

Is everyone as Stressed Out as I am?

by Yasmin Rampuri, Peer Health Educator



It's that time of year. You walk around campus and you think, "no one is as swamped as I am; no one is as behind as I am; no one procrastinates more than I do." Well, I'll let you in on a little secret. You're not alone. Deep down inside you know it's true -- we're all students in the same boat with the same stressors.

On top of the challenges all of us have to deal with (relationships of all kinds, finances, work),

students have a whole smorgasbord of their own: classes, midterms, due dates for 20-page papers with 30 references, group projects from hell, lab write-ups and assignments coming out of our, um, ears. It never ends.

And that's part of the problem. Stress isn't -- in and of itself -- a bad thing. We need a certain amount of it to feel alive and stay motivated. But there is a certain optimal level we function best at, and most students I know have a little more on their plates than "optimal". And most students are not very good at dealing with their stress.

Sometimes it's okay to just put everything you're going through on the shelf for a while to keep your sanity, or to get some perspective, but eventually it's necessary to become aware of how out of control you're feeling and work through it.

Becoming aware means you need to learn what your body does and how your personality and habits change when you have a lot going on. Everyone is unique and has their own signs of high stress. These triggers can be cognitive (irritability, poor concentration, absent mindedness), affective (depression, anxiety, anger), somatic (muscle tension, ulcers, fatigue) or behavioral (sleep disturbances; increased drinking, eating, or smoking, etc.). There will be times when you're showing some of these symptoms and it may be helpful for you to realize that you might need some time out.

There are lots of ways to de-stress, and the bottom line on all of them is take care of yourself:

- Eat a balanced diet and don't skip meals.
- Get enough sleep.
- Schedule in "me" time and use it to pamper yourself.
- Get some moderate exercise, preferably outside in nature.
- Take time to laugh and talk with friends.
- Cry if you need the release. (A sad movie is a great catalyst.)
- Listen to music.
- Get some healthy touch -- Even stroking a pet is a proven stress reducer.
- Learn and practice some relaxation or meditation techniques. (There are lots out there; go to a library or psychologist and research it if you're interested.)
- Find a way of managing your time that works for you; set priorities and write things down!
- Play a few computer games. (Yes, a few. Playing too many will just eat up time and make things worse.)
- Eliminate unnecessary stresses like last-minute anxiety, unhealthy relationships, and over-commitment.

According to Dr. Gretchen Hess, Assistant Dean of Student Services in the Faculty of Education, the key is to have a whole repertoire of these stress management ideas developed and know when you need to do what. Certain things will work better for you depending on what the stressor is and what you are able to do at the time.

We asked Judy Hancock, Health Education Coordinator at the University Health Centre,

what her favourite stress buster is. "A good massage," she told us, "or a hot bubble bath with candlelight and soft music." Sounds great!

A lot of daily stress can be dealt with by using these kinds of techniques, but sometimes we need help to cope. In that case, there are several resources on campus -- the Student Distress Centre, Student Counselling Services, and the psychiatrists at the University Health Centre. All these places have shorter waiting lists than comparable services off-campus, and they're staffed by people who understand the special stresses that come with student life. And what's more, the services are free for students!

We all have a lot to deal with as students. Perhaps what's most important is to remember that it's not the events themselves that are stressful but our perception of them and what we do about them.

For more information on avoiding unplanned pregnancy, managing stress, and generally staying healthy and productive as a student, visit the Student Health Resource Centre, 2-300 SUB, or surf over to www.ualberta.ca/HealthInfo