

Stress Reduction

Erin Hennessy, LMFT, ATR, CCA Staff Counselor

Stress can impact how you feel and how you function in all areas of life. While some stress can be useful and motivational, too much stress can have a negative impact on your health and day-to-day functioning. Stress can be caused by external things, such as social, economic, academic, and environmental factors. Stress can come from life transitions, such as a move, a loss, or a new responsibility. Stress can even be the result of physiological issues, such as health problems, poor eating habits, or lack of exercise. Research shows that we can take active steps to lower the impact of stress, even when there are external factors outside of our control. By changing unhelpful thought patterns and increasing helpful coping skills, we can reduce the negative impact of stress in our lives.



Stress can manifest in many ways. The table below includes some changes that you may notice in your mood, body, or behavior when you are experiencing high stress. Recognizing your own early signs of stress can help you know when to intervene and make positive changes.

How do YOU experience stress?	
<p><u>Mental signs of stress</u></p> <p>Forgetfulness</p> <p>Difficulty with focus and concentration</p> <p>Indecision</p> <p>Persistent worry</p> <p>Lack of creativity</p>	<p><u>Emotional signs of stress</u></p> <p>Mood changes</p> <p>Irritability</p> <p>Crying easily</p> <p>Lack of patience or “short temper”</p> <p>Feeling “burned out” or overwhelmed</p> <p>Feeling pessimistic</p>
<p><u>Behavioral signs of stress</u></p> <p>Sleep difficulties</p> <p>Procrastination</p> <p>Increased drug/alcohol use</p> <p>Decreased socializing</p> <p>Difficulty initiating tasks</p>	<p><u>Physical signs of stress</u></p> <p>Headaches</p> <p>Stomach aches or digestive issues</p> <p>Muscle/joint tension</p> <p>Teeth grinding</p> <p>Habits such as nail-biting or fidgeting</p>

Ways to Reduce Stress

Just as there are many ways to experience stress, there are also many ways to reduce it. Choose a stress reduction strategy that makes sense for you, and commit yourself to it. Check in with yourself regularly, and adjust your habits and strategies as needed to keep your stress under control.

Identify Healthy Coping Skills

Take care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally. Coping skills are all of the strategies we use to deal with stressful situations in life. Some coping skills involve directly addressing the stressor and managing it. Other coping skills involve taking care of yourself and your emotional health without focusing on the stressor(s). Some examples of coping skills include exercise, reading, journaling, talking with a friend, spending time in nature, listening to music, or practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques.

For more information about **coping skills**, including a list of 40 specific coping skills, click here:

[Healthy Coping Skills for Uncomfortable Emotions](#)

For some **mindfulness practices** that you can incorporate into your daily life, click here:

[6 Mindfulness Exercises You Can Try Today](#)

This hand-out from Vaden Health Services at Stanford will help you create a list of **self-care activities** that you can reference when you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed:

[Self-Care Menu \(Self-Guided, April 2020\)](#)



There are also many free apps and programs specifically designed to help you develop a mindfulness practice and cope with stress. These are just a few examples:

[UCLA Mindful App](#)

[Headspace](#)

[Stop, Breathe, & Think](#)

Reduce “less healthy” coping skills. Less healthy coping skills include things that are a “quick fix” and may make you feel better in the short term, but they can negatively impact your ability

to deal with stress and stay healthy over time. Examples of less healthy coping skills include alcohol, substance use, smoking, eating to feel better, or sedentary activities like binge watching and internet/phone use. If you have concerns related to your substance use habits, talk with a counselor or medical professional.

Changing Thought Patterns

Identify what you can and cannot control. Are there elements of the stressful situation that you can change or alter by changing your own behavior or communication? If so, what realistic steps can you take to lessen the stress? This may involve changing your own habits, learning new skills, or stepping outside of your comfort zone. For example, if you're feeling overwhelmed by academic work, you may lessen your stress by making a clear to-do list, prioritizing tasks, improving time-management skills, or reaching out for academic support. Some stressors may be completely out of your control, which can lead to feelings of frustration or powerlessness. Once you've accepted that an event or situation is outside of your control, you can take steps to adapt and respond in a way that is healthy for you. For example, if you're overwhelmed by current events in the news, you *can* control when and how you consume news. If another person's behavior is causing you stress, you *can* set boundaries that feel safe and healthy for yourself.

Challenge unhelpful thoughts. Negative thoughts can create or contribute to stress. If you catch yourself in a pattern of negative thinking, ask yourself:

- Is the thing I'm worried about a possibility or a certainty?
- Am I catastrophizing or jumping to negative conclusions?
- Is my thinking based on facts or opinions/interpretations?
- What would I say to a friend who was having this thought/worry?

With practice, you may be able to train yourself to notice negative thoughts and challenge them, allowing space for more positive and proactive thinking.

Practice gratitude when and where you can. It's easy to get overwhelmed thinking of things that are going wrong. Allow yourself time to think about the things that you appreciate and feel grateful for. For more information and ideas on cultivating gratitude, click here:

[How To Cultivate Gratitude](#)

Connecting with Others

Talk to someone you trust. Humans are social creatures, and talking with a trusted person is a natural stress reliever. While large social events are a great way to make connections and have fun, it is also important to foster one-on-one relationships with people you feel comfortable with. If you're far from friends and/or loved ones, carve out time to connect with the important people in your life via phone or video chat. If you have connections nearby, arrange to meet one person for a walk or other activity that allows for focused conversation. Even if someone is unable to solve your problem or change your situation, a little bit of listening can go a long way.

Make new connections. Making new friends is not always easy, and you may have to step outside of your comfort zone to connect with others. [This article](#) offers some tips for finding and building meaningful friendships.

CCA offers many opportunities for students to meet and make connections outside of the classroom or studio. Check out the [Office of Student Life](#) for more information on activities or groups that may interest you.

Knowing When to Seek Support

If you experience stress, you're not alone. In fact, one 2019 study found that 75% of American students report "overwhelming anxiety" at some point during college. If stress is negatively impacting your ability to focus, sleep, enjoy activities, or stay healthy, it may be time to seek support.

Professional counseling can help you identify ways to reduce and cope with stress in your life, as well as provide you with a confidential space to talk about life's challenges. CCA counselors are here for you, and can also provide referrals to outside services and providers as needed. To access CCA Counseling Services, click [here](#).

CCA's Mental Health Crisis Hotline is available 24/7 for urgent, non-emergency mental health concerns. You can reach the crisis hotline at (510) 594-5099.

If you believe that you are experiencing a mental health emergency, please call 911 or go to the nearest hospital.

Other Stress Management Resources

[Stress Management](#) - This site includes tips for managing stress on a day-to-day basis, including "The Four A's of Stress Management: Avoid, Alter, Adapt, & Accept."

[The College Student's Guide to Stress Management \[Infographic\]](#) - This site provides handy tips for managing stress in college.

[7 Artists on the Self-Care Rituals that Keep Them Creative](#) - This article interviews seven working artists on their self-care habits during the COVID-19 crisis.

References

Information included in this article was obtained from the following sources:

[Top 14 Apps For Meditation and Mindfulness \(+ Reviews\)](#)

[Anxiety in College Students: Causes, Statistics & How Universities Can Help](#)

[The Most Common Symptoms of Stress](#)

[5 Worksheets for Challenging Negative Automatic Thoughts \(+PDF\)](#)