Meghan Cappel

Professor Knippling

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Stress and Coping Mechanisms

It has been said that stress is poison, but one must question if stress is lethal. Life is full of hectic schedules, family issues, and financial uncertainty. Stressors appear in a variety of situations, and they render an assortment of responses from the people they affect. Stress is especially high among college students. College is a time of dramatic change for the student that often revolves around demanding situations. Balancing classes, jobs, and service activities, maintaining a sound financial status, and preserving a high grade point average can push a college student to the limit. The familial support system that had been so comforting in high school is no longer readily available, so the student is forced to find other means of support and coping. Since many students do not know how to properly handle this pressure, it builds up over time until a breaking point is reached. In an attempt to handle this growing stress, some students turn to questionable activities for relief. Other students never properly care for their anxiety and face a multitude of chronic health issues. Does stress always produce negative consequences? Or, can stress have a positive influence toward greater efficiency academically, socially, and physically? Although stress for college students is commonly maligned with negative connotations, it can be a productive growth experience for the individual who identifies and utilizes positive coping methods.

What does it mean when a person says they are “stressed out”? Stress is the body’s way of dealing with demands that have been put upon it. The body reacts to these challenges emotionally and physically as it tries to minimize the effects of this pressure. New circumstances, such as a blind date or leaving home for the first time, or recurring uncomfortable situations, like presenting before a class or taking a final exam, can put the body in an anxious state. The strain of these activities can cause physical, physiological, and psychological symptoms most commonly associated with stress. The physical signs of stress are often ordinary ailments such as headaches, mood swings, or irritability. Chronic stress can cause more serious symptoms resulting from increased levels of cortisol and suppressed levels of serotonin. Cortisol is often referred to as the stress hormone because it helps the body to react in pressure situations. Serotonin is a hormone that affects mood, learning, sleep, and blood flow. When these two hormone levels are altered for an extended period of time, physiological and psychological symptoms are likely to occur. Often these symptoms manifest themselves in decreased short-term memory or stress-related ailments of depression, chronic headaches or migraines, isolation, or insomnia. Prolonged stress can be a contributing factor to cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and clinical depression and can complicate how a person recovers from a disease. Stress is a part of everyday life, and understanding stressors and the symptoms of chronic stress are the first steps in minimizing long-term effects to the body.

College students are especially prone to chronic anxiety due to the high-stress situations they encounter on a consistent basis. Group projects, exams, and presentations are just a few of the stressors that weigh heavily on young minds. A new level of pressure and intensity is introduced through increased academic expectations and additional personal responsibility. Often, new levels of accountability are sources of additional stress for the student. Prolonged exposure to these pressures can be harmful to the health of a young college student. As stated in *Excelling in College*, “College-aged students are particularly vulnerable to developing the first major symptoms of emotional problems like depression and anxiety” (233). Some college students may show signs of emotional instability, but, generally, most students struggle with having to deal with these mounting issues on their own. This negative stress, also known as distress, can physically affect the undergraduate. As stated in *Anxiety in College Students*, “at least 50% of all diseases, including peptic ulcer, colitis, hypertension, enuresis, migraine headache, insomnia… can be attributed to constant stress-related origins” (112). Students must face the pressures of academic success while also managing family concerns, extracurricular activities, friendship problems, job conflicts, health concerns, emotional issues, competition amongst peers, networking, making career choices, and the possibility of failure. It is easy to determine that college students are functioning under a great deal of pressure. It is paramount, however, to recognize and understand the pressures of each new situation to adequately identify productive coping mechanisms. Without a proper management strategy, this negative stress can be physically and mentally detrimental to the student.

The ability to handle stress in the proper manner is crucial during the college years. The website, [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com), defines a coping mechanism as, “an adaptation to environmental stress that is based on conscious or unconscious choice and that enhances control over behavior or gives psychological comfort.” There are a variety of coping mechanisms available to help students gain control and adapt to situations. Many college students, faced with a newfound sense of freedom, will choose negative coping strategies that could lead to further problems. Drug and alcohol use and emotional eating are methods frequently used by students to help deal with problems. Some students are enticed to use drugs as a means to alleviate a tumultuous situation. The drug-induced ‘high’ allows the person to escape to a fantasy world where escalating pressures have been replaced with a seemingly carefree lifestyle. Unfortunately, when the narcotics’ effects have dissipated, the student must still confront the pressure of the original stressor. Prolonged drug use can lead to a growing dependence on artificial stimulants and depressants which could damage the student mentally and leave threaten financial security.

Other students utilize alcohol, so readily available on college campuses, to relieve their stress. Initially, alcohol consumption gives the student a sense of euphoria and release from the imminent pressures of daily life. This relief is short-lived as alcohol reveals itself as a depressant and leaves the student dejected and disheartened that the pressing issues must still be addressed. It is noted in the “College Freshman Stress and Weight Change: Difference by Gender” article that in one survey sample, “the percentage of students who reported drinking more than doubled over the year” (21) as a way to “‘feel better’” (23) and to deal with their stressors. Excessive alcohol consumption can lead to many problems. Alcohol poisoning and alcoholism may have deadly consequences. Additionally, the calories from these alcoholic beverages have the potential to be a detriment to weight management for college students.

A third negative strategy for controlling stress is through food consumption. Weight variances result from the unhealthy coping mechanism of emotional eating. Drastic changes in a student’s eating habits are signs of uncontrolled stress. In worrisome situations, many students turn to food as a source of comfort and companionship. Certain foods may remind a student of a family-favorite recipe or of a carefree time from childhood. Turning to food for emotional release is often to blame for the infamous “freshman fifteen”, that dreaded weight gain that every student fears. Studies reveal that a combination of increased calories and decreased physical activity are to blame for the upward movement of the scale. According to “Behavior Change and the Freshman 15: Tracking Physical Activity and Dietary Patterns in 1st-Year University Women,” one study indicated that “They also took measurements at the end of the academic year, a period of intensive schoolwork and examinations, when they may reflect only temporary changes in physical activity levels…which may have a stronger relationship to weight gain” (524). Other students may turn to the opposite spectrum and lose their appetite during high periods of stress. Students are so focused on the amount of work needed to be accomplished that they cannot think beyond the current task. The decreased production of serotonin depresses the student’s appetite to the point that the thought of eating becomes nauseating. Other times, the student uses bulimic techniques to punish oneself for overeating or for perceived inadequacies in performance. Anorexia and bulimia are often the results of emotional eating during stressful times. Emotional eating in college can lead to eating disorders that last a lifetime.

While it is apparent that excessive pressure on the body can lead to chronic medical issues, stress cannot be eliminated from everyday life. In actuality, stress is what adds excitement to our day. The body produces additional cortisol and adrenaline to help a driver slam on the brakes when a child errantly runs in front of the car to reclaim a wayward ball. Altered serotonin levels allow a person to express shock and amusement at the realization of being the guest of honor at a surprise party. Stress in moderation can be very productive in the life of a college student. It helps to reinforce the need to take studies seriously and to do the best work possible. Moderate, positive stress pushes the student to overcome procrastination and to focus on the future. According to *Anxiety in College Students*, “positive stress [is] defined as functional stress when it enhances our individual or group performance” (112). Positive stress, or eustress, provides motivation and inspiration in creativity and problem-solving. Stress helps the individual stay focused on the task at hand, whether it is giving a presentation at school, playing a video game, or studying for an exam. Stress, and the body’s reaction to that pressure, can save a person’s life. The key element for moderating the pressures of college life is identifying productive and positive methods of stress management.

The encouraging news for college students is that positive coping strategies are readily available, and many are free to utilize. There are three main categories of positive coping strategies. The simplest means of positive stress management is diversion. Any activity that creates a positive distraction can be considered a constructive way to deal with stress. Diversion techniques include breathing exercises, learning, music, and play. Focusing on breathing allows concentration solely on one’s own body, soul, and mind creating a change of focus from the stressful activity. The act of learning also creates amusement for someone struggling with constant worry. Taking up a new hobby, such as knitting, allows a person to relax and concentrate on developing the new skill. Reading a book or joining a club can also be great diversions from the task at hand. Music is another positive diversion for stress. Listening to a favorite song can bring back memories of joyous times and can greatly lift a person’s spirits. *College Rules* suggests “Put on a set of headphones, close your eyes for a few minutes, and let soothing music take you away” (132). While classical music is the best soother, some may prefer rap or alternative sounds. Heavy music allows people to take out emotions that have been weighing them down. Another way to create a diversion is to have fun. Playing a favorite Wii game or heading out for a night of dancing with some friends help people cope with stress in a positive way. Creating diversions are very constructive ways of handling emotions, while also helping the person gain knowledge and a new perspective on impending issues.

Another category of positive coping methods is focusing on the health of the body. Getting exercise is a great way to cope with stress. According to *College Rules*, “exercise releases hormones that will actually make you feel better and will take your mind off your troubles” (130). Along with releasing hormones, exercise allows a person to clear their head and feel better because of calories burned. Getting adequate amounts sleep is also a helpful mechanism when dealing with anxiety. If a person is too stressed to sleep, writing down their feelings can help clear the mind for more restful sleep. Sufficient rest will allow a person to reach a high performance on a daily basis. Eating healthfully is also important when coping with tense situations. Binge eating is commonplace during times of duress, but it is important to remember to fuel the body properly to be prepared to handle these uncertainties. It is stated in *College Rules* that “the lack of proper nutrition can send your stress level even higher” (131). Working on relaxation techniques can also be helpful. Meditating or practicing yoga for just a few minutes each day can have a profound impact on levels of stress. Taking care of one’s physical health is important to coping positively with stressful periods.

A final category of positive coping methods is to foster good mental health when faced with stressful situations. Believing in oneself is important to overcoming anxiety. A person’s self-esteem can be reinforced through positive affirmations and confidence in one’s actions. Planning ahead and managing one’s time well are important ways to help beat stress. These mental steps will ensure that deadlines will be met well in advance. There will be no last-minute panicking if procrastination is replaced with careful time management. Placing trust in others is another positive mental health step toward stress reduction. Talking through problems with a friend or counselor will help ease a person’s burden and help encourage resolution of a stressor. Other people can offer assistance, but the person in need must be willing to listen to their advice. Placing trust in one’s religious beliefs is important to help keep God by one’s side. Prayer is a great way to verbalize concerns and lose some of the heaviness that is weighing on a person’s mind. Using diversions, focusing on the health of the body, and having a positive mental attitude are effective techniques to channel stress in a productive way to overcome a difficult process and strengthen a person emotionally and physically.

The statistics show that increasing numbers of college students are turning to these positive coping methods to deal with their stressful lives. According to a 2009 Associated Press poll, the three most common stressors faced by college students are schoolwork, worry about maintaining good academic standing, and financial security. These stressors seemed very realistic to my current situation as a high-achieving college freshman. After reviewing these findings, I decided to gather my own information for comparison to these results. I conducted an informal survey via SurveyMonkey.com consisting of 100 undergraduate college-aged participants. The goal of this survey was to identify common stressors and coping methods used by the volunteer panelists. The anonymous survey requested demographic identifiers of age and gender and replies to two multiple-choice questions. The first question asked panelists, “What stresses you out the most?” The panelists were then asked to choose up to two options from a varied list of ten potential stressors. The second question asked the panelists, “How do you cope with stress?” The panelists were then asked to choose up to two options from a list of eleven coping mechanisms. I received 100 responses in a four hour span of time.

My survey results were very comparable to the 2009 study. In my survey, I found that the top three stressors from a random group of undergraduate college students were school work load, maintaining a high grade point average, and concern for their future. Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of the ten responses. When offering options of how the students handle stress, I listed both positive and negative coping mechanisms. Since it was an anonymous survey, I felt confident that students would answer the question truthfully. If drugs or alcohol were a preferred coping method, there was no tracking to determine who answered in that manner. I was encouraged to find that the majority of college students surveyed use positive coping methods to deal with stressful situations. The top four management strategies are listening to their favorite music, talking to a friend, sleeping, and exercising. Figure 2 details all of the responses. Music can bring back happy memories of certain events in people’s lives, allowing them to free their mind and concentrate on fun times. Calling a friend or meeting a colleague for lunch can be an instant mood booster. A friend or loved one can offer sound advice, provide comic relief, or just listen while feelings and emotions are vented. Sleep is essential for the college student’s well-being. Sleep deprivation impairs cognitive judgment and puts the body in a state of high anxiety and elevated blood pressure. In contrast, proper amounts of restful sleep restore the body’s energy levels and the ability to confront stressful situations with a clear mind. Using exercise as a stress reliever is very effective, as it produces natural endorphins to instantly improve mood. Exercise can also be used as a way to take out aggressions because it is healthy to “fight” with machines to work harder. Additionally, increased exercise uses the body’s fuel and helps induce more restful sleep. It was interesting to note that less than 14% of the responses reported drugs or alcohol as their preferred coping strategy.

Stress for a college student is inevitable, but when addressed properly, it can be the impetus to maturation and social growth. Students will face challenges in college that will help them deal with greater struggles in the workplace and when they start families of their own. Identification of stressors is paramount to developing positive coping methods. Stress can be positively managed through diversions, attention to the body, and a focus on mental health. A college student can successfully tackle stress through participation in campus clubs and organizations, signing up for exercise classes at the recreation center, or meeting friends for lunch at the cafeteria. When dealt with properly, stress can be the driving force that makes a student successful. An unknown author once said that “God didn’t do it all in one day. What makes me think I can?” The student that retreats from chronic pressure and uses stress to an advantage will achieve the greatest growth and satisfaction in life.

Appendix

Figure 1 is based on my informal survey of 100 undergraduate college students. Each student was to choose two stressors from the list that affect the students most frequently.

Figure 2 is based on my informal survey of 100 undergraduate college students. In this survey, each student was to choose two of the coping mechanisms listed.

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