

## WHAT IS STRESS

Stress is an individual's response to change in circumstance or to a threatening situation. It can be viewed as a personal reaction to an external event/demand like writing an exam or to an internal state of mind like worrying about an exam. Of interest is the fact that stress tends to increase with the prospect of not being able to cope with the situation at hand.

For most people, stress is viewed as a negative concept. However, stress can spur us on to achieve our best. For example, athletes often break world records under the stress and pressure of the Olympics. A moderate amount of stress helps to motivate us to write a term paper or prepare for an exam, and in this case, is positive and necessary. Therefore, a certain amount of stress is desirable but too much is detrimental.

Today's demands and pressures guarantee that all human beings will experience stress. Stress is simply a by-product of life. The encouraging part of this picture is that we can learn how to control or manage "excess" stress. In fact, a belief in our ability to be able to handle stress often times serves to decrease stress levels.

### What is a STRESSOR?

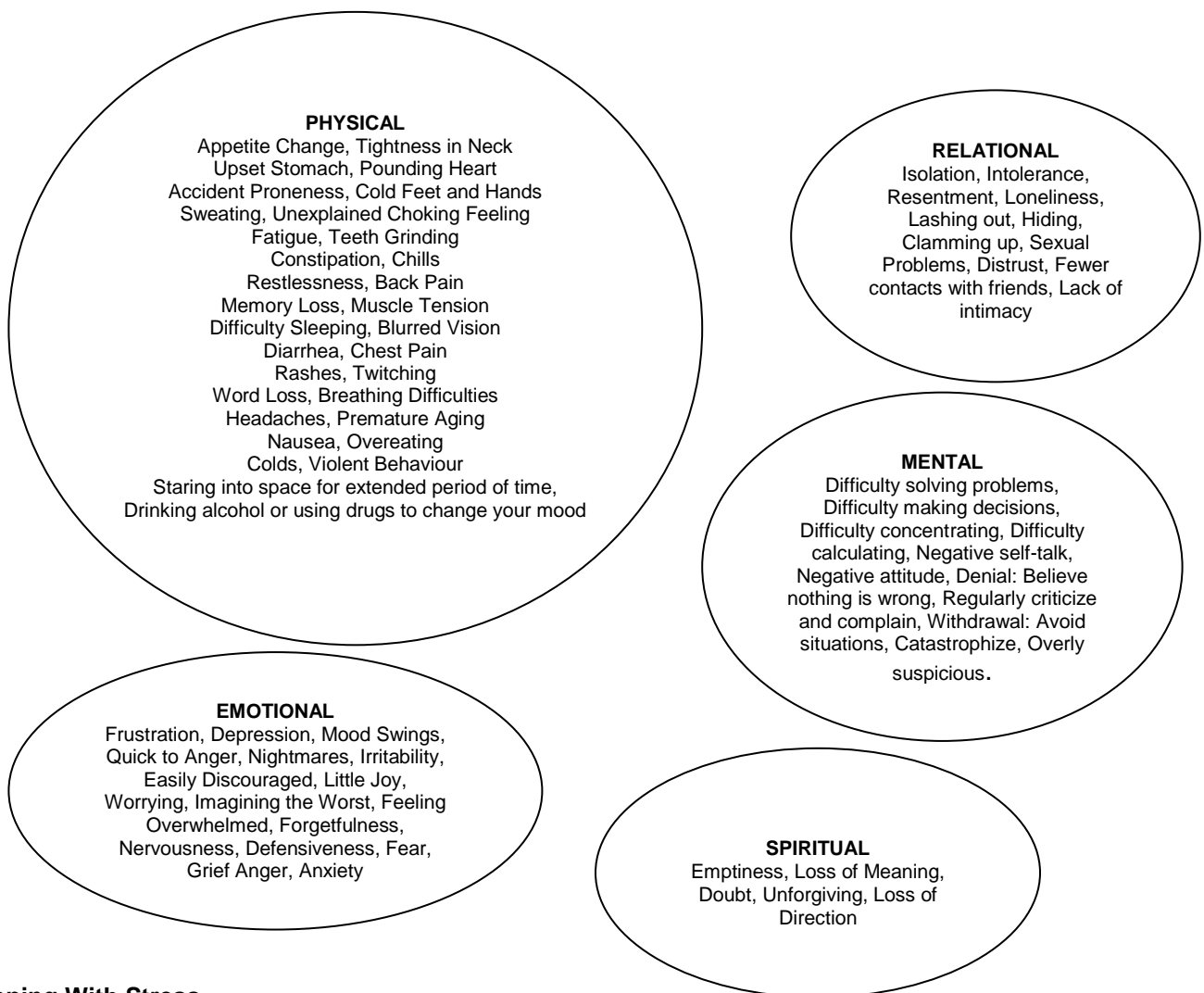
Stressors are those changes in one's life or threatening situations referred to above. As a student, you will likely encounter a number of situations/events which will result in stress. You are reminded that not everyone responds to stressors in the same way because of differences in perception (differences in the meaning given to the situation/event by an individual). What might be stressful for one individual may not be necessarily stressful for another. Below is a list of some common stressors specific to student life.

- Arguments
- Change in Family Roles
- Change in Financial Status
- Change in Friends
- Change in Living Conditions & Social Activities
- Clutter/Disorganization
- Daily Hassles
- Death of a Family Member or Close Friend
- Debt Load/Financing Education
- Different/new/developing support system
- Failing an important test, exam, or course
- Fear of Failure
- Leaving Home
- Lower grades than expected
- Marriage or Divorce
- New girl or boyfriend
- Noise during study time
- Personal Conflicts
- Pregnancy
- Rigorous academic standards
- Roommate & Peer Pressure
- Selection of or Change of your Major
- Sexual harassment
- Suicide of a Friend
- Worry about the future job market

If some of you are returning to university after working or raising your family, becoming a student involves a significant change for you as you juggle the multiple roles of student, parent, marital partner, and possibly income earner.

## Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Stressors in our life encourage us to either adjust to or change some aspect of our behaviour. When we do not successfully make these adjustments or changes we often times find ourselves experiencing a number of unpleasant side effects or signs and symptoms. These signs and symptoms are all indications of a level of stress that is not healthy. Below is a list of some of the more common signs and symptoms related to inappropriate levels of stress. They have been categorized as being either physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, or relational in nature. Identify any signs or symptoms that might be occurring regularly in your life, and then determine if the stressor(s) responsible for the side effects is something you may want to deal with. Before embarking on some sort of plan to reduce your level of stress, a medical checkup should first be completed since many of the signs and symptoms identified below could be related to a physical condition.



## Coping With Stress

### What is the best way to cope with stressors?

Next are some suggestions that can help you cope with stress. Each technique that follows has been categorized for your convenience as being a technique or strategy that can help reduce your level of stress by attending to either

bodily needs, school-related demands, or thinking which ultimately has a lot to do with how you think, feel, and act toward a stressor in your life. You are encouraged to begin by making a commitment to implement just a few of these strategies initially, since making small changes first may be more desirable and realistic than committing to significant changes all at one time.

### **Techniques to Help with Physical Well-Being**

- ❖ Relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques can help us gain more control over the stress we encounter. This is because it is a technique that helps bring about the opposite bodily changes of the stress response or can reduce muscle tension. Refer to a book or see a counsellor at Counselling Services for specific guidance on relaxation techniques.
- ❖ Eat regular well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. When your body is run down, things can look worse than they really are and your ability to cope with them is also reduced. Limit your coffee to 3 cups per day and remember that chocolate and cola drinks also contain caffeine.
- ❖ Exercise. A physical workout is a great tension releaser. Find something that you enjoy and will do on a regular basis. It can be as simple as walking or demanding as racquetball. Exercise can reduce anxiety and depression, reduce muscle tension and temporarily distract us from our stressors.

### **Techniques to Help with Academic Well-Being**

- ❖ Learn to pace yourself. No matter how hard you try, you cannot be in high gear all the time. Take rests while working. Set realistic goals and then take time out to reward yourself once you've reached them.
- ❖ Realize your limits and plan around them. Don't take on more than you can handle. If you have a number of must-do tasks, tackle them one at a time, in the order of their urgency. It's probably better to turn tasks away than to leave work unfinished. Unfinished business is a major source of stress.
- ❖ Make the most of your time. Try to work as efficiently as you can in blocks of time by utilizing a realistic time schedule. Counselling Services' staff can help you develop more effective time management skills.
- ❖ Streamline your assignments. Break complex assignments down into manageable components.
- ❖ Plan for change. Some changes can be predicted and by predicting change, you can reduce the shock of being unprepared. If you are a prospective student, talk with other students to learn about the changes they experienced. This information may lead you to prepare ahead of time for the inevitable changes. For example, learn a word processing computer program before you have to type an assignment for class. Develop effective study skills. Go to class prepared with your readings and homework completed. Ask the professor questions either in class or after class when you do not understand something. Get in the habit of reviewing lecture notes immediately after the lecture to help reinforce the learning which just took place. Also review notes and readings weekly. By following these suggestions, you will probably be better prepared to study for exams.
- ❖ Take time out for yourself away from your responsibilities for least a short period each day to sort out your thoughts and feelings. How much time you need will depend on a number of factors. However, even 15 minutes devoted to yourself can help. Also use this time to relax.
- ❖ Have fun. Plan to do something that you enjoy on a regular basis.

### **Techniques to Help with Psychological Well-Being**

- ❖ Identify and deal with the cause. It is important to determine what is causing your distress. Otherwise you may only superficially deal with your distress so that little relief is experienced. Without this step, stress will build and continue. You may ask yourself: What has changed? When did I start feeling distress? How are my beliefs or thoughts contributing to how I see the stressful situation? Am I expecting too much? Do I not believe I can handle the situation? By identifying the cause, we can more accurately select ways of coping such as revising our expectations, improving study techniques, or gaining support from others.
- ❖ Be aware of negative self-talk and negative attitudes.

- ❖ Thought stopping. Monitor your negative thinking and when it starts say aloud to yourself, "STOP!" The thoughts can come back, and probably will, but when they do, you can use the same technique to stop them again. It will take time and practice to break the habit of negative thinking. However, don't use the technique to stop reasonable worries and appropriate thinking about what you need to do.
- ❖ Engage in positive self-talk. Encourage yourself with phrases that are positive rather than negative.
- ❖ Restrict worrying.
- ❖ If you find yourself engaging in catastrophic thinking (i.e. imagining all of the terrible scenarios or possibilities) try to restrict your worrying to specific times and places. Find a chair in a place at home and at school that you don't particularly like to sit in. Make at least two appointments to go to your worry chair every day and worry for about 20 minutes. Don't do anything else in that chair. This will help get your worrying under control.
- ❖ However, to only worry will not lead to an improved outcome. It is, therefore, important to recognize when you are only worrying and move beyond worrying into problem-solving. You may ask yourself what is the cause of my worrying and is there anything that can be done to modify the situation. It may be helpful to speak with a counsellor to help you with this process.
- ❖ Talk out your troubles. Learn to talk things over with someone you trust. It releases pressure, makes you feel better and sometimes can help you see a new side to your problem. If you find yourself getting preoccupied with an emotional difficulty, resist letting it get in your way. Counselling Services' staff are available to listen to you. Learn to distance yourself. When you find yourself in a heated argument, stop and ask yourself "is this something really worth fighting for?"
- ❖ Don't fight the inevitable. Accept what you cannot change.
- ❖ Humour. Laughter is a great stress-reducer.
- ❖ Stress Diary. Keeping a stress diary allows us to monitor stress reactions and the events that precede them. This will help to identify the stressors that trigger stress reactions. For example, you may find that you experience a headache whenever you find yourself running late. Eliminating the stressor (i.e., running late) may allow you to eliminate the stress reaction (i.e., a headache).
- ❖ Alter the view. The way in which we view stressors and our ability to handle them has a profound effect on our ability to cope. Often, it is not the original stressor (e.g., an exam) but our reaction to it (e.g., excessive worrying) that causes the greatest amount of stress. Can you view the stressor in a more favourable light? Could things be worse? Can any good come out of dealing with the stressor?
- ❖ Reassess. Underestimating our ability to cope (e.g., negating previous successes, good study habits or intelligence) or overestimating our ability (e.g., I can learn in a few nights what most students take an entire semester to learn) can also contribute to stress.

### **When Do I Seek Assistance?**

We sometimes underestimate the impact of stressors in our life. As human beings, we can handle a lot without falling apart. However, it may be time to consider seeking assistance if any of the signs or symptoms of stress identified in this handout are occurring on a regular basis. You may first want to try talking through your difficulties by sitting down with a friend, physician, parents, or minister: This often times can help reduce your level of stress to an appropriate level. However, if this option fails to bring about the necessary relief, you may want to implement the appropriate strategies identified in the previous section. If you need assistance with any of these strategies or simply want to know more about stress, any of our friendly staff members located at Counselling Services would be more than willing to help.

Prepared by: University of Regina - Counselling Services 1998