Normal reactions to stress

Stress is our automatic response to demands, pressures, and/or competing priorities in our life. Not all stress is bad. Some stress can motivate us and help us focus on achieving our goals. But too much stress, or stress carried too long, can activate our “fight or flight” response ... which, if left unchecked, can decrease our ability to function in one or more areas of our life.

As a college student, stress is unavoidable. The goal isn’t to try to get rid of all stress. Rather, the goal is to learn to respond well to stress. This means balancing your daily stressors with the activities and attitudes that replenish the physical, mental, and emotional energy lost to stress.

Signs your stress is too high

Short-term stress is common for college students. But when you can’t return to a relaxed, calm state, the sustained changes in your body – including increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, and muscle tension – can lead to mental and physical exhaustion, illness, and a decreased ability to function.

Emotional symptoms:
- Irritability
- Anxiety, fear, worry
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anger
- Sadness, crying
- Loss of pleasure in things once enjoyed
- Depression
- Hopelessness

Academic / cognitive symptoms:
- Difficulty retaining information read or heard
- Unwanted or repetitive thoughts
- Poor concentration
- Disorganization, forgetfulness
- Deterioration in quality or quantity of work

Physical symptoms:
- Muscle tension
- Frequent illness
- Stomach aches and digestive issues
- Sleep disturbances
- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Headaches
- Vague aches and pains
- Appetite or weight changes
- Heart palpitations

Tips for managing stress

No one can eliminate stress entirely, but we can learn to manage it better. How you think about and respond to daily situations determines whether you find them overwhelming or manageable. Here are a few tips to help keep stress in check:

Take care of yourself: Prioritize sleep. Eat nutritious food each day. Get some exercise. Improving these habits alone can go a long way to mitigating your stress.

Connect with others: Those with strong social support networks (friends, family, teammates, etc.) report less stress and overall improved mental health.

Improve your time management skills: Cornell’s Learning Strategies Center (lsc.cornell.edu) is an excellent resource for learning to be more organized and efficient with the time you have every week. Be sure to speak with your professors if you need extra help, or anticipate difficulty meeting deadlines.

Refuse to play the stress game: Sometimes Cornellians wear busyness like a badge of honor, and compete with each other about who’s more stressed. Remember that stress diminishes your quality of life, so aspire to be organized and healthy instead.

Let go of perfectionism: Cornell students have extremely high standards for themselves. But no one hits it out of the ballpark every time. Try to be as understanding with yourself as you would be with a friend.
Cultivate resilience: Practice daily healthy habits including positive self-talk, physical activity, and asking for help when needed. Building resilience can help you bounce back from stress and challenges with minimal emotional upset. Visit health.cornell.edu/resilience.

Keep things in perspective: Ask yourself – what’s the worst thing that could happen? And what is the likelihood of that happening? Remember, no matter how bad (or good) things are right now, they will change.

Reframe: Stop negative self-talk, and give yourself some credit for your abilities and accomplishments. See mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow. Overcoming the fear of failure is only accomplished by doing things you fear over and over again, resolving to bounce back, and learning throughout the process.

Learn to meditate: Meditation has numerous proven physical and mental health benefits, including reducing reactivity to stressors and helping to put things back in perspective. You can learn to meditate through Cornell’s free Let’s Mediate program or through our online resources: visit health.cornell.edu/meditate.

Get out in nature: Research shows that spending even short periods of time in nature can improve memory and ability to concentrate, as well as reduce overall stress and improve your sense of well-being.

5-minute stress busters

Deep breathing: Take slow, deep breaths through your nose – filling up your whole chest – and exhale slowly through your mouth. Try to make your exhale longer than your inhale.

Progressive muscle relaxation: Starting with your toes and working your way up to your head, slowly tighten ... hold ... and then relax your muscle groups (feet, legs, buttocks, abdomen, shoulders, arms, hands, face). This type of body scan exercise is also great for helping you fall asleep.

Mini-meditation: Even two-five minutes of meditation can calm your mind and help you feel more focused and relaxed. Learn how on our Meditation page: health.cornell.edu/meditate.

Visualization: Mentally rehearse a task you want to master. Imagine yourself acing the task (taking an exam, having an important conversation). Now, focus on how your success feels (excited, relieved, satisfied, smart). Re-visit this feeling often.

Change of scenery: Get up and take a short walk. Or take the longer route to class to take in a few extra minutes of nature.

Let it out: Laugh with a friend. Do 20 jumping jacks. Put on your favorite song and dance.

When to get help

If you’re having trouble managing your stress, and find that it’s impacting your quality of life and ability to function, we can help.

Schedule an appointment with a Cornell Health medical or mental health provider: health.cornell.edu/appointments.

Or stop by Let’s Talk – available Monday-Friday at various campus locations – to consult informally with a Cornell Health counselor: health.cornell.edu/LetsTalk.

More resources for support are available on our website (health.cornell.edu) and on Cornell’s Caring Community website (caringcommunity.cornell.edu).