

Stress Management

What is Stress?

Stress – that tense, anxious feeling you get when you are faced with a difficult decision that requires a response on your part. What is it? Stress is how our bodies react to demands and change. Stress is an automatic physical reaction to a danger or demand (whether real or perceived). The “fight or flight” response kicks in which allows our bodies to prepare to deal with threats or danger. Muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, the heart speeds up and extra adrenaline rushes through your system. This is very helpful when you need bursts of energy fight or flee a predator, or win the championship game. Without some stress, people wouldn’t get a lot done. The extra burst of adrenaline may help you concentrate better to finish your final paper. It can be positive stress when it is a short-term physiological response that subsides when the challenge has been met, enabling you to relax. However, if the stress is excessive or long lasting, it can lead to negative consequences and harm your physical and mental well-being.

What are Stressors?

While stress is the feeling we have when we are under pressure, stressors are the things in our environment that we are responding to. Stressors can be as simple as background noise in our environment or as complex as a social situation such as going out on a date. Stressors can involve a physical threat such as a car speeding toward you or an emotional threat such as being rejected by your boyfriend or girlfriend.

Relationship between Stressors and Stress

The relationship between stressors and our experience of stress is not one to one. On average, the more stressors we experience in our life, the more stressed we will feel. However, what is stressful for one person may not necessarily be stressful for another. How can this be? Our experience of stress is greatly influenced by how we interpret and label our experience. In order to feel stressed, I must interpret the environment as some sort of threat or as requiring some change or adaptation on my part. If I wake up on a crisp winter morning to a fresh snowfall, my reaction will be determined by how I interpret this event. I may enjoy the beauty and relax while I sit and have my breakfast, enjoying the view out my window. Alternatively, I may be concerned about driving on slippery roads and be very tense and worried and the physiological stress response will kick in while I try to eat my breakfast. Another part of the equation is how I judge my ability to cope with the stressor. If I have had a considerable amount of experience driving on slippery roads and have a four-wheel drive car with studded snow tires, I may have confidence in my ability to cope with the stressor and thus will experience less stress.

Stress Equation

Stressors

+

Perceived Threat or Demand

+

Evaluation of Coping Ability

=

STRESS

Thus, the amount of stress I feel is determined by three things:

- * The number, intensity, and length of stressors I experience
- * My evaluation of the degree of threat or demand posed by the stressor
- * My evaluation of my coping ability to deal with the stressor

How Do I Deal with Stress?

There is no single technique to lessen your feelings of stress. You can work on any of the three parts listed in the equation above. The more parts you change or work on, the more successful you will be in decreasing your level of stress.

1: Notice what the stressors are in your life.

- * Are there any you can change by avoiding them or eliminating them completely?
- * Can you reduce your exposure to them?
 - * If you get stressed driving in traffic, maybe you can go to work at an earlier time.
 - * Can you organize your time better so you're not studying for a big exam at the last minute?

2: Pay attention to what you say to yourself about a stressful situation.

- * Do you tell yourself "If I am not a perfect student, no one will ever hire me and I will be forced to "flip hamburgers" the rest of my life?
 - * Work on changing to more realistic expectations of yourself.
- * Are you overreacting and seeing everything as absolutely critical and urgent?
 - * Try to shift your focus to looking at what really is important.

3: Increase your confidence in dealing with your stressors.

- * Learn techniques to help you cope with whatever stressor is most predominant in your life.
 - * Take a study skills or time management class. Use a calendar to organize your time.

4: Take care of yourself emotionally and physically. How well you deal with stress is determined partly by your overall level of health and feeling of well-being.

5: Learn techniques for dealing with the physical effects of stress.

- * Try relaxation, deep breathing, meditation, biofeedback or whatever appeals to you.

6: Learn to enjoy the little things in life.

- * Take a few minutes each day to watch a sunset or enjoy the chorus of birds on your walk between classes.

Need Additional Help?

North Idaho College counseling services offer free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for NIC students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, stop by Student Health & Counseling Services (2nd floor of SUB) or call 769-7818. All appointments are strictly confidential.