TIP SHEET FOR
STRESS MANAGEMENT

There are many ways to manage unhealthy stress in your life. As you begin to understand more about how stress affects you as an individual, you will develop your own ideas to help relieve tension.

Remember, some of these stress management strategies will be new skills and require practice to be effective. Think about learning to ride a bicycle. There was a time when this was a new skill and felt very unnatural and awkward. You probably needed help at first. With some coaching and practice, stress management, like bicycling or any other skill, becomes easier.

1. Take a Deep Breath!

Stress often causes us to breathe shallowly and this in turn almost always causes more stress! Mentally scan your body for physical tension.

Does your chest feel tight? You may be holding your breath without even knowing it! Shallow breathing puts less oxygen in the blood stream, producing an increase in muscle tension. You may experience headaches; you may feel more anxious and uptight.

The next time you feel "uptight," try taking a minute to slow down and breathe deeply. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count as you exhale - slowly!

2. Manage Time

One of the greatest sources of stress is over commitment or poor time management. Plan ahead. Make a reasonable schedule for yourself and include time for stress reduction as a regular part of your schedule.

Trying to take care of everything at once can seem overwhelming, and, as a result, you may not accomplish anything. Instead, make a list of what tasks you have to do, then do one at a time, checking them off as they're completed. Give priority to the most important ones and do those first. If a particularly unpleasant task faces you, tackle it early in the day and get it over with; the rest of your day will include much less anxiety.

Most importantly, do not overwork yourself. Resist the temptation to schedule things back-to-back. All too often we underestimate how long things will take. Schedule time for both work and recreation. Too much studying is actually inefficient and can lead to burnout. Recognize when you are most stressed and allow yourself some reasonable breaks. When things feel especially difficult, take a walk or otherwise change your scenery.
3. Connect with Others

Being by yourself is fine, but being lonely is different. A good way to combat sadness, boredom and loneliness is to seek out activities involving others. Consider being a participant! There are lists of organizations available on campus. Or you may choose to offer your services to neighbourhood or volunteer organizations. Help yourself by helping other people.

4. Talk It Out

When you feel something, try to express it (appropriately, of course!). "Bottled up" emotions increase frustration and stress. Share your feelings. Perhaps a friend, family member, teacher, clergy person or counsellor can help you see your problem in a different light. Talking with someone else can help clear your mind of confusion so that you can focus on problem solving. Put out "brushfires" while they are still small. Even if it is slightly embarrassing, asking for help soon after a problem occurs may avoid much more serious problems later. Also consider writing down thoughts and feelings. Putting problems on paper can assist you in clarifying the situation and allow you a new perspective.

5. Take a "Minute" Vacation

Create a quiet scene. You can't always run away, but you can dream. Imagining a quiet country scene can take you out of the turmoil of a stressful situation. When you have the opportunity, take a moment to close your eyes and imagine a place where you feel relaxed and comfortable. Notice all the details of your chosen place, including pleasant sounds, smells and temperature. Or change your mental "channel" by reading a good book or playing relaxing music to create a sense of peace and tranquillity.

6. Monitor Your Physical Comfort

Be as physically comfortable as the situation will allow. Wear comfortable clothing. If it's too hot, go somewhere where it's not. If your chair is uncomfortable, change it. If your computer screen causes eye-strain or backaches, change that, too. Don't wait until your discomfort turns into a real problem. Taking five minutes to arrange back support can save you several days of back pain!

7. Get Physical

Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Academic life is often sedentary, and sitting around can mean letting stress accumulate in your body. When you feel nervous, angry or upset, release the pressure through exercise or physical activity.

Try to find something you enjoy and make regular time for it. Running, walking or swimming are good options for some people, while others prefer dance or martial arts- all are available through the University. Working in the garden, washing your car, or playing with your dog can relieve that "uptight" feeling, relax you, and often will actually energize you! Remember, your body and mind work together.

8. Take Care of Your Body

You are special! Take care of yourself. Healthy eating and adequate sleep fuels your mind as well as your body. Avoid consuming too much caffeine and sugar. In excess, the temporary "highs" they provide often end in fatigue or a "crash" later. Take time to eat breakfast in the morning. It really will help keep you going through the day!

Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress. Like an automobile running low on gas, if you are irritable and tense from lack of sleep or not eating right, you will be less able to "go the distance" in dealing with stressful situations.
9. Laugh

Maintain your sense of humour, including the ability to laugh at yourself. Rent or take yourself to a funny movie: the sillier the plot the better. Laughter is good for you!

10. Know Your Limits

A major source of stress is people's efforts to control events or other people over whom they have little or no power. When confronted with a stressful situation, ask yourself: is this my problem? If it isn't, leave it alone. If it is, can you resolve it now? Once the problem is settled, leave it alone. Don't agonize over the decision, and try to accept situations you cannot change. There are many circumstances in life beyond your control, starting with the weather and including in particular the behaviour of others. Consider the fact that we live in an imperfect world. Know your limits. If a problem is beyond your control and cannot be changed at the moment, don't fight the situation. Learn to accept what is, for now, until such time when you can change things.

We often have a lot of responsibilities and demands made of us. Prioritise who and what is important to you and learn to say 'no' to others. Just take care of yourself and don't overcommit.

11. Must You Always Be Right?

Must you always be right? Do other people upset you- particularly when they don't do things your way? Consider cooperation or compromise rather than confrontation. A little give and take on both sides may reduce the strain and help you both feel more comfortable.

12. Have a Good Cry

Big boys and girls do cry. A good cry during periods of stress can be a healthy way to bring relief to your anxiety, and it might prevent a headache or other physical consequences of "bottling" things up. However, if you are crying daily, seek a consultation with a counsellor or a doctor. This can be a sign of depression.

13. Avoid Self Medication

Alcohol and other drugs do not remove the conditions that cause stress. Although they may seem to offer temporary relief, these substances only mask or disguise problems. In the long run, behaviour while "under the influence" increases rather than decreases stress. Prescription medications should be taken only on the advice of your doctor.

14. Look for the "Pieces of Gold" Around You

It is easy to fall into a "rut" of seeing only the negative when you are stressed. Some people have spent years "turning gold into garbage - the Midas touch in reverse." When someone says "That's a nice outfit" the "garbage collector" questions whether that person "really means it."

Your thoughts can become like a pair of very dark glasses, allowing little light or joy into your life. What would happen if each day for the next three days, you committed yourself to actively collecting (noticing) five "pieces of gold" from your environment?

Pieces of gold are positive or enjoyable moments or interactions. These may seem like small events but as these "pieces of gold" accumulate they can often provide a big lift to energy and spirits and help you begin to see things in a new, more balanced way.
Examples of "Pieces of Gold"

A friendly greeting from the bus driver... Someone you met yesterday remembering your name... A car in a really cool colour... Children's laughter... A motorist who stops to let you through traffic... The scent of new-mown grass... A dog catching a Frisbee... A sweet piece of fruit... A bird singing... A discount, a bargain, a coin left in the pay phone... The way the light comes through the trees... A call from a friend... A glorious sunset... A cool evening breeze, a toasty fire, a sense of well being.

Help is Available for Managing Stress

Even the best athletes benefit from coaching to enhance or recover their skills. Sometimes you may need some coaching too. If you've identified the sources of stress in your life and practised some personalized strategies, but continue to have difficulties in managing stress, a smart step would be to seek assistance.

Stress need not be a negative factor in your life. An increase in stress increases the adrenalin and energy in your body. Use this energy to make changes, overcome challenges and put stress to work for you.

Seek additional help

- Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus (02 4921 5801) or at the Central Coast campus (02 4348 4060).
- Make contact with the Chaplaincy Centre at the Newcastle campus (02 492 15571) or at the Central Coast campus (02 4348 4036).
- Make an appointment to see your doctor if you have any health concerns.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as does the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.

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