



Vance-Granville Community College

## Student Affairs – Counseling Services



### *Looking at Stress*

## **You Need Stress in Your Life!**

Stress adds flavor, challenge and opportunity to life. Without stress, life would be dull and unexciting. However, too much stress can seriously affect your physical and mental well-being. Recurrent physical and psychological stress can diminish self-esteem, decrease interpersonal and academic effectiveness and create a cycle of self-blame and self-doubt. It is important for your health that you find the optimal level of stress that you can learn to manage effectively.

Stress is unique and personal to each of us. What is relaxing to one person may be stressful to another. One person may find "taking it easy" at the beach relaxing while another may find it boring. The key to stress reduction is identifying strategies that fit you as an individual.

## **Signs of Stress**

The best way to cope with unhealthy stress is to recognize when your stress levels are building. While we often think of stress as the result of external events, the events themselves are not necessarily stressful. It is the way in which each individual interprets and reacts to an event that produces stress. People vary significantly in the type of events they experience as stressful and the way that they respond to these events. Public speaking is a good example: while some people see it as routine, others experience it as highly stressful.

## **Stress Signals**

Stress "signals" fall into four categories: thoughts, feelings, behavior and physical symptoms. When you are under stress you may experience:

Feelings	Thoughts	Behavioral	Physical
Anxiety, irritability, fear, moodiness, embarrassment	Self-criticism, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, forgetfulness or mental disorganization, preoccupation with the future, repetitive thoughts, fear of failure.	Stuttering or other speech difficulties, crying, acting impulsively, nervous laughter, "snapping": at friends, teeth grinding or jaw clenching, increased smoking, alcohol or other drug use, being prone to more accidents, increased or decreased appetite.	Tight muscles, cold or sweaty hands, headaches, back or neck problems, sleep disturbances, stomach distress, more colds and infections, fatigue, rapid breathing or pounding heart, trembling, dry mouth.



## Sources of Stress

Stress is a part of every student's daily life. Your personal stress requirements and the amount which you can tolerate before you become distressed varies with your life situation and your age. As a college student, the greatest sources of events you experience as stressful are likely to be relationships, academic and social situations, environment and lifestyle.

Leaving home or commuting daily, managing finances, living with roommates and juggling a job, classes, and relationships all contribute to the normal stress of being at the College. It is also not uncommon for students to feel overwhelmed and anxious about wasting time, meeting high standards or being lonely.

In addition, stress can also come from exciting or positive events. Falling in love, preparing to study abroad, or buying a new car can be just as stressful as less happy events. It is crucial to recognize stressful situations, address them, and develop strategies to manage your stress.



A critical first step in coping with stress is taking stock of the stressors in your life. If you are unsure about your sources of stress, complete the **Student Stress Checklist**.



After you have identified the sources of your stress, review the **Tips for Stress Management** and identify the ones which may be most helpful to you.



We've also included a list of **Resources and Reference Sources** for the information here provided.



## *Student Stress Checklist*

**Both positive and negative events can be stressful.**

**Make a note of any items that you have experienced in the past six months or are likely to experience in the next six months.**

1. Death of a loved one.	20. Change in sleeping habits.
2. Relocating to Henderson.	21. Lower grades than expected.
3. Divorce of parents.	22. Breakup of relationship.
4. Encounter with the legal system.	23. New job.
5. Transfer to a new school.	24. Financial problems.
6. Marriage.	25. Change in eating habits.
7. Lost job.	26. Chronic car trouble.
8. Elected to leadership position.	27. Pregnancy.
9. New romantic relationship.	28. Too many missed classes.
10. Serious argument with close friend.	29. Long commute to work/school.
11. Increase in course load or difficulty.	30. Working more than one job.
12. Change in health of family member.	31. Impending graduation.
13. First semester in college.	32. Argument with family member.
14. Failed important course.	33. Sexual concerns.
15. Major personal injury or illness.	34. Changes in alcohol and/or drug use.
16. Change in living conditions.	35. Roommate problems.
17. Argument with instructor.	36. Raising children.

18. Outstanding achievement.

19. Change in social life.



## *Tips 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.

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### **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! You may choose to offer your services to neighborhood 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 counselor 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 tranquility.

### **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. 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 humor, 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 behavior 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.

## **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 counselor or a physician. 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, behavior 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 color... 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 practiced some personalized strategies, but continue to have difficulties in managing stress, a smart step would be to seek assistance through Counseling Services.

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.

### **Vance-Granville Community College Resources**

Counseling Services: 738-3328

Career Exploration Center: 738-3326

LRC /Library: 738-3279

Area Mental Health: 430-3805

- Disability/Substance Abuse Services: 877-619-3761
- Health Dept: 492-7915, 431-1404

Registrar: 738-3265

Vice President of Student Affairs:  
738-3233

- Admissions: 738-3286
- Services for Students with Disabilities: 738-3282
- Financial Aid: 738-3280

- Emergency Calls: 9-1-1