# Relaxation, Stress & Sleep

Feeling overwhelmed or stressed? You are not alone!

Dartmouth students report their top three impediments to academic performance as:

* Stress (31%)
* Cold/Flu/Sore Throat (24%)
* Sleep Difficulties (18%)  
  Source: Dartmouth College Health Survey, Spring 2008

### The good news?  There is something ****you**** can do to change this pattern!

When one develops skills that help to manage stress and improve the quality (and quantity) of sleep, he or she will also most likely see a decrease in the frequency of general illnesses such as colds, sore throat and the flu.This site contains a lot of information to support you in enhancing your relaxation skills, which helps you to sleep more soundly and supports your body in fighting the negative consequences of stress.

* [Stress](http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Ehealthed/relax/index.html" \l "stress)
* [Symptoms of Stress](http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Ehealthed/relax/index.html#symptoms)
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* [About Relaxation](http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Ehealthed/relax/index.html#about_relaxation)
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* [**Downloadable Relaxation Exercises** (mp3 files to listen thru your computer or to be downloaded)](http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Ehealthed/relax/downloads.html)
* [Positive Impacts of good sleep](http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Ehealthed/relax/index.html#positive_sleep)
* [Watch lecture by Dr. James Maas, Ph.D.](http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Ehealthed/relax/sleeplecture/sleeplecture.html) - Author of the New York Times Best Seller, "Power Sleep: The Revolutionary Program That Prepares Your Mind for Peak Performance" (Viewing is restricted to faculty, staff & students. DND authentication is required.)

## Stress

Stress is a basic part of life. Experiencing some amount of stress in our lives is protective and adaptive. Our responses to stress help our minds and bodies to prepare for difficult challenges, and to react appropriately in a time of crisis. In fact, a certain amount of stress is necessary to help us perform at our best. Stress adds flavor, challenge and opportunity to life. Without stress, life could become quite dull and unexciting.

### Stress generally comes from four main areas...

* **Environmental factors** such as excessive noise, problems with roommates or neighbors, uncomfortable living space, bad weather, natural disasters, busy traffic, pollution
* **Social factors** including deadlines, financial problems, group projects, disagreements, demands on time and attention, dating, balancing work and school, loss of a loved one, conflicts with family
* **Physiological factors** such as adolescence, illness, accidents, lack of exercise, poor nutrition, alcohol or drug use/abuse, sleep disturbances, muscle tension, headaches, upset stomach
* **Thoughts**, including our perception of events, expecting too much from ourselves or others, being perfectionistic, being competitive, making decisions, having a pessimistic attitude, expecting problem-free living, worrying,being self-critical, making assumptions

Too much continued stress can seriously affect our physical and mental well being. It can interfere with normal daily activities, diminish self-esteem, impair relationships, and decrease work and academic effectiveness. Stress can lead to self-blame, self-doubt, feeling burned out, or becoming clinically anxious or depressed.

## Why we 'stress out'

There are two main reasons...

1. We perceive a situation as dangerous, difficult, or painful.
2. We don't believe we have the resources to cope.

We often identify specific events, people, or situations that seem to make us feel stressed. It's as if these things automatically cause us feel stressed out. In reality, it's how we perceive an event, the meaning we give to it, that leads us to feel stressed or not stressed about it.

**The interesting thing about stress is that it begins with our own perceptions of things!**

You may have noticed that some people can feel quite stressed out about a particular event while others don't seem to be bothered by it at all? For example, if three of your friends all get a poor grade on a test, you might notice some different reactions.

1. One friend may seem mildly annoyed for an hour or so.
2. Another friend doesn't seem to be bothered at all.
3. The third friend, however, might become quite alarmed by this poor grade. She can't get it off her mind, she vows to study three times as hard next time, she can't concentrate on her other work, and she might even find it difficult to fall asleep that evening. She might become increasingly concerned about all the grades she'll make this term, and wonder whether her GPA will suffer.

In a case such as this, a poor grade on a test means something different for each of your friends. The same situation has happened to all three, but each person feels more or less stressed about it because of what it means to him or her.

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## Symptoms of Stress

Symptoms of stress can affect us physically, behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively. You can learn to recognize these symptoms or signals in yourself before stress gets too far out of hand. When you recognize your unique signals, it's time to take action.  Some possible reactions are listed below:

### Physical Symptoms:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * headaches * indigestion * stomach aches * sweaty palms * cold hands/feet * dizziness * easily fatigued * muscle tension | * back pain * tight neck/shouldres * racing heart * shallow breathing * restlessness * ringing in the ears * constipation * diarrhea |

### Behavioral Symptoms:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * excess smoking * bossiness * eating too little or too much * critical attitude of others * short-tempered * procrastination * sleeping too much or too little | * overuse of alcohol * inability to finish tasks * driving too fast * nail biting * grinding of teeth * fidgety |

### Emotional Symptoms:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * bothered by unimportant things * feeling 'burned out' * nervousness, anxiety * boredom * edginess * irritable * feeling powerless | * crying easily * overwhelming pressure * anger * loneliness * unhappiness, depression * moodiness * feeling helpless |

### Cognitive Symptoms:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * difficulty with concentration/focus * trouble thinking clearly * expecting too much from self/others * forgetfulness * lack of creativity | * inability to make decisions * constant worry * loss of humor * being self-critical * being pessimistic |

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## Suggestions for Reducing Stress

1. **Find a support system.** Find someone to talk to about your feelings and experiences. Speak to friends, family, a teacher, a minister, or a counselor. Sometimes we just need to "vent" or get something "off our chest." Expressing our feelings can be relieving, we can feel supported by others, and it can help us work out our problems.
2. **Change your attitude.** Find other ways to think about stressful situations. "Life is 10% what happens to us, and 90% how we react to it. Talk to yourself positively. Remember, "I can handle it, " "this will be over soon," or "I have handled difficult things before, and I can do it again." Also, practice acceptance. We need to learn to accept things we cannot change without trying to exert more control over them.
3. **Be realistic.** Set practical goals for dealing with situations and solving problems. Develop realistic expectations of yourself and others. Setting our expectations or goals high may seem like a useful way to push ourselves and get things done, but we may also set ourselves up for disappointment and continued stress. Find the courage to recognize your limits
4. **Get organized and take charge.** Being unorganized or engaging in poor planning often leads to frustrating or crisis situations, which most always leads to feeling stressed. Plan your time, make a schedule, establish your priorities. Do this regularly until it becomes a productive habit. Take responsibility for your life. Be proactive. Problem solve and look for solutions rather than worry.
5. **Take breaks, give yourself "me time."** Learn that taking time to yourself for rejuvenation and relaxation is just as important as giving time to other activities. At minimum, take short breaks during your busy day. You might purposely schedule time in your day planner just for yourself so that you can recharge for all the other things you need to do. Learn your "red flags" for stress, and be willing to take time to do something about it.
6. **Take good care of yourself.** Eat properly, get regular rest, keep a routine. Allow yourself to do something you enjoy each day. Paradoxically, the time we need to take care of ourselves the most, when we are stressed, is the time we do it the least. When we feel overwhelmed we tend to eat poorly, sleep less, stop exercising, and generally push ourselves harder. This can tax the immune system and cause us to become ill more easily. If we take good care of ourselves to begin with, we will be better prepared to manage stress and accomplish our tasks in the long run.
7. **Learn to say "no."** Learn to pick and choose which things you will say "yes" to and which things you will not. Protect yourself by not allowing yourself to take on every request or opportunity that comes your way. It is okay to decline a request for a favor. Saying "no" does not mean you are bad, self-centered, or uncaring. Learn skills of assertiveness so that you can feel more confident and have effective ways of saying "no."
8. **Get regular exercise.** Exercising regularly can help relieve some symptoms of depression and stress, and help us to maintain our health. Exercise can build confidence, self-esteem, and self-image. It is also a great way to take time for yourself, blow off steam, and release physical tension.
9. **Get a hobby, do something different.** For a balanced lifestyle, play is as important as work. Leisure activities and hobbies can be very enjoyable and inspiring, and they can offer an added sense of accomplishment to our lives. For ideas on new hobbies, browse through a bookstore or a crafts store, surf the internet, look up local organizations, see what classes or courses are available in your community or from a nearby college or university. Don't quickly dismiss new opportunities.
10. **Slow down.** Know your limits and cut down on the number of things you try to do each day, particularly if you do not have enough time for them or for yourself. Be realistic about what you can accomplish effectively each day. Also, monitor your pace. Rushing through things can lead to mistakes or poor performance. Take the time you need to do a good job. Poorly done tasks can lead to added stress.
11. **Laugh, use humor.** Do something fun and enjoyable such as seeing a funny movie, laughing with friends, reading a humorous book, or going to a comedy show.
12. **Learn to relax.** Learn some relaxation exercises such as those discussed further down this page. Develop a regular relaxation routine. Try yoga, meditation, or some simple quiet time. Relaxation techniques are skills that need to be developed with patience and practice so that we can use them effectively during difficult times of stress later on.

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## About Relaxation

The ability to relax is important in effectively managing stress and anxiety. When we feel stressed, our bodies react with what is called the "fight or flight" response. Our muscles become tense, our heart and respiration rates increase, and other physiological systems become taxed. Without the ability to relax, chronic stress or anxiety can lead to burnout, anger, irritability, depression, medical problems, and more.

Allowing yourself to deeply relax is the exact opposite of the "fight or flight" response. In 1975, Herbert Benson described what he referred to as the "relaxation response." This is the body's ability to experience a decrease in heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and oxygen consumption.

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## How Relaxation Exercises Can Help

There are many benefits to being able to induce the "relaxation response" in your own body. Some benefits include a reduction of generalized anxiety, prevention of cumulative stress, increased energy, improved concentration, reduction of some physical problems, and increased self-confidence (Bourne, 2000).

* Relaxation exercises can be a powerful weapon against stress. The following are some important facts about stress:
* 43% of adults experienced adverse health effects from stress
* 75-90% of visits to a physician's office are for stress-related conditions and complaints
* Stress has been linked to the 6 leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide
* The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has declared stress a hazard of the workplace
* In the workplace, stress may be related to lost hours due to absenteeism, reduced productivity, and worker's compensation benefits. This costs the American industry more than $300 billion annually   
  Source: Miller, Smith & Rothstein, 1994

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## Types of Relaxation Exercises

Relaxation techniques can help reduce emotional and physical sensations of stress, as well as the worry or stressful thoughts that may accompany them. If you can learn to relax your breathing and reduce your muscle tension, your mind will follow. Conversely, if you can learn to ease stressful thoughts and worry, your body will relax as well.

It is highly recommended that you approach learning these exercises as skills that need to be practiced and developed over time, rather than as something you can do once in a while. Without practice, these exercises may not be as effective for you at the time you need them most!

While there are numerous types of relaxation exercises, but we will explore a few of them here:

* **Deep Breathing:** When we feel stressed, it is common for our rate of breathing to increase. We also tend to breath in a shallow manner, more highly in our chest. A deep breathing exercise allows us to take fuller, slower breaths that reflect a true relaxed state.
* **Visualization/Imagery:** Visualization is a nice way of giving our minds and bodies a "mini vacation." It involves using imagery to fully immerse ourselves in a pleasant scene, noticing the sights, sounds, smells, and tactile sensations.
* **Meditation:** Meditation can be described as "mental exercise" such as concentration on one’s breathing or repetition of a mantra. Various types of meditation that are recognized include transcendental meditation, prayer, Zen meditation, Taoist meditation, mindfulness meditation, Buddhist meditation and others. The end goal of all types of meditation lead to a mind that is quieted and free from stress by the use of quiet contemplation and reflection.
* **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** This practice involves sequentially tensing and relaxing the large skeletal muscle groups. Muscle relaxation is achieved by noting the contrast between the state of tension and relaxation and by increasing discernment of muscle groups that are prone to carrying tension.

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## Positive Impacts of good sleep

There is a great amount of research on sleep and it's impact and there are many resources available for those seeking it. However, what you probably most need to know is that adequate sleep (average of 7-9 hours/night) has been linked to the following positive impacts:

1. **Learning and memory:** Sleep helps the brain commit new information to memory through a process called memory consolidation. In studies, people who’d slept after learning a task did better on tests later.
2. **Metabolism and weight:** Chronic sleep deprivation may cause weight gain by affecting the way our bodies process and store carbohydrates, and by altering levels of hormones that affect our appetite.
3. **Safety:** Sleep debt contributes to a greater tendency to fall asleep during the daytime. These lapses may cause falls and mistakes such as medical errors, air traffic mishaps, and road accidents.
4. **Mood:** Sleep loss may result in irritability, impatience, inability to concentrate, and moodiness. Too little sleep can also leave you too tired to do the things you like to do.
5. **Cardiovascular health:** Serious sleep disorders have been linked to hypertension, increased stress hormone levels, and irregular heartbeat.
6. **Disease:** Sleep deprivation alters immune function, including the activity of the body’s killer cells. Keeping up with sleep may also help fight cancer.  
   Source: Harvard Health Publications: "[Importance of Sleep: Six reasons not to scrimp on sleep](http://www.health.harvard.edu/press_releases/importance_of_sleep_and_health)", accessed on 12/15/09

Not surprisingly, there are many documented consequences for sleep deprivation. Among them:

* Reduced decision-making skills
* Poorer memory
* Reduced concentration
* Reduced work efficiency
* Shortened attention span
* Increased risk for weight gain, depression, diabetes and cardiovascular Disease
* Reduced alertness
* Poorer judgment
* Reduced awareness of the environment and situation
* Slower than normal reaction time

[Watch lecture by Dr. James Maas, Ph.D.](http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7Ehealthed/relax/sleeplecture/sleeplecture.html) - - Author of the New York Times Best Seller, "Power Sleep: The Revolutionary Program That Prepares Your Mind for Peak Performance" (Viewing is restricted to faculty, staff & students. DND authentication is required.)

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The content for Stress and Relaxation sections of this page have been adapted from Georgia Southern University's Counseling Center.

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