Stress

We would all agree that student life today can be stressful. Decisions need to be made, problems solved, assignments completed (yesterday), exams revised for, money (or the lack of it) managed, relationships worked out and not forgetting those library books that are six weeks late.

It’s often very difficult to find the time, energy and resources to deal with everything that university life throws at you and it’s not hard to see why stress levels can soar. We are all more aware of stress; it’s a word often used to describe how we feel, but what is it?

What is stress?

Stress can be described as our body’s reaction to the everyday demands of life. It’s the natural, healthy, hormonal reaction which helps us tackle challenging situations. Adrenaline is produced as a response to the demand, giving us extra energy and alertness. You may have heard it called the ‘fight or flight’ reaction and it’s this which has helped the human race to survive. In our dark and distant past this reaction helped us to survive the dangers of predatory animals and aggressive neighbouring tribes, or the hazards of nature.

How to recognise the stress response

When faced with a situation which we interpret as a demand being made upon us, the following reaction occurs:

- adrenaline is released, our sense are activated and we become mentally alert;
- our breathing rate speeds up, nostrils and air passages in the lungs open wider to get more air in quickly;
- our heartbeat speeds up and blood pressure rises;
- sweating increases to help cool the body;
- blood and nutrients are concentrated in the muscles to provide extra strength.

Though events which we experience nowadays may not, in the main, present a physical danger, they can still be sufficient to produce the fight or flight reaction. However, if all of this pent-up energy provided by the adrenaline cannot be utilised, the physical results of the stress response will continue, with the body remaining on ‘full alert’ for long periods of time. It is this long-term response which can adversely affect our physical and mental well-being.
The signs to look out for

Some or all of the following signs may be experienced:

- decision making becomes difficult
- getting to sleep becomes difficult due to worrying about tomorrow
- feelings of guilt when relaxing
- feeling tense, impatient or irritable
- feeling the need to interrupt when others are talking
- feeling frustrated when people don’t/won’t do what you want
- feeling that you have too much to think about and finding concentration difficult
- drinking or smoking more than usual
- loss of appetite or a tendency to eat hurriedly
- a tendency to argue more
- life seems full of crises

What causes stress?

The stress response is linked with our perceived ability to cope with a given situation. If we feel we can cope, we feel in control and the need for the fight or flight adrenaline response is reduced.

Students’ comments …

“It’s the amount of work we have to do to time deadlines … I suppose we do tend to leave things to the last minute, which doesn’t help.”

“You want to do well for everyone, not just yourself. You know that your family are expecting some results at the end of all this.”

“Coming to university is exciting and stressful, especially at first. You soon realise that you have to make loads of decisions about all sorts of things, mostly on your own. It was easier at home because you had your family and friends there to ask.”

“Half the time I’m too tired to feel anything, but if you don’t work you won’t have enough money and then you get stressed because you can’t afford to pay your bills … but then you’re too tired and don’t have the time to study. Trying to sort out one problem just leads to another.”

So what can you do about it?

First and foremost, talk to someone about how you feel. Voicing your worries out loud, sharing them with someone, is one of the best ways to ease things.
Talking about the amount of work you have to do with someone in a similar situation can help to put things into perspective and help you feel less isolated.

**Take regular exercise and relaxation.** For health reasons we are advised to exercise for at least 20 minutes three times a week. Similar levels of exercise can also help with stress. If possible, 30 minutes a day doing something you enjoy will help you unwind and use up all the pent-up energy created by stressful situations. Relaxation exercises, yoga, tai chi and meditation can also help. See back of leaflet for weblinks and reading material.

**Have a regular dose of fun.** One of the best de-stressors is laughter. Admittedly, not easy when you’re worried, feeling wound up and stony broke, but trying to see the funny side of things can help you unwind.

**Limit the amount of caffeine you take in tea/coffee and fizzy drinks.** Caffeine is a stimulant and as a result you may feel more alert and able to stay awake, but it can lead to disturbed sleep and palpitations, which may already be symptoms of stress, creating a vicious circle.

**What not to do about it**

There are lots of things you may feel like doing to overcome stress, but some coping strategies are unhelpful and can make the situation feel a lot worse.

Drinking alcohol to excess will probably make you feel worse in the long run (alcohol is a depressant). Whatever it is that is causing your stress will still be there when you sober up, and drinking may increase stress and can lead to financial concerns.

There is nothing in a cigarette which relieves stress. It is only the craving for nicotine which is relieved. Stress can be added to if you are worrying about the long-term effects on your lungs, and again, using your meagre money rations on cigarettes will only compound financial worries.

**Where can I get support?**

The University of Leicester Counselling and Wellbeing Service offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling. Talking to someone who is not involved in your life can help you recognise patterns of behaviour and find your strengths while working in a group can provide invaluable learning and support.

Counselling appointments usually last 50 minutes and the number of
appointments will be decided by you and your counsellor. You can arrange an appointment by contacting our receptionist by telephone on 0116 223 1780, fax on 0116 223 1269 or by Email at counselling@le.ac.uk, or you can call into reception at the Counselling and Wellbeing Service. The Service also provides workshops at certain times of the year, such as exam stress, relaxation, confidence building etc. Please enquire at the Service or check the Service’s website.

Your GP may be able to help by referring you to counselling or other support services. In some cases, short-term medication can help relieve severe anxiety and stress. However, it is important to bear in mind that this is only part of the solution.

If you know what is causing your stress levels to soar, then you might want to talk to someone who can address your difficulties directly. If it’s an academic issue you might approach your personal tutor, and if you live in university accommodation you may want to speak with your warden or sub-warden.

**Other sources of support**

Other sources of support could be:

**AccessAbility Centre**
Ground Floor, David Wilson Library  
T: 0116 252 5002  E: accessable@le.ac.uk  
For students with specific learning difficulties and disabilities

**Careers Development Service**
Student Development Zone, David Wilson Library  
T: 0116 252 2004  E: careers@le.ac.uk  
For help with careers advice and employment

**Chaplaincy**
The Gatehouse, on University Road  
T: 0116 285 6493  E: chaplaincy@le.ac.uk

**Student Learning Centre**
Student Development Zone, David Wilson Library  
T: 0116 252 5090  E: studentlearning@le.ac.uk  
Practical advice, information and support for all aspects of study

**Student Welfare Service**
Percy Gee Building
T: 0116 252 1185 E: welfare@le.ac.uk
Support for students including finance, accommodation, child care and international

Sub-wardens
Accommodation related issues and peer support

Resources for stress management: useful websites
www.student.counselling.co.uk
www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_relief_meditation_yoga_relaxation.htm
www.brianmac.co.uk/relax.htm
http://www.mind.org.uk/help/information_and_advice

Useful reading: (available at the University library)

We would like to thank University of Teesside for allowing us to adapt their student leaflets, on which this information on stress was based.
Where to find Counselling and Wellbeing

Our entrance is at the rear of the building located directly on the junction of University Road and Welford Road. We have a ramp and there is a large sign on the wall. The building is accessible to wheelchair users.

Contact Details

Counselling and Wellbeing
University of Leicester
161 Welford Road
Leicester
LE2 6BF

T: 0116 223 1780
F: 0116 223 1269

www.le.ac.uk/counselling

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