

Understanding and Managing Stress at Cornell

What is stress?

"I'm so stressed..." we hear this every day, but what does it really mean?

Stress is our internal response to external "events." In other words, stress is what our bodies and minds experience as we adapt to a continually changing environment.

The stress response can be triggered by both positive experiences, such as falling in love or acing an exam, or from negative experiences, such as an unexpected loss, disappointment, or a traumatic event. How you think about and respond to daily situations determines whether you find them overwhelming or manageable.

- **As a positive influence**, stress can compel us to action, move us into our "peak performance zone," and bring a sense of excitement or exhilaration to our lives.
- **As a negative influence**, it can result in fatigue, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness. If this response persists over time or results from a sudden significant change, it can lead to health problems

such as headaches, upset stomach, heart palpitations, insomnia, eating disorders, or depression.

The stress continuum

- **Healthy tension (green zone)**
Stimulating challenges and demands that motivate you to improve your performance and efficiency have the added benefit of increasing joy and excitement in your life. Consider it a daily goal to balance the "right amount" of stimulating challenges with a healthy diet, a consistent sleep schedule, regular exercise, and stress management techniques. This will help you stay in the green zone.
- **Peak performance zone**
In order to reach your personal best when you need it most (e.g., on the day of an exam, athletic event, performance, or other personal challenge), you need to be well-prepared physically, mentally, and emotionally. This foundation will allow you to access the extra burst of

energy and focus needed to achieve your peak performance.

- **Imbalance (yellow zone)**
When stress builds, the protective functions of your body and mind become compromised. You may experience irritability, aches and pains, sleep problems, or a decline in performance.
- **Breakdown (red zone)**
If stress is left unchecked, symptoms will worsen, causing forgetfulness, severe physical complaints, illness, feelings of anxiety, panic and/or depression.

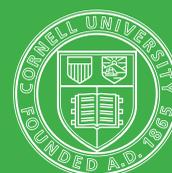
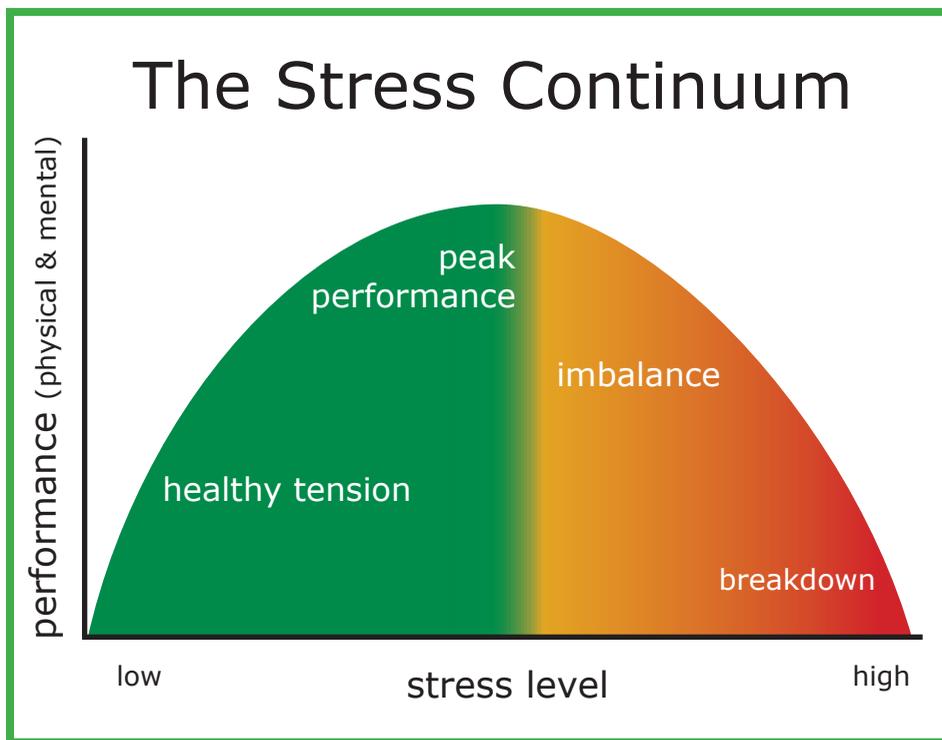
Excelling at anything requires monitoring your stress level and then adjusting your daily health practices (e.g., sleep, diet, exercise) and stress management strategies to avoid "burnout" or a plateau in performance. This ongoing process builds the foundation for achieving success.

The stress response

When you perceive that a situation, event, or problem exceeds your resources or abilities, your body reacts automatically with the "fight or flight" response. Your heart pumps more blood; adrenaline and cortisol are released. In the short run, this can give a burst of physical energy that pushes you to physically overcome the "threat." Continual activation of this response increases the risk of developing ongoing physical or mental health problems.

You can often tell you are under stress by the effect it has on your body, thoughts, feelings, and behavior. The way you experience stress can vary in intensity and appearance, and may be quite different from how it is experienced by others. Here are some of the signs of stress you may recognize.

- **On the body...** muscle aches, headaches, or backaches; increased susceptibility to colds or other illnesses; stomach upset and digestion problems; shortness of breath, chest pain, racing heartbeat, difficulty sleeping, and fatigue.
- **On thoughts and feelings...** forgetfulness, persistent negative thinking,



repetitive thoughts, poor concentration, diminished reasoning ability; difficulty organizing, retaining or retrieving information you've learned; mood swings, irritability, guilt, restlessness, sadness, depression, anger, fear, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed.

- **On behavior...** skipping a class or job; diminished attention to personal hygiene; decline in performance; over-eating or under-eating; angry outbursts, relationship problems; increased use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs; self-injury, social withdrawal, crying spells, blaming others.

Managing stress

Managing your stress means finding and maintaining a balance between those things that deplete or drain you, and those that renew or refresh.

You have a great deal of control over how stress affects you. While you can't control all of the challenges daily life throws your way, you can improve your response to stress. Make a conscious effort to:

1. create a daily routine that meets your body's need for rest, energy, intellectual stimulation, social interaction and quiet time for self;
2. learn how to turn off the "fight or flight" response; and
3. develop a variety of stress management skills to strengthen your relaxation response.

Create "balance" through daily health practices:

- **Make time for sleep.** Sleep contributes to your mood, appearance, cognitive functioning, and academic performance. It also enhances your immune system. Researchers recommend establishing a regular bedtime and rising time so that you can get 8-9 hours of continuous sleep a night. Addressing concerns about your sleep with a health care provider can be a first step in restoring balance.
- **Eat well.** Quality food eaten at regular intervals provides the fuel your body and mind need to be productive throughout the day. Choose a variety of foods (in color, textures and tastes) to ensure that you get all the essential nutrients each day. Take time to enjoy your food and use this as an opportunity to socialize with friends.

- **Exercise** is a healthy way to let go of pent-up energy, anger, or anxiety. Any physical movement can reduce stress. Try walking, dancing, swimming, biking, team sports, yoga, Tai-Chi, or a gym workout. Just 30 minutes of light-to-moderate exercise can release endorphins, the body's natural mood enhancers.

Exercise also boosts the immune system, improves the quality of sleep, manages weight, elevates mood, improves self-esteem, increases energy level, and aides in the management of many chronic illnesses (e.g., diabetes, asthma, etc.).



- **Connect.** Spending time with people who bring out the qualities you like about yourself can help keep you emotionally-balanced. Turn to those who understand you, who share similar interests, who are non-competitive with you, who make you laugh. We all need people in our lives who can accept us as we are, who know how to give us hope, and who can help us put life in perspective.
- **Limit use of substances,** including alcohol, tobacco, sugar, caffeine, or other non-prescribed drugs. While it may be tempting to use one or more of these for temporary relief, the rebound effects may exacerbate stress.

Learn to turn off your "fight or flight" response:

Recognize when you are stressed.

It is important to identify and understand what triggers your flight or fight response. Your body's own "warning signs" may indicate that you are "stressed out" and that it is time to address the symptoms and explore the underlying causes.

For example, do you:

- have headaches, muscle aches, changes in eating habits or problems sleeping?
- become nervous, panicky, irritable, impatient or emotionally upset?
- tend to withdraw or become angry?
- have difficulty concentrating, being creative, or decisive?

If you can routinely identify what stresses you and how it affects you, it will become easier to choose effective coping strategies.

Adjust your way of thinking.

The way you think about stress makes a difference because your thoughts and perceptions create your feelings. These feelings will either activate the *stress response* (with a positive or negative effect) or the *relaxation response*.

For example, let's say you are studying for a prelim. You *start thinking* about how little you remember from the reading assignments, how many lectures you missed, and how little study time is left. In response, you may *feel* worried, anxious, or even a little panicky. Try shifting your focus away from what you think you don't remember toward making a plan on how you can best utilize the time left to study. Visualize how you will feel when you have successfully completed the prelim; then get to work and stay focused on your study plan.

Counter negative thinking.

- Practice accepting things you can't change and taking action on the things you can.
- Challenge unrealistic thoughts and beliefs.
- Modify rigid "black and white" thinking. Steer clear of terms such as "always," "never," or "should."
- Treat yourself the way you treat your best friend – with kindness, care, and support.
- Counter negative self-talk, such as "I'm never going to catch up," with a positive internal dialogue. Give yourself credit for your abilities and your accomplishments and then tell yourself, "I was

"...laughter is one of the most beneficial stress reducers"



BREATHE



MEDITATE



RELAX YOUR BODY



PLAY



LISTEN TO MUSIC



VISUALIZE

being too negative; I know I can do this if I stick to my study plan.”

- Adopt the attitude that every experience in life is a teacher. Many have said they learned more from their mistakes than from their successes.

Manage your time better.

Look for ways to control or eliminate the cause of your stress. If you don't have enough time in the day to do all the things you need to accomplish, here are some suggestions on how to reclaim your time:

- Cut down on or eliminate time-wasters or other unnecessary distractions, such as Facebook, computer games, television.
- Set boundaries on your time so others don't co-opt it.
- Make a daily and weekly plan to help you reach long-term goals and to meet personal needs.
- Break-up a large project into smaller, more manageable parts; set deadlines for completion of each. For more information, visit: www.clt.cornell.edu [Search "Study Skills."]
- Recognize that you do not have to say "yes" to every request others make.
- Shorten your exposure to a source of stress so it's something you can manage without feeling overpowered (e.g., take a break, leave the situation, limit the conversation, or bring a friend as a "buffer").
- Drop a class if you're taking more credits than required.

Explore a variety of stress management techniques:

There are many techniques you can learn and use to quickly shift the way your body and mind react to stressors. Try using some of the following behaviors to elicit the "relaxation response."

- **Deep breathing** can reduce anxiety and disrupt repetitive or negative thoughts by focusing awareness on the present moment. Changing from fast, shallow breathing to slow, deep breaths can shift your mood and perspective.
- **Meditation** is the process of tuning out the world and turning your attention inward. Focus your attention on one thing at a time...your breath, a word or phrase, or an action. Observe without judgment the thoughts that arise as you "tune in;" release the thoughts as you exhale and return your attention to the object of

your focus. With practice, this skill will help you manage your life by returning a sense of calm when you begin to feel out-of-balance.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation** systematically relieves body tension and helps you feel more relaxed within minutes. Starting with your toes and working your way up to your head, slowly tighten...hold...and then relax your muscle groups (e.g., feet, legs, abdomen, buttocks, shoulder, arms, hands, face). As you release, think to yourself, "these muscles are now relaxed."
- **Play!** Enjoy a pleasurable, no-pressure activity. Being "child-like" (different from childish) allows you to explore, to experience your feelings in the moment, to release tension in a creative way, and to rebound from disappointments with greater ease.
- **Laughter** jolts us out of our usual state of mind and can eliminate negative feelings. As a result, humor can be a powerful antidote to burn-out. Hearty belly-laughs exercise muscles, stimulate circulation, decrease stress hormones and boost your immunity, making laughter one of the most beneficial stress reduction techniques you can practice.
- **Listening to music** can energize or relax you. Studies show it can lower blood pressure and respiration, creating a calming effect. Be conscious of how music makes you feel. Choose what you need at the moment (e.g., to lighten a heavy mood; to help you relax and fall asleep). Have fun discovering new music; attend performances; make your own (sing, drum, etc.). Enjoy sharing it with your friends.
- **Visualization** is the process of mentally rehearsing a task you want to master. Doing it will help you achieve many of the same benefits you would from actual physical practice. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Imagine yourself acing the task (e.g., taking an exam, having an important conversation). Now, focus on how your success feels (excited, relieved, satisfied, smart).
- **Take a power nap.** A 20-30 minute nap in the afternoon can increase your alertness, reduce stress and boost your cognitive functioning without leaving you feeling groggy or interfering with night-time sleep.

duction techniques you can practice."



- **Consider alternative or complementary techniques.** This may include yoga, massage, acupuncture, Tai Chi, or Reiki. Many forms of complementary health care and self-care practices can boost energy and stamina, stimulate circulation, reduce tension, and help restore emotional balance.

Gannett Stress Management Resources

Information and web links for each of the following services can be found on the web at: www.gannett.cornell.edu

BASICS: If your use alcohol or other drugs is contributing to your stress, consider calling 255-4782 to make an appointment with a BASICS provider. She or he can help you explore your alcohol or other drug use in a non-judgmental environment.

CHEP Nutrition Counseling: If you're considering options for improving your diet, getting the most out of the food you eat, working on building muscle mass, or re-evaluating your relationship to food, consider calling 255-5155 to make an appointment with a Gannett nutritionist.

Counseling and Psychological Services: Gannett's professional counselors provide a safe place to talk about your concerns. Services are offered in-house, and at a variety of "Let's Talk" off-site locations. Many students seek services when they experience loneliness, anxiety, depression, adjustment challenges, relationship difficulties, and/or other stress-related issues. In-house CAPS appointments can be made by calling 255-5208. "Let's Talk" hours are listed on-line at www.gannett.cornell.edu/LetsTalk

Health Promotion: Staff in Health Promotion offer information, training and outreach programs to enhance your health and to support a balanced lifestyle. A wide variety of brochures, posters, and website resources are provided, along with referrals to other services that foster healthy living. You can reach Health Promotion by phone at 255-4782.

Massage Therapy: Located on campus, in Schoellkopf Hall, Gannett's licensed massage therapist utilizes several types of massage techniques (Swedish, connective tissue, trigger point, reflexology), depending on the needs of the client. Massage

therapy can address a variety of issues, including localized pain, headaches, stress, insomnia, and general tension. Call 255-5985 for appointments.

Medical Services: Gannett clinicians can assess the health-related symptoms often experienced with stress (e.g., sleep difficulties, gastro-intestinal problems, headaches, backaches, etc.). They can help determine or rule out associated medical conditions, and offer suggestions to ease discomfort. Call 255-5155 for an appointment.

Sexual Health Counseling: Free and confidential appointments can be made with a Gannett Clinical Counselor. You can talk about stress related to relationships, intimacy, sexual identity or functioning; or concerns regarding pregnancy, sexually-transmitted infections, etc. Call 255-4782 for an appointment.

Pharmacy: The Gannett Pharmacy offers over 1,000 prescription and non-prescription supplies, many of which can help relieve the symptoms of stress. You will also find novelty items such as Cherry Pit Pillows to soothe sore muscles, light therapy devices to offset "the winter blues," and a variety of books on health-related topics. These titles include:

- *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* by David D. Burns, MD
- *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* by Edwin Bourne, PhD
- *The Depression Workbook* by Mary Ellen Copeland, Matthew McKay, PhD
- *The Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris, MD
- *The Mindful Way Through Depression* by Mark Williams, et al.
- *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Martha Davis, et al.

You can view these books and other products at the Pharmacy (Level 3). For other pharmacy needs, including prescription refills, phone 254-6337.

CREDIT: The stress continuum on the cover of this fact sheet is based on the definitive work of Yerkes and Dodson, JD, 1908.

This is your creative space . . .

Use it to brainstorm, draw, doodle, or make a list of the following:

- What you already do to manage your stress.
- What you haven't tried yet, but would like to explore.

Stay in the "Healthy Tension (Green) Zone."

Fall and Spring Semester Hours:

Monday-Friday	8:30 am-5:00 pm
Wednesday	9:30 am-5:00 pm
Saturday	10:00 am-4:00 pm
Sunday	building closed

Check the web for hours during breaks, winter and summer sessions: www.gannett.cornell.edu

e-mail: gannett@cornell.edu

phone: 607-255-5155 fax: 607-255-0269

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