Stress in College: What Causes it and How to Combat it

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It's no secret that many college students spend most of their time on campus stressed out. Balancing classes, tests, projects, extra-curricular activities and work is enough to make anyone feel overwhelmed, especially with final exams right around the corner.

"College life has become a lot more competitive--it's much harder to get into schools, it's gotten a lot more expensive," says Elizabeth Scott, About.com stress management expert. "There are a lot of things that are factors that have made society more stressful, and that really translates to college life as well."

Having stress in your life is unavoidable, but there are steps students can take to mitigate its effects on their lives and health.

"Healthy worry is felt in the feeling of uneasiness and concern," says , stress management counselor and speaker. "Unhealthy anxiety is when uneasiness and concern fills them with apprehension and they are constantly worried and cannot control their anxiety level."

We talked with some stress and health experts about the presence of stress in college and why it's important to identify certain types of stress and learn how to cope.

Why College is Stressful

Going off to college involves significant adjustments to your daily routine; your sleeping and eating habits, time-management skills, and stress levels will be altered in one way or another. And even though it's been barely three months since you left high school, you are now expected to be more independent and self sufficient.

Adapting to this new life stage and the inevitable stress that comes with it (both good and bad) affects students differently.

"A lot of people are going away to school, so they're moving away from their social support network and that's a pretty huge change right there," Scott says. "At the same time, they have a lot of new things they have to navigate--not just getting around campus and living on their own, but choosing their classes, choosing what direction they want to go in their lives and choosing who to hang out with."

Striking a balance between school and personal life takes discipline and strong time-management skills, something that not every student comes equipped with as a freshman.

"We have more ways to help ourselves and more ways to distract ourselves," says Dr. Gregory Jantz, psychologist and author of How to De-Stress Your Life. "We actually create more stress because we end up not being good time stewards."
Relationships can also be a source of stress for students. Wishy-washy friends who are supportive one minute and negative and insulting the next adds unnecessary stress, and according to Scott, can be worse for your health than having a completely conflicted relationship with an enemy.

"Knowing who is toxic to you and safe guarding a little bit [can] keep the stress from happening," she says. “There’s going to be conflict in every relationship at some point. Working on conflict resolution skills and communication skills in yourself can really help you manage the conflicts that come along."

**Effects of Stress**

A constant state of stress can affect all aspects of students’ bodies: physical, mental, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functions can go haywire under duress.

Scott points out that stress has a profound effect on your immune system and your state of equilibrium. Prolonged stress and sleepless nights can compromise your health, adding another thing for a student to stress about.

“When people are stressed, they tend to not take care of themselves as well,” says Scott. “They don’t do healthy behaviors like eating right, exercising and even going to the doctor as much as they need to. You’re attacking your health on several different fronts.”

Stress can also impact relationships in your life, whether it’s with friends, family, classmates or teachers. Jantz explains that stress distorts emotions, and you may be more irritable and defensive as a result.

“If you are stressed out, you are not going to be able to form these bonds or you’re going to have problems maintaining relationships,” says Rubel.

**Chronic Stress**

While it is perfectly normal, and even healthy to feel stressed out from time to time, there is a point where stress crosses the line into what experts call “chronic stress.”

Jantz explains that constant levels of tension can cause adrenal glands to release too much cortisol, keeping the body in a physiological state of stress.

“Chronic stress diminishes the amount of time you spend in the sleep cycles that we need to stay in [and] affects our digestion and our bodies,” he says.

Scott says that chronic stress is aggravated by not allowing your body to recover and return to a normal, relaxed state. “It can either be because your body is being triggered over and over again in a period of time, or it can be a constant stream of stress and you never recover from it,” she says.

In addition to strain on your body, Jantz points out that under chronic stress, you may subside to unhealthy behaviors. “If they're under chronic stress, maybe they're going to drink more or use [drugs],” he says. “We tend to look for more destructive outlets alternately.”

**How to Relieve Stress**

The experts agree that it is important for students to have stress-relief techniques that help them return to a calm and relaxed state of mind, even if the stress is still present.

De-stressing techniques vary, and what works for one student might not work for others.

Jantz says to restore your sanity, some people may only need something as simple as taking themselves out of their normal setting. Going outside and sitting under a tree can help regroup thoughts and let out some stress.

“Maybe there’s too much stimuli and you have to remove yourself from distraction,” he says.
"Use a different environment to help calm you down."

Taking care of your body is also a simple, yet efficient way to curb anxiety and stress overload. Students should schedule in exercise so it becomes a part of your daily routine. If you can, avoid processed foods, too much sugar, and energy drinks, which the experts unanimously agree can agitate stress levels.

"The body can get dehydrated, so [hydration] is another way of helping your mind," says Jantz. "Water improves concentration."

If projects, papers and tests are the main source of your stress, Rubel recommends not procrastinating and keeping a tight schedule and organized notes and work area.

Although it may seem impossible to reinforce the good things in your life when you feel like tearing your hair out, constructive thinking can help you see the proverbial glass as half-full.

"Students can change the way they think about things," says Rubel. "Maintain an optimistic, positive attitude with high self-esteem. Keep boundaries in place, laugh when you can, and share that laughter with others."