing healthy tension between being relaxed and energised.</p>
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Symptoms of stress

- > The acronym **SPACE** is a useful way of summarising stress symptoms
- > **S** – the situation (e.g. dealing with academic pressures such as exams and personal pressures such family and relationship difficulties.
- > **P** – the physical impact of stress can show itself in neck, back and chest pains, headaches, dizziness, appetite change, fatigue, feeling 'run down'.
- > **A** – actions such as increased alcohol/drug intake, withdrawing, becoming impatient, twitchy or aggressive, working longer with little effect, disturbed sleep\and eating patterns.
- > **C** – cognitions or thoughts such as 'I can't do this- I'm losing it' plus disorganised or negative thoughts, not being able to switch off.
- > **E** – emotions e.g. feeling irritable, critical, sad, depressed, apathetic.

What can students do to combat stress?

Physical health

- > Physical relaxation is important and examples include music, reading, walking, yoga, hot baths etc. Relaxation helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system which calms down the body if it has been over aroused.
- > Regular exercise, e.g. twenty to thirty minutes a day, three times a week enhances mental and physical well-being.
- > A healthy diet, multi-vitamin tablets, regular sleep patterns (seven-eight hours sleep each night) and reduced alcohol, caffeine, drug intake can also help.

How can you help?

Suggestions for discussion

- > You can help by looking for signs of stress and by listening, and showing understanding and support.
- > The student may need help to identify why things have got out of hand and any changes that could be made to relieve pressure.
- > Review work timescales and avoid 'bunching up' of assignment deadlines if possible.
- > Signpost to other sources of support. (See 'Useful contacts')
- > Getting the right work/life balance is important. To keep working without taking regular breaks is both unproductive and stressful. Students could review this by drawing up pie charts showing a typical day's activities divided into hours and then comparing this to a chart of how they would ideally divide up a day. What changes could be made?
- > Proactive action is important to combat stress rather than just slumping in front of the TV!

How can you help?

Understanding the emotional impact of stress

- > Stress can distort cognitions or thoughts so things get 'blown up out of all proportion' and are not seen objectively.
- > Some people are driven by lots of 'oughts' and 'shoulds' or aim to 'be perfect' adding more stress but students could consider what they really want and what is important. A 'good enough' philosophy might help.
- > Talking to friends, a tutor or a counsellor can really help as they can give a different perspective and can encourage more realistic thoughts.
- > Remember stress is not about being lazy; it is a sign of more pressure than the individual can cope with.
- > If stress builds up over time and students 'keep things in' it can lead to 'burn out' and depression.
- > Emotional support from friends, family or a counsellor can help.
- > Having fun and smiling more often is a good prescription!

Useful contacts

- > **Counselling and Personal Support** can help with
 - > strategies to manage stress
 - > information
- > Students can drop in to Gateway House 1.7 or Telephone (0116) 257 7602 or Email: counselling@dmu.ac.uk
- > For advice, information or support by email, contact 121@dmu.ac.uk
- > **The Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLASS)** provides study support tutorials and a range of learning materials which can help with areas such as time management.
(continued...)

> **CLASS** study support tutorials can be booked via
 - email: class@dmu.ac.uk - telephone: (0116) 257 7042
 Learning materials can be found at: www.askgateway.dmu.ac.uk

Contact:

- > **The Centre for Learning and Study Support**
 - > Support Office, Ground Floor
 - > Kimberlin Library
 - > Tel; 0116 257 7042
 - > Email: class@dmu.ac.uk
 - > Web: www.askgateway.dmu.ac.uk

	> Further information:
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**Reference material
for students**

- > The following booklets are available from **Counselling and Personal Support** or at www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets.
 - > 'The MIND Guide to Managing Stress'
 - > 'How to Cope With the Stress of Student Life'
 - > 'How to Cope with Exam Stress'
- > The following resources are all available from **Counselling and Personal Support:**
 - > Handout: 'Helping Stress with Sport and Activity'
 - > O'Hanlon, B. (1998) 'Stress – The Common Sense Approach'. Newleaf. Dublin
 - > Holden, R. (1992) 'Stress Busters: Over 101 Strategies for Stress Survival'. Harper Collins. London
 - > Natural Relaxation package and CALMyou series available via the Counselling Service website www.dmu.ac.uk/counselling or www.my.dmu.ac.uk

Other web sites

www.thesite.org.uk

**Other related Focus
On titles**

- > Difficult One-to-one Meetings
- > Mental Health Problems
- > Helping Students who are Withdrawn and Depressed