

College Life: 10 Ways to Reduce Stress

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“When you get to college, it’s usually a fairly sizable life change,” says J. David Forbes, MD, a Nashville, Tenn., physician specializing in stress management. “It’s the first time you’re off on your own. You’re out from any kind of adult jurisdiction. That can bring an overwhelming number of choices.”

Stress occurs when your tension level exceeds your energy level, resulting in an overloaded feeling. “As long as our available energy exceeds our tension level, then we’re in an okay state,” Dr. Forbes says. “But if energy is low and tensions are higher, then that can result in a state of anxiety, depression, and feeling overwhelmed.”

College can be an exciting time, but also a stressful one. If you feel like your brain is melting under the crush of books, classes and papers, don’t freak out. Follow our stress-management tips to help relieve the pressure.

Get enough sleep.

→ It may be tempting to hit the hay at 4 a.m. and then attend an 8 a.m. class, but shortchanging yourself on rest can increase your stress level. “Winging it on not much sleep has a profound effect on how we experience the stressors of the day,” Forbes says. Plus, insufficient sleep can put you at risk for serious illnesses, such as diabetes, obesity, and depression. Adults typically need seven to nine hours of sleep a night for best health. Forbes also recommends that you align your sleep schedule with normal resting hours by getting to bed before midnight, rather than staying up until dawn and sleeping until mid-afternoon. “The more that our internal clock is closely aligned with the clock of the sun, the better it is,” Forbes says.

Eat well.

→ A steady diet of pizza and vending-machine fare can decrease energy levels in the body, leading to a lower threshold for stress. “You end up feeling very tired and looking for the same [junk food] to kick you back up,” Forbes says. “It’s a lousy cycle of hunting for short-term comfort food or sugar highs that actually keep you feeling worse.” Follow a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.

Exercise.

- When you're stressed, moving around may be the last thing you feel like doing. But as little as 20 minutes a day of physical activity can reduce stress levels. Forbes says just three or four half-hour sessions can lighten stress considerably. As for what type of exercise, try something that you enjoy doing, like swimming or yoga. "You're not going to continue something you don't like," Forbes notes.

Avoid unnatural energy boosters.

- Artificial stimulants like caffeine pills or prescription meds may help you stay awake for that all-night study session, but putting off your body's need to sleep will ultimately result in an energy crash, resulting again in a greater susceptibility to stress. "It's like clipping the wires to your fire alarm while the house burns down," Forbes says. "Just because you didn't hear it doesn't mean the house didn't burn."

Get emotional support.

- Adjusting to college can be difficult, and venting your frustrations to a trusted friend can go a long way in fighting stress. "It's a way to empty out tensions and make them lower," Forbes says. Choose a friend or family member who won't be judgmental or try to give lots of advice. Or seek the help of a professional counselor or psychologist. To find a trusted practitioner, check with your student health center for recommendations.

Don't give up your passions.

- Your schedule may be filled with lectures and study groups, but try to find at least a couple of hours each week to pursue a hobby or other activity that you enjoy. "Do something that feeds the peace of your soul in some way and stay connected with it," Forbes says. "It promotes the anti-stress physiology of your body." Not sure what your passion is? Visit Findmyhobby.com, a directory of Web sites devoted to almost every kind of pastime.

Try not to overload yourself.

- Between classes, extracurricular groups, and maybe even a job, it's easy for students to take on more than they can handle. If you've signed up for an excessive number of courses, don't be afraid to drop one, and remember that you can always say no when you're asked to organize the Latin Club's annual yard sale. "Take good, loving care of yourself," Forbes says. "You are your own parent from here on out. Start caring for yourself like you would for a child in your charge."

Avoid relaxing with alcohol.

- Having three or four beers to unwind after a hard day of studying may seem perfectly logical, but any unresolved stress that you have will just come flooding back after your buzz subsides. Plus, if you overindulge, you may have to deal with unpleasant side effects, like nausea and hangovers, later on. If you find yourself drinking regularly before noon, become anxious at the prospect of not drinking, or become unable to “just have one,” you may be developing alcohol dependence. Your student health center or the National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service at 800-662-HELP can assist you in finding professional help.

Breathe.

- When you feel stressed, deep-breathing exercises can help melt away the tension. Try this exercise: Inhale slowly through your nose, hold the breath for a few seconds, then exhale through your mouth, and repeat as needed. This helps prevent the short, shallow breaths that often accompany feelings of tension.

Get a massage.

- If you're feeling frazzled, try putting yourself in someone else's hands — literally. Stress often causes your muscles to become tight and knotted, and a professional massage therapist can help to loosen them, providing stress relief. Educational requirements for massage therapists vary from state to state, so finding a knowledgeable one can be tricky. One of the major professional massage associations in the United States, the American Massage Therapy Association, has a searchable directory of massage therapists.

Going to college can put a lot of pressure on you. Using some of these strategies will help you reduce stress and soar through those four years.

<http://www.everydayhealth.com/college-health/college-life-10-ways-to-reduce-stress.aspx>