Why we “Stress Out”

There are two main reasons......We perceive a situation as dangerous, difficult, or painful.

We don’t believe we have the resources to cope.

We often identify specific events, people, or situations that seem to make us feel stressed. It’s as if these things automatically cause us feel stressed out. In reality, it’s how we perceive an event, the meaning we give to it, that leads us to feel stressed or not stressed about it.

The interesting thing about stress is that it begins with our own perceptions of things! You may have noticed that some people can feel quite stressed out about a particular event while others don’t seem to be bothered by it at all? For example, if three of your friends all get a poor grade on a test, you might notice some different reactions.

One friend may seem mildly annoyed for an hour or so.

Another friend doesn’t seem to be bothered at all.

The third friend, however, might become quite alarmed by this poor grade. She can't get it off her mind, she vows to study three times as hard next time, she can't concentrate on her other work, and she might even find it difficult to fall asleep that evening.

She might become increasingly concerned about all the grades she'll make this term, and wonder whether her GPA will suffer.

In a case such as this, a poor grade on a test means something different for each of your friends. The same situation has happened to all three, but each person feels more or less stressed about it because of what it means to him or her.

Symptoms of Stress

Symptoms of stress can affect us physically, behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively. You can learn to recognize these symptoms or signals in yourself before stress gets too far out of hand. When you recognize your unique signals, it’s time to take action.
Stress relief from laughter? It's no joke.

Short-term benefits
A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body. Laughter can:

Stimulate many organs. Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.

Activate and relieve your stress response. A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response and increases your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.

Soothe tension. Laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

Long-term effects
Laughter isn't just a quick pick-me-up, though. It's also good for you over the long haul.

Laughter may:

Improve your immune system. Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses.

Relieve pain. Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers. Laughter may also break the pain-spasm cycle common to some muscle disorders.

Increase personal satisfaction. Laughter can also make it easier to cope with difficult situations. It also helps you connect with other people.

Improve your mood. Many people experience depression, sometimes due to chronic illnesses. Laughter can help lessen your depression and anxiety and make you feel happier.

Go ahead and give it a try. Turn the corners of your mouth up into a smile and then give a laugh, even if it feels a little forced. Once you've had your chuckle, take stock of how you're feeling. Are your muscles a little less tense? Do you feel more relaxed or buoyant? That's the natural wonder of laughing at work.

Laughing is the best medicine

Humor can be learned. In fact, developing or refining your sense of humor may be easier than you think.

Put humor on your horizon. Find a few simple items, such as photos or comic strips that make you chuckle. Then hang them up at home or in your office. Keep funny movies or comedy albums on hand for when you need an added humor boost.

Laugh and the world laughs with you. Find a way to laugh about your own situations and watch your stress begin to fade away. Even if it feels forced at first, practice laughing. It does your body good.

Share a laugh. Make it a habit to spend time with friends who make you laugh. And then return the favor by sharing funny stories or jokes with those around you.

Knock-knock. Browse through your local bookstore or library's selection of joke books and get a few rib ticklers in your repertoire that you can share with friends.

Know what isn't funny. Don't laugh at the expense of others. Some forms of humor aren't appropriate. Use your best judgment to discern a good joke from a bad, or hurtful, one.
Stress occurs when your tension level exceeds your energy level, resulting in an overloaded feeling. “As long as our available energy exceeds our tension level, then we’re in an okay state,” Dr. Forbes says. “But if energy is low and tensions are higher, then that can result in a state of anxiety, depression, and feeling overwhelmed.”

Get enough sleep. It may be tempting to hit the hay at 4 a.m. and then attend an 8 a.m. class, but shortchanging yourself on rest can increase your stress level. “Winging it on not much sleep has a profound effect on how we experience the stressors of the day,” Forbes says. Plus, insufficient sleep can put you at risk for serious illnesses, such as diabetes, obesity, and depression. Adults typically need seven to nine hours of sleep a night for best health.

Eat well. A steady diet of pizza and vending-machine fare can decrease energy levels in the body, leading to a lower threshold for stress. “You end up feeling very tired and looking for the same [junk food] to kick you back up,” Forbes says.

Exercise. When you’re stressed, moving around may be the last thing you feel like doing. But as little as 20 minutes a day of physical activity can reduce stress levels.

Avoid unnatural energy boosters. Artificial stimulants like caffeine pills or prescription meds may help you stay awake for that all-night study session, but putting off your body’s need to sleep will ultimately result in an energy crash, resulting again in a greater susceptibility to stress.

Get emotional support. Choose a friend or family member who won’t be judgmental or try to give lots of advice. Or seek the help of a professional counselor or psychologist. To find a trusted practitioner, check with your student counseling center for recommendations.

Don’t give up your passions. Your schedule may be filled with lectures and study groups, but try to find at least a couple of hours each week to pursue a hobby or other activity that you enjoy. “Do something that feeds the peace of your soul in some way and stay connected with it,” Forbes says. “It promotes the anti-stress physiology of your body.”

Try not to overload yourself. Between classes, extracurricular groups, and maybe even a job, it’s easy for students to take on more than they can handle. “Take good, loving care of yourself,” Forbes says. “You are your own parent from here on out. Start caring for yourself like you would for a child in your charge.”

Avoid relaxing with alcohol. Having three or four beers to unwind after a hard day of studying may seem perfectly logical, but any unresolved stress that you have will just come flooding back after your buzz subsides.

Breathe. When you feel stressed, deep-breathing exercises can help melt away the tension. Try this exercise: Inhale slowly through your nose, hold the breath for a few seconds, then exhale through your mouth, and repeat as needed.

Fitness Tip:
Having a hard time fitting in 30 minutes or more of exercise a day? Break it up! Aim for 3 or 4 ten minute bursts of exercise throughout your day!
Positive Impacts of good sleep

There is a great amount of research on sleep and its impact and there are many resources available for those seeking it. However, what you probably most need to know is that adequate sleep (average of 7-9 hours/night) has been linked to the following positive impacts:

**Learning and memory:**
Sleep helps the brain commit new information to memory through a process called memory consolidation. In studies, people who’ve slept after learning a task did better on tests later.

**Metabolism and weight:**
Chronic sleep deprivation may cause weight gain by affecting the way our bodies process and store carbohydrates, and by altering levels of hormones that affect our appetite.

**Safety:**
Sleep debt contributes to a greater tendency to fall asleep during the daytime. These lapses may cause falls and mistakes such as medical errors, air traffic mishaps, and road accidents.

**Mood:**
Sleep loss may result in irritability, impatience, inability to concentrate, and moodiness. Too little sleep can also leave you too tired to do the things you like to do.

**Cardiovascular health:**
Serious sleep disorders have been linked to hypertension, increased stress hormone levels, and irregular heartbeat.

Types of Relaxation Exercises

**Deep Breathing:**
When we feel stressed, it is common for our rate of breathing to increase. We also tend to breathe in a shallow manner, more highly in our chest. A deep breathing exercise allows us to take fuller, slower breaths that reflect a true relaxed state.

**Visualization/Imagery:**
Visualization is a nice way of giving our minds and bodies a "mini vacation." It involves using imagery to fully immerse ourselves in a pleasant scene, noticing the sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations.

**Meditation:**
Meditation can be described as "mental exercise" such as concentration on one’s breathing or repetition of a mantra. Various types of meditation that are recognized include transcendental meditation, prayer, Zen meditation, Taoist meditation, mindfulness meditation, Buddhist meditation and others. The end goal of all types of meditation lead to a mind that is quieted and free from stress by the use of quiet contemplation and reflection.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation:**
This practice involves sequentially tensing and relaxing the large skeletal muscle groups. Muscle relaxation is achieved by noting the contrast between the state of tension and relaxation and by increasing discernment of muscle groups that are prone to carrying tension.