

Surviving Stress in Grad School:

Reduce, Manage and Fight Back

We all know that stress is part of life – especially in graduate school – and yet it still manages to sneak up on us and get in the way of our personal lives and work. If you recognize that stress is normal and that it will happen to you, says Gloria Varley of University Health Services, you will be much better prepared to handle it. You can reduce stress by staying healthy and managing your time, and survive the stress that remains using a variety of techniques.

Expect and Recognize Stress

Because what stresses you out may differ from what stresses out others, and your physical and emotional reactions to stress may differ from those of others, it is important to know what types of pressure cause stress for you and to be able to recognize your personal symptoms.

Stress is a physical, emotional and psychological reaction to a stressor. Our bodies release stress hormones – the ones that trigger the fight-or-flight impulse – whether the stressor is physical or psychological. That’s why we often have physical reactions – increased heart rate, high blood pressure, gastric problems – to emotionally stressful situations. Stress is not all bad, says Varley. It can motivate us and help us accomplish things.

But when stress becomes chronic, our bodies continue to release the stress hormones and never return to a completely relaxed state. That’s why, even without realizing that you are stressed out, you can suffer from a weakened immune system, gastrointestinal problems, body aches, trouble sleeping and fatigue (with or without insomnia). Be aware of the symptoms you experience when you are under stress so that you can recognize the situation and make choices to relieve the pressure.

Your First Defense: A Healthy Lifestyle

Stress can throw off your physical well-being, but having a robust immune system to begin with mitigates the effects of stress. It is essential to get enough sleep, eat nutritiously and exercise on a regular basis so that you have “money in the bank” when a stressful event comes along.

Health is more than just the absence of illness, though. A healthy lifestyle requires a balance between your physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual needs. It’s natural to have times in your life when you neglect one or more of those areas, but when you’re in disequilibrium for too long, your physical or mental health may suffer. The key is to figure out what you require to create meaning and balance in your life, whether it’s exercise; playing a sport; time with friends, family or pets; time with yourself; creative endeavors; church attendance or cooking. Identify your personal must-haves and then reserve time for them in your schedule no matter how busy you get.

Time Management = Stress Management

Perhaps the biggest source of stress for most graduate students is the workload. But this is one source of stress that you can do something about. Managing your time wisely will give you a sense of control over the situation and help minimize the stress you feel as you accomplish things in a planned, scheduled manner.

First, stop procrastinating. Procrastinators tend to underestimate the amount of time it will take them to complete a task and overestimate the time in which they have to do it. To avoid that problem, keep track of the work you do and how long it takes you. Use a calendar to stay abreast of work, school and personal commitments. Schedule study time and appointments with yourself for relaxation time.

Use “chunking”: break down large projects into smaller pieces, make a list of the tasks you’ll need to complete and schedule them, working backward from your deadline. Make short- and long-term to-do lists and enjoy the sense of accomplishment as you cross off tasks.

In the middle of all that hard work, don’t forget to take breaks and reward yourself. If you’re having a hard time getting started on a big job, force yourself to do at least a small piece of it, then take a break. When you return to the job, you will be “warmed up” and more ready to jump in.

Turn Stress into Challenges

Sometimes it's not the stressor that causes our stress reactions so much as the way we think about it. When something stressful happens, most of us subconsciously think about all the potential awful consequences until we are convinced that the situation is really much worse than it is. For example: You have an exam tomorrow for which you haven't prepared adequately. Part of you begins thinking, "There's no way I can pass this test. I'll get a failing grade, which means I'll fail the course and end up flunking out of graduate school." That's called negative self-talk, and we all do it.

But if you can identify the negative self-talk that's ratcheting up your stress level, you can consciously dispute it. Think, instead, for example, "I have three hours I can devote to studying tonight. If I prioritize the material, I can review at least the most important topics, which should be enough preparation for me to do OK on the test. Even if I do poorly

tomorrow, I will have two other exams in this course, so I can bring my grade up with those." That's called cognitive re-framing. It won't make the stress go away, but it will reduce the level of your anxiety. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Surviving Stress: Some Strategies for Coping" by Gloria Varley, University Health Center. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Fight Back Against Stress

No matter how much you plan or manage your time, some stress is inevitable. Just doing something about it, though, takes some of the pressure off and gives you a sense of control. Try some of these techniques for fighting back against stress:

- Check out the University Health Center's stress management resources at <http://www.uhs.uga.edu/stress>.
- Exercise. It's a natural anti-depressant and anti-anxiety because it releases endorphins. Don't have time to go to the gym? Turn up your stereo and dance around the house for a few songs.
- Spend time with family and friends. Having a support network has been shown to reduce anxiety.
- Meditate or spend time in a quiet place. It will lower your blood pressure, heart rate and stress-hormone level. It's also good for depression and pain management.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Do something creative. Sing, play music, do a craft project or take an art class.
- Reward yourself.
- Have a good laugh.