

# Maintain a calm body & mind



Stress is a very common experience for students who are actively balancing the pressure of study with day-to-day life. Sometimes stress can be motivating and drive us to complete difficult tasks while at other times it can be debilitating and cause a negative or unpleasant experience. Generally when you hear people talk about stress, they are referring to the negative impact of stress in their life. When a person becomes over stressed it can impact on their functioning and way of coping. Stress affects everyone in different ways.

## Physical/body

**Regular exercise:** Exercise is great for letting out physical tension when you're feeling overwhelmed. Regular exercise helps promote neurotransmitters that help the mind keep calm.

**What you put into your body:** Eat regularly and have a healthy balanced diet. A diet rich in vitamins such as B and C and iron supports the nervous system in times of stress.

Avoid or limit alcohol, cigarettes caffeine and other drugs.

**Sleep:** Regular satisfying sleep increases resilience and buffers against stress. Your memory gets processed during REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep especially emotional memory.

If you have trouble sleeping it may help to change your pre-sleep routine. Turn your computer off 30 minutes before you go to sleep and at the same time have a glass of milk. Listen to some soft music or read a magazine or a little while until you feel sleepy. This calms your mind. The milk has a substance called tryptophan in it that helps you sleep. If you like you can add a herbal supplement like valerian or lavender oil which can also help you to relax. Get a good quality essential oil and dab it on your chest before settling down to sleep.

## Muscle relaxation

**Loosen up and relax:** Sometimes when a person is feeling stressed it can lead to muscle aches, pains or tension. This tension is held in the body and may leave you feeling exhausted.

**Try some Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** this technique includes tensing up a particular muscle and then relaxing the muscle. Get comfortable. At first just focus on the breath. Notice the breath moving in and moving out, the rising and falling of the chest. Simply say to yourself 'I am breathing in', 'I am breathing out'. Continue for a few breaths. Then breathe in, and as you do so, clench your fists and tense you arms. Hold the breath for a moment then breathe out releasing your hands and arms and mentally say to yourself 'let go'. Repeat this process through the rest of your body: shoulders, face and neck, chest, stomach and buttocks, calves, thighs and feet. Repeat for any areas that seem to be carrying extra tension. Once you have moved through the body in this way, bring your awareness back to the breath and once again say mentally to yourself 'I am breathing in', 'I am breathing out'. Enjoy the feeling of calm and peace and when you are ready, discontinue the practice.

Some people find other ways to loosen up and relax like soaking in a hot bath or getting a massage. If you are feeling stress and tension considered what ways you could reduce the tension in your body.

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## Emotional

Establish supportive relationships/friends.

**Get connected:** Connectedness is also seen as a protective factor in terms of preventing the build-up of stress. People who are connected socially, have meaningful relationships and have a sense of belonging, are more resilient. Sometimes during stressful times it can feel like you just want to be alone and need to withdraw. However, it is really important to balance the seriousness of study with some fun with friends.

**Ask for help:** Talk with others about your anxieties and/or concerns. Never be afraid of asking for help – everyone experiences stress at some time.

## Mental/mind

It's how we are seeing something that often creates the most stress.

Having an awareness of patterns of thinking that add to stress, and ways of seeing things that reduce stress, can help. Know you have choices and say 'NO'. Focus on the positives in the situation. This helps get a different perspective.

Practise moving on from mistakes. Rather than 'I should have' say to yourself 'I learned... from this situation' (e.g. that you need to start an assignment sooner than you did or that next time you will word it better).

Be encouraging and supportive of yourself, (e.g. set time frames and reward yourself for obtaining goals. Having short term goals is helpful. Say 'even if I study for a few hours this morning', or 'if I finish this, this morning, I will have the afternoon free'). Appreciate who you are and the unique qualities you have.

Try to keep things in perspective. If a situation is getting on top of you, step back, adjust your goals and take action. Simplify; focus on one thing at a time: 'I'll just do this' (e.g. 'I may not have had time to research all I need but I'll do what I can and get this assignment finished on time, and without penalty').

Procrastination is a really self-destructive, stressful habit. Try the Ten Minute Promise. This is a promise you make to yourself to spend just ten minutes on ONE task. You'll be surprised what you can get done in ten minutes and how often it turns into 20 or 30. Just doing something is better than nothing.

Try looking at your situation as if it were someone else – a friend, perhaps. Think about the advice you would give them, and follow it yourself.

Don't be afraid to ask for help (e.g. if you feel anxious about a particular assignment ask your tutor, or you could take an academic skills course).

**Focus on things you can control:** Choices – say 'no' to events or commitments that make you feel overloaded. Set boundaries with friends and family if they are asking too much of you at the moment.

## Be mindful

Do you find your mind drifting at times like you are on automatic pilot? You may find yourself worrying about something unrelated to what you are doing, or daydreaming about a holiday in the future. These thoughts are automatic thoughts preventing you from experiencing your current experiences and focusing on the here and now. Some thoughts can have a negative effect on how we are feeling and create a negative experience. Mindfulness is a skilful way of disengaging with negative thoughts and letting go.

**For many students uni can be a very stressful time. Some students worry about exams, trying to do well, and getting on with other students. If you are experiencing stress while studying at Southern Cross University, don't wait for stress to get too bad. Make an appointment to see the free and confidential Student Counsellor.**

## Southern Cross University Student Health Service, Counselling

**Lismore: 02 6626 9131**

**Coffs Harbour: 02 6659 3263**

**Gold Coast: 07 5589 3252**

**The Hotel School Sydney: 02 8249 3200**

**Southern Cross University Out of Hours**

**Crisis Line: 1300 782 676**

**All other areas: 1800 111 890**

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