

Stress Management

The Skill that Affects All Others

Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Explain stress
- Identify types of stress
- Analyze the causes and effects of stress
- Identify your current stress levels
- Differentiate “good stress” from “bad stress”
- Develop your own personal two-step stress management system
- Build awareness of your stress management abilities

Why Learn This Skill?

Stress management is the one foundational skill that will increase your chance of having a healthy, happy, and successful journey through life. If your stress is out of control, so are your physical and mental health, academic and job performance, decision-making, and personal relationships. Let's first look at how stress affects your academic performance. A recent Associated Press and MTV poll found that 85 percent of college students reported feeling stress *daily*. Of the students polled, 60 percent reported feeling so stressed out that on one or more occasions they could not complete their assignments. Therefore, mastery of this skill is critical to your future academic success.

Many stress management systems are complicated and difficult to use. Have you ever read an article claiming to contain twenty steps to a stress-free life? First, there is no such thing as a stress-free life. Second, if you're already overwhelmed, just the idea of a twenty-step process is stressful! This text was created to provide a simpler, more realistic two-step system.

Another problem with stress management systems is that they're supposed to work for everyone even though each of us is unique. Just because a particular method worked for the professional speaker who developed the program does not mean it will work for a student who is juggling multiple roles, such as being an employee, a student, and a single parent. By reading this chapter and completing the exercises within, you will develop a simple and effective stress management system that will work for *you* in your academic, personal, and professional life.

1.1 Introduction

Going to school and learning should be a positive and uplifting experience, but a lack of good stress management skills can make you feel like the panda in the “after” picture in Figure 1-1 below. If you can relate, think about the following questions: Is the “after” picture how you really want to feel for a substantial portion of your life? Do you think you will make good decisions, perform well academically, or even feel well if you spend most of your time feeling like the “after” picture? Also consider the effect of consistently going home to your loved ones looking like the “after” picture. What might that do to your personal relationships? Keep this picture in your mind as you travel through this book.

1.2 Relax—Stress Is Manageable

This book starts with stress management for one very important reason: Whether you are a recent high school graduate or someone going back to school later in life, whether you are attending a four-year university or a community college, whether you are a young adult experiencing independence from your parents for the first time or a parent yourself, we all deal with stress. Many college surveys indicate that stress is the main barrier to academic success. If you are overwhelmed by stress, you won’t be able to think critically and creatively, set goals, manage your time, or study effectively. You may mistakenly believe you simply need to work on your time management or study skills when really the first thing you must do is get your stress levels under control. Once you have learned how to manage your stress, you can begin to develop the other skills necessary for success in college and beyond.

Figure 1-1 Can you relate?



1.3 What Is Stress?

We all deal with stress, but it doesn't have to rule your life. Stress management is both possible and necessary for success, and this book is designed to help you. In fact, beyond simply *managing* your stress, it's also possible to *turn your stress to your advantage*. You may not realize it now, but stress isn't always a bad thing. That said, before you can learn to use stress for success, you first need to understand what stress is all about. This chapter provides an understanding of stress that will serve as the foundation for your personalized stress management system. Instead of letting stress work against you, you will learn to make it to work for you.

What is stress? One of the common misconceptions about stress is that we need to wipe it out of our lives, and our goal should be to become "stress free." Nothing could be further from the truth. Stress is needed for our very existence, and there are several examples of good stress. A physiological example of good stress is the "fight-or-flight" response that kicks in when emergencies occur. Your body senses the stress brought on by danger and prepares you for action. You feel your heart begin to race and your body undergoes several physical changes to prepare to face the perceived threat. This kind of stress is an important survival response—one we can't, and shouldn't, get rid of.

Mental stress can also be good. Riding a rollercoaster or watching a horror film can be a stressful experience, but these are activities we do for fun. Similarly, engaging in challenging coursework can be stressful, but it's how we learn and grow and, ultimately, the experience should be rewarding. The stress of a deadline can motivate you to work instead of procrastinating, and the stress of a new experience, like going to college, doesn't diminish its value. But if stress isn't all bad, then what should the goal of stress management be? Stress management, we will soon discover, is about walking the fine line between good stress for optimal performance and bad stress, where your performance is greatly impaired. In other words, good stress is when you hype yourself up for the game and bad stress is when you take yourself out of the game.

Before you begin to develop your stress management system, it is important to get a baseline assessment of your current stress levels. In Exercise 1-1, let's find out where you are now to see how much you can improve in the coming months and years once you begin to use this simple system in your day-to-day life.

1.4 A Working Definition

So, what *is* the best definition of stress? If you read books on stress, you will find many different definitions. According to the American Institute of Stress, Hans Selye, the father of stress theory, defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to a demand made upon it." Let's try to define stress in a more user-friendly way. We have already established that some stress is needed, both physically and mentally. However, at times, we let this stress get out of control. When that happens, instead of helping us, stress causes serious harm. Based on this, the best way to define stress is in terms of how our bodies and minds *react* to stress. Here's our working definition of the **stress reaction**: how our minds and bodies react to events, people, and situations in our lives, largely shaped by our perceptions.

Stress reaction

How our minds and bodies react to events, people, and situations in our lives, largely shaped by our perceptions

Exercise 1-1 Baseline Assessment: *Your Stress Number*

Rate the following statements with numbers 1 through 4 as follows:

1 = Rarely 3 = Frequently
2 = Sometimes 4 = Always

- ___ 1. I have low energy and feel tired.
- ___ 2. I worry a lot about problems or how things are going to turn out.
- ___ 3. I can spot all the things others are doing wrong.
- ___ 4. I feel the need to be perfect at what I do.
- ___ 5. I skip my workout/exercise sessions.
- ___ 6. I feel sad.
- ___ 7. My mind goes a million miles per hour.
- ___ 8. I take on everyone else's problems.
- ___ 9. I try to control other people.
- ___ 10. I feel like I can't do anything right.
- ___ 11. I avoid risks for fear of failure.
- ___ 12. I let my work pile up.
- ___ 13. I feel like I'm being pulled in all directions.
- ___ 14. I have a pessimistic attitude.

- ___ 15. I get tension headaches.
- ___ 16. I have a difficult time sleeping.
- ___ 17. I overreact to situations.
- ___ 18. I feel guilty if I relax and do nothing.
- ___ 19. I lose my sense of humor.
- ___ 20. I get angry easily over little things.

Now add up your answers and see where you stand: _____

60–80: This chapter could be a life-changing experience.
50–59: Your stress is out of control, and you desperately need this material.
40–49: Your stress is causing problems for you, and you would gain moderate benefit from this chapter.
30–39: Stress is affecting you, and this chapter will help with the stress in your life.
20–29: You are doing pretty well, but this chapter can help you do better.

Mind–Body Connection Let's take a closer look at this definition. Notice how it begins with "how our minds and bodies react..." This shows the close relationship is between the body (physiologic responses) and the mind (psychological responses). You may have read elsewhere that heart and lung disease are among the top illnesses affecting people in the United States. However, think about *why* many individuals develop heart or lung disease. Much of lung disease is caused by smoking, which is an unhealthy response to stress. Likewise, heart disease is often caused by poor diet, smoking, and lack of exercise. These are all the unhealthy habits of someone who doesn't properly handle stress in his or her life. Just think about the following common statements as they relate to stress and the mind–body connection:

- I couldn't catch my breath.
- My heart was racing.
- My brain was fried.
- My stomach was twisted in knots.

Our Perceptions Define Our Stress Now let's continue on with the rest of the definition: "... react to events, people, and situations in our lives, largely shaped by our perceptions." Notice the words *our perceptions*. We can drive this point home using the example of donating blood. Take a look at the pictures of the two first-time volunteer blood donors in Figure 1-2.



Donor A is calm and relaxed throughout the whole procedure and even smiles and jokes with the technician. Donor B is highly stressed, sweaty, and in general a “nervous wreck” throughout the whole procedure. However, both patients had the *same* procedure with the *same* technician in the *same* environment. You would think their reactions would be exactly the same. Why is there a difference in their reactions?

The answer is that their perceptions were different. Obviously, the perception of the first donor was more positive, whereas the second donor was full of dread. The way you look at a situation has a big effect on how you feel about it. If you look at giving blood as a positive experience (“I get to help people!”), you will feel better about doing it. If you look at it as a negative experience (“They’re going to stick me with a needle!”), you won’t feel as good.

Keep in mind that most stress occurs as a result of how we *interpret* and *react* to a situation, person, or event—not solely because of the situation, person, or event itself. It is sometimes hard to admit that we cause most of our stress, but the good news is that if we do cause it, then we can actually control it.

Hans Selye developed many of the terms associated with stress. He referred to anything that causes stress as a “stressor” or “trigger.” It’s important to become aware of the stressors in your life in order to learn to manage them. Give Exercise 1-2 a try.

Exercise 1-2 Beginning to Build Awareness: *What Triggers You?*

List and describe the top three stressors or triggers in your life.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

1.5 Types of Stress

We've established that stress is a physical and emotional reaction based on our perceptions. Let's further define stress to include two broad categories: *external stress* and *internal stress*. Keep in mind, the more we learn about stress, the better we can manage it.

1.5a External Stressors

External stressors are things *outside* of you, and they include your environment, social interactions, major life events, and daily hassles. Sometimes these things are beyond our control, but we can control how we react to them. Please see Table 1-1 for examples of some external stressors in our lives.

1.5b Internal Stressors

Internal stressors are things *inside* of us—like our thoughts—and they include things like being pessimistic or too self-critical as well as our habits and personality traits. These thinking styles are examples of the internal “mind talk” we engage in. You'll read more about mind talk elsewhere in the book, including information on just how powerful this internal dialogue can be and how it can either help you grow or hurt you. For example, someone who is a perfectionist might have unrealistic expectations for him- or herself. Any time perfectionists make mistakes, they tend to engage in self-critical mind talk. Instead of helping them grow, this can cause a great deal of negative stress as the perfectionist dreads the next mistake. Please see Table 1-2 for some more examples of internal stressors.

Table 1-1 Examples of External Stressors

External Stressors	Examples
Environment	Noise, heat, bright lights, confined spaces
Social interaction	Bad relationships, aggressive interactions, new social situations
Major life event	Starting school, moving, getting married, getting divorced, job loss or change, family sickness or death
Daily hassle	Commuting to work or school, car repairs, paying bills

Table 1-2 Examples of Internal Stressors

Internal Stressors	Examples
Habits	Lack of restful sleep and exercise, smoking, drug abuse
Personality traits	Workaholic, perfectionist, people-pleaser
Negative thinking styles	Pessimistic, self-critical, rigid thinking, racing mind

1.6 Harmful Effects of Stress

It is a fact of life that we all have temporary stressors that are both external and internal in nature. Currently, you may be studying for that big exam, deciding on your career path, going on a job interview, or having a major issue impact your life. The question is, will you handle your temporary stressors and turn them into a positive experience? Let's first explore what happens if you cannot—the harmful effects of stress. We will then finish this chapter by learning how to face stress in a positive way, giving you the tools to properly manage stress.

1.6a Chronic Stress

No matter what the change or challenge may be, it is important that you do not let stress adversely affect your performance and health. It is especially dangerous when you remain in a chronic (long-term) state of stress. *Chronic stress* equals poor performance, poor decisions, and poor health. It can affect you physically, mentally, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Physical symptoms of chronic stress can include sweating, muscle aches, digestive problems, loss of appetite, headache, and dizziness, to name just a few. *Mentally*, chronic stress manifests itself as anxiousness, forgetfulness, confusion, panic attacks, and loss of humor. *Emotional changes* include anxiety, nervousness, fear, irritability, impatience, and even depression. *Behavioral changes* may include increased alcohol intake, appetite changes, smoking and drug abuse, restlessness, nail-biting, and increased aggressiveness. Do any of these sound familiar?

Chronic stress has been related to conditions such as heart disease, depression, ulcers, and migraine headaches. Some say it is the leading cause of health problems in our hectic, high-paced society. Look at some of these facts concerning stress:

- Chronic stress has been shown to weaken the immune system.
- It is estimated that heart disease causes over a third of all deaths in the United States. Stress can play a major role in this disease.
- The majority of heart attacks occur on Monday mornings.
- The stress-related disorder of hypertension (high blood pressure) is estimated to affect as many as sixty-five million Americans.
- Research shows that stress plays a role in osteoporosis in women.
- Chronic high levels of stress can contribute to weight gain

1.6b Stress and the Workplace

Stress also has major effects in the workplace. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), job-related stress generates more health complaints than other life stressors. Studies cited on the American Institute of Stress website indicate 80 percent of workers feel stress on the job and nearly half say they need help in managing their stress.

1.6c Stress and Academic Performance

One of the reasons why stress management should be the first behavior addressed for students adjusting to college is its relationship to academic performance. A groundbreaking research study conducted by the University of Minnesota's Boynton

Health Service surveyed 9,931 students at fourteen different two- and four-year schools. They compared academic performance (as measured by GPA) to health problems such as stress and poor habits such as smoking, drinking, and gambling. It is not surprising they discovered students with unhealthy behaviors had significantly lower GPAs.

Furthermore, the study showed stress to be one of the *biggest* factors related to a lower GPA. Of the 69.9 percent of students who reported they were stressed, 32.9 percent said that stress was hurting their academic performance. The good news in the study was that students who said they were able to handle their stress effectively performed much better than those who said they couldn't. The main researcher in the study, Dr. Ehlinger, said, "If students can manage their stress, then their stress level will not matter."

Food for Thought

It is estimated that \$300 billion is spent annually in the United States on stress-related compensation such as workers' compensation claims, reduced productivity, absenteeism, accidents, and medical/insurance costs (American Institute of Stress)

1.7 Good Stress versus Bad Stress

Hans Selye was once quoted as saying “stress is the spice of life.” His quote was meant to show that without stress, progress is rarely achieved, and additionally that boredom itself can become stressful due to a lack of progress. Selye used the term *eustress* to describe positive stress. “Eu” means easy or normal. Conversely, Selye used the term *distress* for negative stress. We are going to simplify things and use the terms **good stress** and **bad stress** instead. *Good stress* refers to the stress necessary to progress and succeed through life. *Bad stress* is the overwhelming and counterproductive stress that weighs us down.

Good stress

Stress that is necessary to progress and succeed; also known as *eustress*

Bad stress

Stress that is overwhelming and counterproductive; also known as *distress*

1.7a Stay in Your Zone

The main goal of this chapter is to help you develop a personalized system to keep you in your “good stress zone” so you can perform at your best in school, at your job, and in life. First, it’s important to recognize your personal stressors and the way it feels when your stress is out of balance or, in other words, when you have entered your “bad stress zone.” How do you, individually, react to too much stress? If you can recognize these warning signs in yourself, it’s easier to identify when your stress levels are too high, making it possible to manage them. Notice we are not focusing as much on the triggers. That’s because life circumstances and the stress they cause will always come and go. It’s more practical to focus on how stress makes you feel physically and mentally. Seeing these feelings for what they are—signs that you’re too stressed—is valuable for your health and can help you maintain a positive attitude even when life gets hard. Your reaction to stress is a wake-up call that says you need to cope with what’s going on in your life before it overtakes you.

Let’s revisit the notion that not all stress is bad for you. Survival stress is an important and necessary stress. If confronted by a life-threatening event, your fight-or-flight response will kick in. In other words, your body gets ready to either fight or flee the dangerous situation. In a true emergency, this response can maximize your chance for survival.

In your everyday life, stress can motivate you to get things done. It can be difficult to work on large assignments well before the deadline (even if you know you should), but once that due date starts approaching, you probably find your motivation to work is much higher. A little bit of stress is good for you while performing important tasks. The key is finding a balance.

1.7b Good Stress

Stress is often unavoidable when it comes to everyday events such as a big exam, a job interview, or giving a speech in front of the class. But can it also be helpful for succeeding in these tasks? Studies show that you actually perform better if you have moderate stress and are not totally “cool as a cucumber.” If you are not under enough stress, your performance may suffer because you are bored or unmotivated. However, if you let stress get out of hand and you panic, you have entered into the bad stress zone. In the bad stress zone, your anxiety rises to the point where you perform poorly or worse, not at all.

Food for Thought

There are many stories of people performing herculean feats when their fight-or-flight response, or adrenaline rush, kicked in. Stories include people of average strength lifting cars to save someone trapped underneath or carrying items such as refrigerators while running from a fire.

1.7c Bad Stress

As already stated, a certain amount of stress is normal. We need it to develop and grow. However, going beyond your good stress zone and entering your bad stress zone can be harmful. You need to be able to identify when this is happening. The best way is to look for physical and emotional signs that the stress is getting to be too much for you. From our previous discussion on the harmful effects of stress, it should be clear what high levels of bad stress can cause. It's no wonder that individuals who don't know how to manage their stress have more accidents, poorer attendance, and difficulty studying and learning. If bad stress persists and becomes long-term (or chronic), it can become destructive. The American Institute of Stress lists several effects of stress in the *bad zone*, including:

- High blood pressure, heart attack, or stroke
- Stomach pain
- Lack of sleep or insomnia
- Decreased immune system functioning
- Depression and personality changes
- Problems with learning
- Frequent headaches



Real-Life Application

Preventive Medicine and Early Intervention

For a long time, doctors waited until people got sick to treat them. However, recently, *preventive medicine*—treating people in a way that stops them getting sick in the first place—has gained a lot of attention. Tension headaches indicate you have been in

your bad stress zone for some time. But what if you could identify that you were in your bad stress zone before the headaches became a problem? If you could identify earlier signals that precede a headache, you could take steps to prevent many headaches from ever happening. One thing to look for is nervous habits such as biting fingernails, pulling your hair, shaking your leg, or clicking your pen. These are usually early signs that you have just entered your bad stress zone. If you intervene right away, you can prevent yourself from developing more serious problems like headaches. This self-awareness is often difficult because many of these habits are so automatic that we just ignore them. Try to be more aware of these habits. If you can catch yourself shaking your leg, it's possible to prevent the subsequent muscle tightness, upset stomach, and headache that may follow.

1.8 Your Two-Step Stress Management System

Now that you have some background information about stress, you can develop your personalized stress management system. Take your time with each step, and remember that this system will evolve over time and with continued use.

1.8a Step 1: Become Aware of Your Good and Bad Stress Zones

It's time to take the first step in our two-step process for creating a personal stress management system. Here you will learn to become aware of your individual good and bad stress zones. Exercise 1-3 will help you recognize your good stress zone.

Exercise 1-3 Determining Your Good Stress Zone

Write at least three adjectives or phrases that describe you when you are in "your good stress zone." Write more if you can think of them because the better you describe and know your good stress zone, the more likely you are to spend more time there. In other words, select words that describe you when you are functioning well, running on all cylinders, hitting your peak, and so on. To get you thinking, some adjectives may include *happy*, *focused*, and a *sense of humor*. Phrases may include "I'm more productive when I feel..." or "I feel more motivated when I'm..." Remember, choose words that best describe you when you are doing well in *your* life.

Keep these words and phrases in mind because we will soon use them to develop your personalized stress management system.



You defined your good stress zone in Exercise 1-3. Now, in Exercise 1-4, let's go on to develop awareness of your bad stress zone. Then we can discuss how to stay in the good zone and avoid the bad.

Exercise 1-4 Finding Your Bad Stress Zone

List several (as many as you can) mental *and* physical changes that occur when you are in your bad stress zone. In other words, come up with a list of things that happen to your body and mind when you are “losing it,” not running on all cylinders, and not functioning well. To jog your memory, some possible examples could include stomachaches, forgetfulness, nervous habits, eye twitching, making mistakes, irritability, headaches, or muscular tension. Remember to list your own responses. Some may be the same as the examples given, but they must relate to *your* life.

You have now developed a contrasting picture of your good and bad stress zones from Exercises 1-3 and 1-4, but we need to take it just a little further. In Exercise 1-5, you will develop your personal stress chart. This will give you a complete picture of both your good and bad stress zones. In addition, it will allow you to see how your reaction to stress goes from bad to worse so you can intervene early to return to your good stress zone. See Figure 1-3 for an example of one of the author’s stress charts.

Figure 1-3 Example of completed stress chart

 Good Stress Zone	 Bad Stress Zone
Focused	Shaking leg
Good sense of humor	Forgetting things
Mentally sharp	Neck and back tension
	Stomachache
	Eye Twitching
	Headache

Exercise 1-5 Making Your Personal Stress Chart

Using Figure 1-4, place your descriptions from Exercise 1-3 in the Good Stress Zone. Now look at your list from your bad stress zone (Exercise 1-4) and place the items in *chronological* order starting with what occurs first when you just begin to enter your bad stress zone. You can also compare your chart to Figure 1-3, which shows a completed stress chart as an example.

Figure 1-4 **Stress chart**

Good Stress Zone	Bad Stress Zone
 <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	 <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

You have now completed Step 1 of the process. Your personalized stress management system can help you recognize when you are in your good stress zone. Most importantly, it will show you how to recognize when you are beginning to enter your bad stress zone so you can quickly intervene to prevent further bad things from happening.

For example, look at Figure 1-3. If the author intervenes as soon as his leg starts shaking, he can quickly go back into the good stress zone. If he doesn't intervene, he will move further down the line to more serious consequences like forgetting things and getting a stiff neck. If he still doesn't intervene, he might wind up with a stomach- or headache.

People who get frequent tension headaches (four or five a week) have used this system to reduce their headaches down to one or even *none* a week. By recognizing the early warning signals—such as shaking their leg or rolling their neck because of tension—and doing something about their stress, they are able to get things under control before their stress results in a headache.

Please note that your stress chart will continue to develop over time. Here are some helpful hints:

- As stated previously, a nervous habit such as tapping a pen, shaking a leg, or biting your nails is an early warning sign you are entering your bad stress zone.
- Make sure your list contains both mental and physical signs of stress.
- Review your stress chart every few months to see if you discovered something new to add.
- Pick something later in your chart (like a headache) that occurs when you are at your most stressed and keep track of your progress in reducing how often that thing happens. Acting early is key to preventing later and more harmful consequences.
- Pay attention when people close to you provide insights about you, like calling attention to your nervous habits or tendency to overreact when stressed. They may see things about you that you can't see about yourself.

Congratulations! You are now aware of how you act and feel when you are too stressed versus when you are just stressed enough. Now we move on to Step 2, which basically says once you recognize that you are in your bad stress zone, you can intervene in a healthy manner to get back to your good stress zone.



Real-Life Application

Success Story

Often you are not aware of a nervous habit. During one workshop, an attendee who had a headache five days a week vigorously denied any nervous habits that led up to the headaches. When pressed, she began to click her pen very quickly. Even as she was doing so, she continued to deny any nervous habits. That is, until

the pen clicking was brought to her attention. She said, “I didn’t even know I was doing that.” Then a friend said, “Yes, and you always chew on your hair when you’re stressed out,” and a coworker said, “You drive me crazy when you tap your pencil and grind your jaw.” In fifteen minutes, she had a fully developed stress chart with many early indicators that could signal an alarm to intervene before her headache began. Within six months, she indicated she was down to one to two tension headaches per week! What a positive change in her quality of life!

1.8b Step 2: Perform a Healthy Intervention

Notice the word *healthy*. If every time you enter your bad stress zone, you drink alcohol, take other drugs, or reach for something to eat, you can develop addictions. That is an unhealthy way to cope with stress. So, what are the healthy options? There are many, and they depend on your particular situation. This chapter ends with some ideas for what to do when you know you're in your bad stress zone. Please note that not all of these will work for any given situation; they are presented here to give you options to think about as a starting point.

Exercise Physical exercise relieves stress. The type of exercise is up to you and can be as simple as taking a brisk walk. If you are more physically fit, you may want to include jogging, bicycling, or lifting weights. Finding a good workout partner or participating in team sports increases the likelihood that you'll work out regularly because socializing makes exercising more fun.

Aerobic exercise also releases *endorphins*, which are the body's natural pain killers and mood-elevating chemicals. Exercise can be used on a regular basis to help *prevent* you from entering your bad stress zone. It can also be used when you find yourself crossing into the bad stress zone and just need to take a brisk walk to clear your mind.

Of course, you can't always drop everything while at work or taking a test and just begin exercising when things get stressful. This is why it is important to have a variety of options to choose from for any particular situation. People who have office jobs and spend a lot of time sitting at the computer can do certain office exercises, such as periodically stretching to help relieve their tension. Some workplaces even have office aerobics and exercise sessions built into the workday.

Nutrition and Sleep Good health practices such as getting enough sleep and eating healthy food increase the probability that you will remain in your good stress zone even when stressors do come your way. It's like hydrating yourself before physical exercise instead of waiting until you are dying of thirst. Sleep is a must for us to function and handle stress. Research has shown that lack of sleep makes you more susceptible to illness, more irritable, and less able to focus. Health experts recommend that most adults get between seven and nine hours of sleep a night.

When you get run down because of sleep deprivation or poor nutrition, every little stressor will send you into your bad stress zone, and it may be difficult to escape. Remember what happens when people stay in their bad stress zone for extended periods of time? It can create chronic stress, which can lead to high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart attacks, to name just a few possible outcomes.

Good nutrition is a must for our growth and development. It also helps to fight bad stress and disease. One part of practicing good nutrition is to drink plenty of water. Water makes up the majority of our body, and it aids in digestion, absorption of nutrients, and removal of waste products. Although water is found in most foods, drink at least six to eight glasses each day for good health.

Caffeine, found in coffee, tea, and many sodas, is a potent stimulant—it makes you feel energized. However, large amounts can make you anxious and nervous and can prevent you from getting a good night's sleep. Maintaining a well-balanced diet, and ingesting caffeine in moderation, is important for your long-term health.

Time Off Taking time off from work or school helps you deal with stress in a positive way. Both the body and mind need to get away and recharge their batteries. Getting lost in a hobby or listening to your favorite music can slow down your mind. Slowing down your mind can help you take a calmer look at what's causing your stress and move you back into your good stress zone.

Did you ever have a major problem come into your life and the more you focused on it, the more stressed and emotional you became with no solution in sight? It is hard to come up with ideas and use good decision-making skills in this frame of mind. Even taking fifteen minutes for yourself can help greatly. When life gets busy, you might find it hard to make time for yourself. If you are responsible for taking care of others, this can make it even harder. Reach out to people in your life who support you and remember that if you are in your good stress zone, you won't just be a better student—you'll be a better parent, spouse, sibling, friend, or coworker too.

When a problem is causing unrelenting stress, take a break and get away from the problem by doing something else. In many cases, the solution will then come to you as if by magic. It's not magic, just your subconscious mind working for you. You'll read more about this later. Basically, by stepping away from the problem and distracting yourself with a hobby or music, you are calming your mind, and a calmer mind may be better able to come up with the solution.

Humor Therapy It has been estimated that children laugh a hundred times a day. Maybe there is a lot to be learned from children. How often do you think adults laugh each day? How often do *you* laugh?

Humor also has psychological effects, such as helping to resolve problems and to reduce stress and anxiety. You have probably been in a stressful situation with other people when a joke broke the ice. Humor therapy is even used to enhance some medical treatments. It is often said that "laughter is the best medicine."

There are several techniques you can use to add humor to your life. One of the most effective tools is to simply *smile* and laugh out loud more often. Look for humor in every situation you can, and don't be afraid to laugh at yourself. At the same time, always remember to take your study and work responsibilities seriously.

The next time you are on hold, or dealing with one of those frustrating automated telephone menus, or in a traffic jam and beginning to tense up and stress out—put a big smile on your face. You will find it is nearly impossible to feel bad when you are smiling. This will prevent something that is out of your control from ruining the rest of your day. Try it now with Exercise 1-6 to demonstrate its effectiveness.

Exercise 1-6 A Simple Method That Works Wonders

You can either do this alone or with a partner. Place a big smile on your face and try to be angry or think a bad thought. Write a description of how it worked for you.

Try this next time you feel yourself getting tense or worked up about something. Simply sit back and place a huge smile on your face. Sometimes the simple techniques are the most effective.

Social Support Social support in the form of friends, family, loved ones, or clubs and organizations can all help with stress relief. Be careful because interactions with people can also cause bad stress. However, all you need to do is remain *aware* of your early stress signals, and if you notice any, do *something positive* to get you back to your good stress zone.

Although social support can be very positive, it is always good to keep in good touch with *yourself*. Do Exercise 1-7, which helps you vent safely about whatever may be causing you stress.

Exercise 1-7 Venting

Is there something happening that you perceive as unfair? Do you have a friend with a personality trait that drives you crazy? Is an upcoming event stressing you out? Using a recording device, talk to yourself about it. Make a recording of yourself talking about this problem as if you were venting to a trusted friend. Be honest, be brutal, but be yourself. Get it all out. Then let a few hours or a day go by, and *listen* to yourself. How does the problem sound to you now? Does it seem as important or “vent-worthy” as it did before? And how do *you* sound to yourself? Would you sympathize with yourself? Major leap of faith: Would you let someone you trust listen to this recording? Talking with a close friend and journal writing can be two additional and very effective ways to vent.

Relaxation Techniques Practicing relaxation techniques will help to clear your mind and make you sharper. Many people will find a million excuses why they can’t take the time to relax. Do you see the problem this sets up? If someone is that busy, then they especially need to take the time to relax and restore their body and mind or life will continue to be crazy. Just remember, if you use your cell phone a lot, you must take the time to recharge it in order for it to work. You need to recharge yourself as well. The time you take to do so allows you to listen to your body. Two types of effective relaxation techniques include breathing relaxation and meditation techniques.

Slow and deep breathing serves several purposes. First, it increases oxygen to your brain and your body, helping them work properly. It also slows your thinking to help clear your head and relax your muscles. Here is a breathing relaxation technique to try:

First, find an area with few or no distractions (noise, interruptions, etc.). You can sit in a favorite chair (recliners work best) or even lie on your bed and use this technique before going to sleep if you can't find the time during the day. Sometimes, this may even make you fall asleep, which is good because you will get a much more restful and restorative sleep. Now that you have your area, get comfortable and do the following:

1. Close your eyes and have your palms face upward.
2. Take a *slow* and *deep* breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. When you breathe in, your stomach should slowly rise (not your chest) and it should then slowly sink when you breathe out. You can put one hand over your stomach to make sure you are doing this correctly until you get used to it.
3. Continue breathing slowly and deeply, concentrating on your breathing and nothing else (thoughts might enter your mind, but simply acknowledge them and go back to concentrating on your breathing).
4. Once you are comfortable doing this, add some visual imagery. For example, as you slowly breathe *out*, visualize all the tension in your body leaving with your exhaled breath.

This is a basic relaxation technique, and with practice, you can eventually do one or two deep cleansing breaths when tension rises and feel immediate relief within only a minute. Breathing becomes important when your demanding schedule is causing stress and you need to take a quick refreshing pause. In addition, you'll see in the upcoming chapter on Learning Styles, Memory, and Test Taking how this one-minute technique can help when you begin to "stress" while taking that big exam. However, try to do at least ten slow deep breaths in the beginning until you get comfortable with the technique.

Meditation Meditation basically means slowing your mind down and clearing it of thoughts. Techniques can vary greatly, but they all center around attempting to focus your mind on one thing and ignoring everything else. This one thing can be your breathing, as you just learned. It can also be an object, phrase, or even a positive thought.

Yoga deals with the study of meditation and has been around for centuries. Although many people think of yoga as all those bent and stretched postures, the main focus of all yoga practices revolves around breathing and clearing your mind. The physical benefits achieved through the postures paired with the relaxation of the mind's internal chatter can be quite powerful and, more importantly, peaceful. It may be an interesting and relaxing experience to take part in yoga or tai chi (meditation in movement) classes. Many schools or local community centers such as the YMCA offer these classes either free or at low cost. Remember, consistency is key in any practice.

Now that you have developed *your* stress chart and can recognize when you are entering your bad stress zone, use the upcoming Chapter Summation (Exercise 1-8) to list a few things you can do to get you back into your good stress zone. It may be something from this chapter or it may be something unique to you. Pick what works for you. It is also a good idea to pick interventions for different environments and have a “pocketful” ready for any situation. For example, you may have a “walk in the woods” as a healthy way to deal with stress. However, when the stress is mounting during an exam, this isn’t something you can do. Instead, focusing on your breathing might help.



Examples of healthy ways to deal with stress.



Healthy Decision-Making

Mary has been out of school for several years and is a single parent. She has decided to go back to school to better her life and has been accepted for the fall semester, which is three months away. She has been reading about how much her program stresses critical and creative thinking skills, and she is concerned that she gets too stressed out to think clearly at times. In addition, she has attempted several study schedules but gets overwhelmed and

very anxious and is unable to stick to them. What would you recommend Mary do prior to the start of school to give her a more hopeful outlook and maximize her chance of succeeding in school?

Exercise 1-8 Chapter Summation

Explain how using an effective stress management system can change your life.

Describe your good stress zone.

List three early indicators you have entered your bad stress zone.

List and describe several interventions (ways of dealing with stress), so you can have them ready in any given situation or environment.

An exercise choice:

A step you will take toward better nutrition:

A way to improve your sleep habits:

A hobby:

Your favorite relaxing music:

Your favorite type of humor or favorite comedian:

Your social and family supports:

A favorite relaxation technique:

At least one intervention for work or school:

At least one intervention at home:

NOTE: You may want to keep this list handy so you can pick out something that would help you at that “stressful” moment. Eventually you won’t need the list because you will automatically respond with a healthy and effective intervention when your stress alarm goes off.

Know Your School

Your school will have support services to help you in many areas. Research and find what school resources can help you with stress management. One example would be counseling services. Others include student health services, resident advisers, and clergy. Check out school or community offerings of classes on yoga and meditation. List the information here, and for quick reference, place the information in a prominent place such as on your refrigerator.

Resource Name: _____

Office Location: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Resource Name: _____

Office Location: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Resource Name: _____

Office Location: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Resource Name: _____

Office Location: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

Resource Name: _____

Office Location: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____