Navigating College Stress

Almost everyone experiences stress to some extent, and college students are certainly no exception. Many college students report dealing with varying levels of stress throughout college for a number of different reasons. Stress affects everyone differently and for different reasons, and people respond to stress in many different ways, but it doesn’t have to cripple you or prevent you from reaching your goals. Below you’ll find strategies to reduce and manage stress in college.

Why are you stressed?

College students commonly experience stress because of increased responsibilities, a lack of good time management, changes in eating and sleeping habits, and not taking enough breaks for self-care. Transitioning to college can be a source of stress for most first-year students. Some predictable stressful times include studying for exams, competing for admissions or internships, and trying to master large amounts of content in small amounts of time. Sudden changes, unexpected challenges, or traumatic events can be unpredictable sources of stress. Students are expected to make decisions about their careers and academic life and foster new meaningful relationships in their time in college. Take a moment to think about the things in your life that may be causing you stress so that you can better address it effectively.

Tips to reduce and manage stress

Knowing how to properly and healthily manage stress is a crucial tool for college students. Using effective stress management techniques can help you moderate and calm yourself during stressful times and help your academic, social, and emotional experiences in college be more positive and successful. While there is no perfect way to completely eliminate stress, here are a few tips to try to help manage and reduce it:

Manage your time

Research shows that students who manage their time are less likely to feel stressed. Time management can be especially difficult when living away from home for the first time, when studying from home, or when juggling many roles and responsibilities at the same time. Use a weekly planner, priorities chart, or even the calendar on your phone to help manage your time.

Engage in mindful leisurely activities

We all have personal needs that need to be met and leisurely activities that we enjoy (eating, sleeping, relaxing, reading, socializing). Taking a break can be as simple as grabbing a snack, going for a walk around campus or around your neighborhood, meeting a friend for lunch, or catching up with a friend on a video call. When we are mindful of these needs and take time to enjoy them, we are less likely to be stressed.

Plan for the worst case scenario

Planning out the worst-case scenario can seem like an overwhelming task, and in some cases that may be true. However, when you are able to predict what will happen in the future, you are better able to put in supports to help you manage when the ‘worst case’ scenario happens. For example, if you feel as though you might be failing a class (worst case scenario), you can talk to your professor about receiving an incomplete, talk to academic advising to see how that affects your grade, create a study schedule to help yourself catch up, and see a peer tutor to support you with the material. If you are dealing with a sudden change or difficult situation that is impacting your learning, consider reaching out to your professor, reaching out to your friends and family, or making an appointment with a coach at the WCU Learning Assistance & Resource Center (LARC).

Engage in self-care and self-compassion

We are often harder on ourselves when we are unsuccessful or when things get challenging. One way to combat stress is to engage in self-compassion. Extend the same kindness you would to a friend to yourself. Know that you do deserve to take care of yourself. Be aware of when you are distressed and create a self-care plan for when you are. Integrating leisure and social activities is a great way to take care of yourself. You can also do simple relaxation exercises—such as deep breathing—multiple times during the day to help alleviate some stress.

When in doubt, write it out!

Research suggests that when you are feeling stressed, rather than avoid the uncomfortable feeling, it is better for you to address it by writing about it. Studies show that individuals who write out the causes of their stress, thoughts, and emotions tend to do better academically. To do this activity effectively it is recommended that you write everything you are feeling with no hesitation or worry.

Improve your health

**Healthy eating.** The majority of the time, try to choose fresh whole foods, and limit your intake of fried, processed, and fast foods. The federal government has made it easier to determine how to eat healthier by creating the ‘my plate’ diagram.

**Hydration.** Drink plenty of water, and be careful not to overdo it with caffeine.

**Physical activity.** Knowing how to properly work out and making time for it can be challenging. However, there are many ways to engage in physical activity—going to the gym, attending fitness classes, swimming laps, jogging, playing basketball or another sport you enjoy, or doing yoga. You can also add in some simple modifications to your day to increase physical activity without having to go to the gym or play a sport. Try walking rather than taking the bus, getting off a bus early and walking the rest of the way, using stairs rather than elevators, biking, parking farther in a parking lot, etc.

**Restful sleep.** Sleep is often the first habit that is compromised when students enter college. However, time and time again research supports the importance of sleep—for memory consolidation and recall, increasing learning abilities, energy conservation, muscle growth, and tissue repair, just to name a few. Long-term sleep deprivation is associated with many illnesses and overall poor health and mental health. To work and live at your optimal level each day, build enough time into your schedule for 7-9 hours of sleep every night and protect and prioritize that time. Join the Refresh Sleep Campaign through the Wellness Promotion RamConnect page to sign-up for weekly emails to help you improve your sleep habits.

Create SMART goals

Often, students create grandiose goals that are unattainable. Use the classic SMART goals mnemonic when framing your goals: make sure they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound to maximize the possibility that you’ll complete them. If you are struggling, make an appointment with a Wellness Coach through the QR code below to help guide you through creating SMART goals and staying accountable to meet them.

Use problem-solving techniques

Often, students find themselves in situations where they feel stuck. When a problem arises, they have a difficult time solving it. Students often ruminate about problems, which causes more stress and anxiety. Rather than engaging in negative thinking patterns, it is more helpful to strategically approach problems. This worksheet can help guide you through solving problems. While problem solving, focus on what you can and cannot control. Creating goals around things you can control will allow you accomplish more, while thinking or worrying about things you cannot control takes away energy you need.

Try relaxation techniques

While in the previous tips we talk more about *preventing* stress, using relaxation techniques will help calm you when you are *actively* stressed. Studies show that engaging in mindfulness significantly helps reduce stress. The following two are examples of mindfulness relaxation techniques that can help calm you when you are stressed:

* Diaphragmatic Breathing
* Love and Kindness Meditation

Make connections

Creating meaningful connections with other people fosters overall wellbeing. Two ways to do this is by providing service to others and creating a supportive network. Humans are inherently social; we need connectedness to survive and thrive. For this particular reason, peer support and self-help are often effective. There is great power in knowing that you are not alone. Everyone needs a supportive person with whom they can reach out to during the good and bad times. There are many ways to connect with your peers, whether you choose to meet in person, make time to schedule a video chat, or play online games together. Belonging to a community is essential to handling stress. One way to engage with your WCU community is to join clubs and organizations. Explore RamConnect or attend the Campus Organization and Activity fair at the start of each semester to find organizations that may interest you.

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