

Graduate Student Stress Management

Key themes and tips for
Graduate Students

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Counselling Services



UNIVERSITY OF
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Agenda

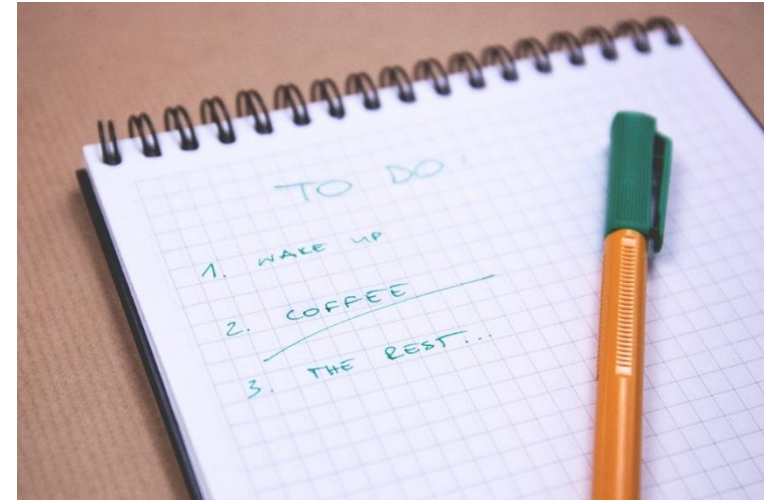
- Definitions
- Common issues
- Obstacles to seeking help
- Coping methods
- Summary and resources available

What is Stress?

Definitions

- **Stress:** Any uncomfortable emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, and behavioral changes. Some stress is motivational to help get through situations of exams and deadlines. An extreme amount of stress can be psychologically and physically debilitating- feeling overwhelmed, anxious, difficulty sleeping.

(American Psychological Association)



Autonomic Nervous System

Sympathetic nervous system

- Increases heart rate, constricts blood vessels
- Prepares the body for action
- Red alert
- Fight or flight

Parasympathetic nervous system (governs internal organs, blood vessels, glands, and functions)

- Slows the heart rate and dilates blood vessels
- Conserves energy
- Takes nourishment to vital organs

Under stress

The sympathetic system predominates. Your energy is focused on taking action and not on taking nourishment to vital organs.

Signs and Symptoms – On Your Body, Mood, and Behaviour

What you may notice

- Muscle tension or pain
- Excessive fatigue
- Sleep problems
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anxiety
- Sadness or depression
- Irritability or anger
- Sudden disinterest in or absence from studies
- Disinterest in exercise

What others may notice

- Restlessness
- Deterioration in physical appearance
- Unusual inability to make eye contact
- Sudden social withdrawal
- Drug or alcohol overuse

Four Types of Stress

- **One time not repeating** - A class presentation.
- **One event triggering a cascade** - A move or a divorce.
- **Chronic, intermittent** - Insufficient funds for tuition.
- **Chronic continual** - Thesis research without clear supervisory directions.

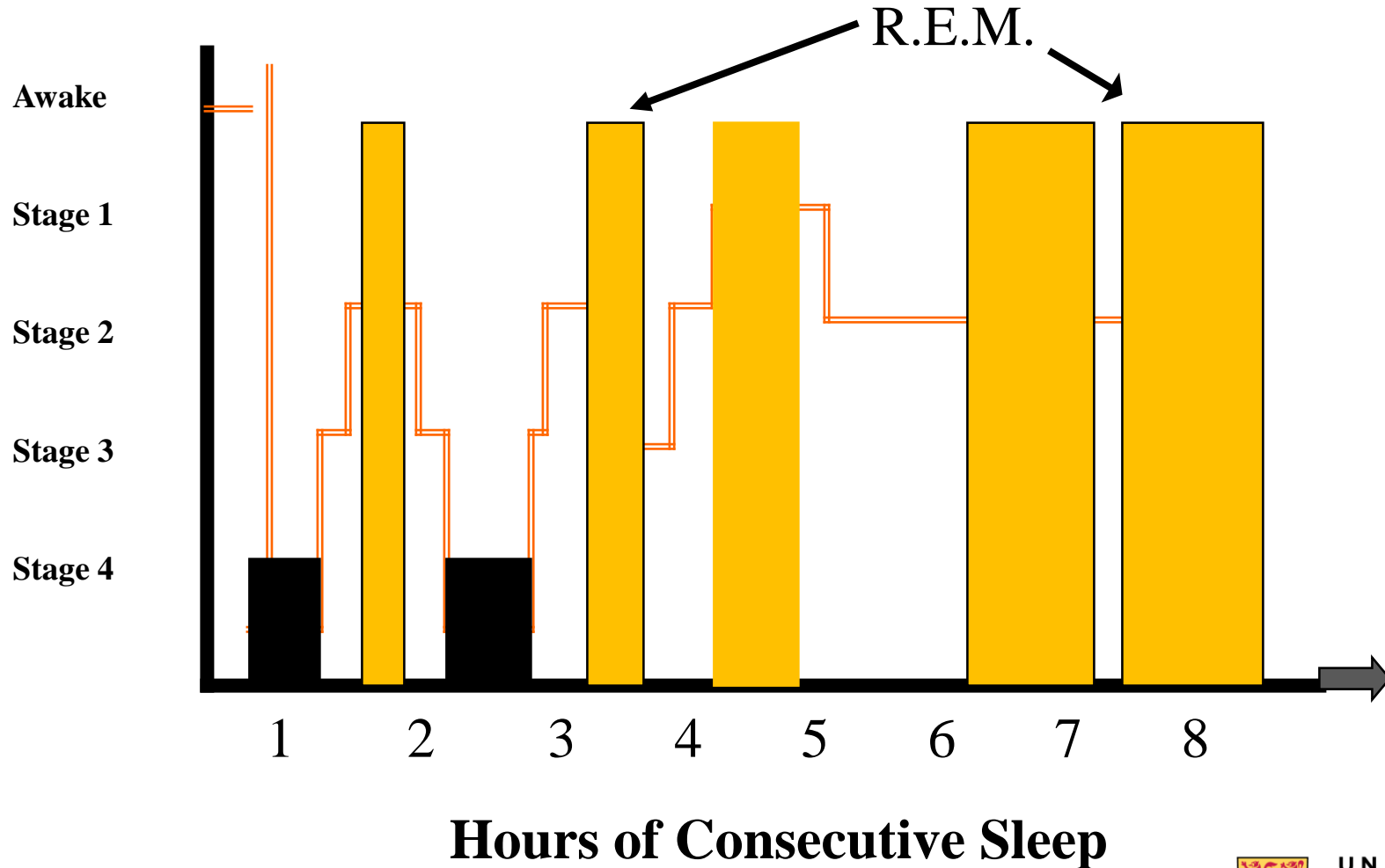


Circadian Rhythms

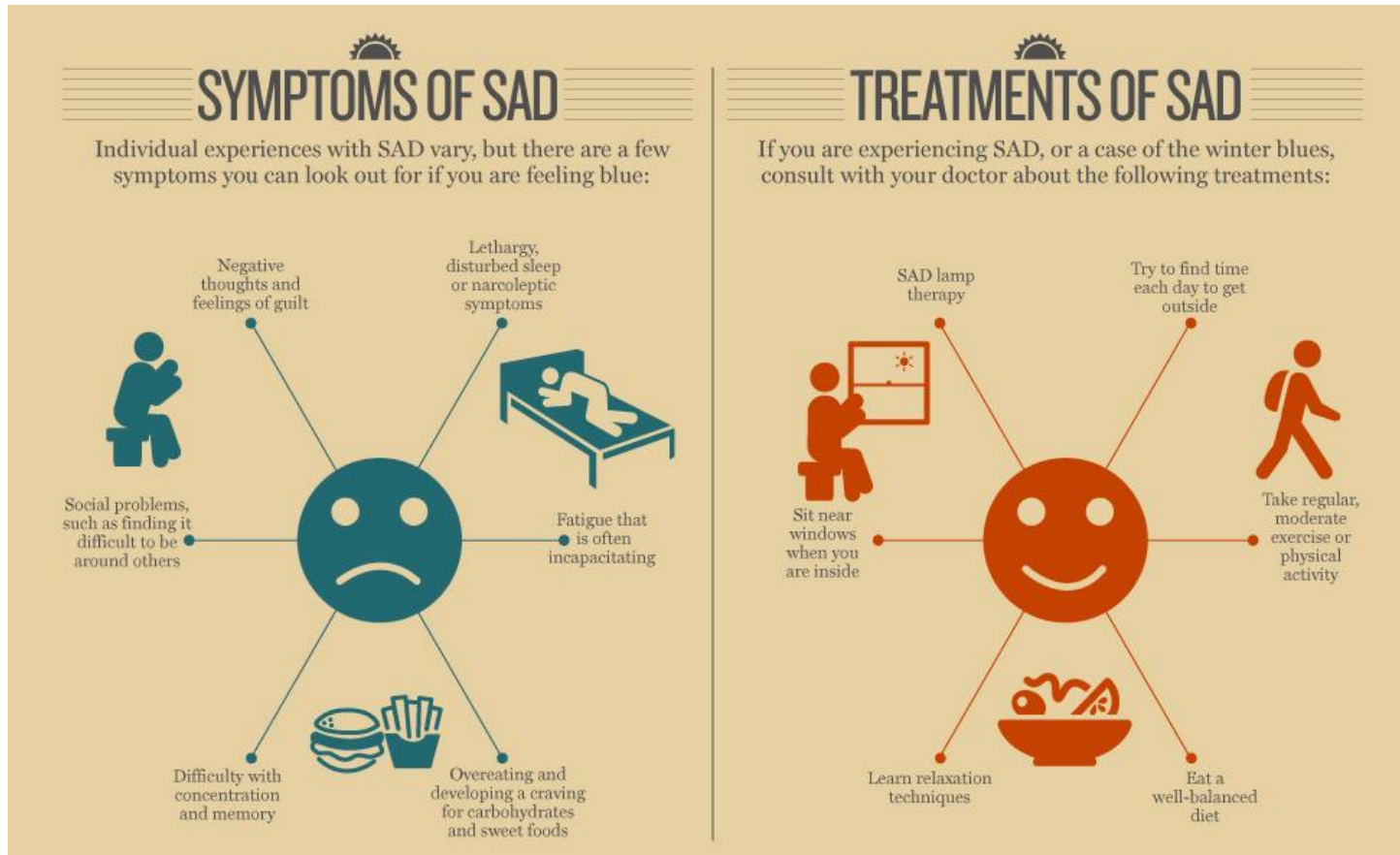
Time	Rhythm level
8 a.m. to 12 p.m.	High
12 p.m. to 4 p.m.	Medium
4 p.m. to 6 p.m.	Low
6 p.m. to 10 p.m.	Medium
After 10 p.m.	Rest



Adult's Sleep Histogram



Key Theme: Seasonal Affective Disorder



Source: <http://www.coreexcellence.com/10-happy-factors-that-fight-seasonal-affective-disorder-s-a-d/>

See also: <http://uwimprint.ca/article/fight-back-against-sad-ness-this-winter/>

Common Issues Reported by Graduate Students

Key Themes: Relationships with Advisors

- Expectations
 - Different supervisors may have different expectations of their students
- Working styles
 - Some advisors may be very involved, others may not be involved at all



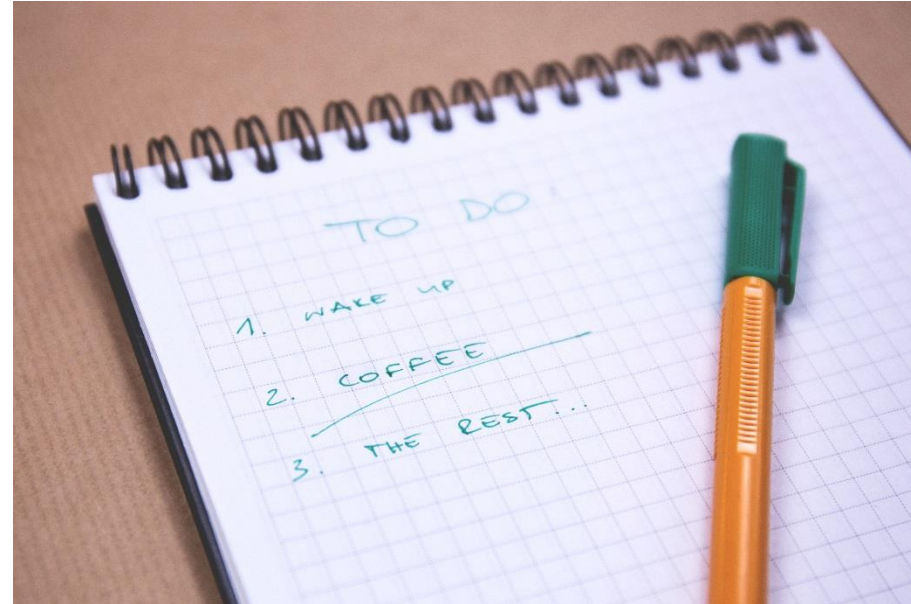
Problem-Solving: Relationships with Advisors

- Set clear expectations
- Advocate for yourself
- Ask for help if you need it



Key Themes: Stress Level

- The stress level of graduate studies can sometimes add to previously existing issues
- Added stress around key dates: Presentations, publications, thesis submission



Problem-Solving: Stress Level

- Practice self-care skills:
 - Sleeping, eating at regular intervals, exercise
 - Even a small amount of exercise, like taking the stairs instead of the elevator can make a big difference
 - Meditation and mindfulness: Many online apps available
 - Counselling seminars: Coping Skills series available in person or online
- Practice in both times of stress and everyday to maintain a constant level of calm



Key Themes: Work-life Balance

- It can be hard to balance all the priorities in school and life
- You may feel conflict about your life-goals versus your career goals
- Your family may have different expectations for you

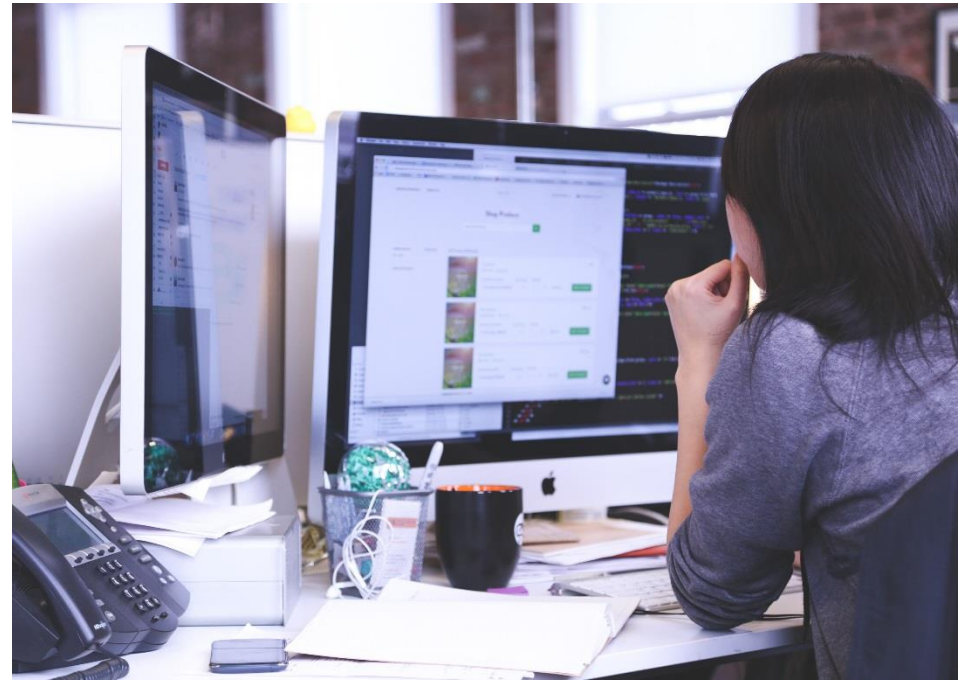


Problem-Solving: Work-life Balance

- Keep communication open
 - Between yourself and your partner
 - Between yourself and your advisor
 - Between yourself and your family
- Set aside time for yourself to recharge

Key Themes: Isolation and Competition

- The graduate student working environment can be prone to feeling isolated
- Competition between students in similar fields may lead to further isolation
- Consistency of the working day



Problem-Solving: Isolation and Competition

- Join your graduate student society
- Network at events such as conferences

Obstacles to Seeking Support

Confidentiality Concerns

- Students frequently do not want supervisors, administrators, or mentors to know that they have difficulties and need to obtain help.
- A “stiff upper- lip attitude” in academia prompts people who struggle with mental health problems to keep them hidden and accept depression as normal.
- Graduate students do not want to run into undergraduate students whom they may teach or facilitate labs for at Counselling offices.
- Students are concerned that acknowledgement of mental health concerns may place their careers at risk.
- Students are aware of the power differential between themselves and faculty members and may be fearful to discuss issues openly with others.

Imposter Syndrome

- Graduate students may suffer from imposter syndrome.
 - E.g. “I thought as if I’d gotten this far in my academic career by fluke, and that the top grades I received during my undergraduate and master’s studies had been administrative mistakes. This fed into my anxiety as well as my depression.”

Imposter Syndrome

“It’s very common to feel an incompetent fraud,
and usually to assume you’re only one who feels
that way.”

Sociology Professor, New Jersey
As reported in Quartz, 2015.

Other Obstacles

- Graduate students can be unwilling to access mental health services for fear of personal funding and career reprisals.
- They report to academic and administrative individuals who might be contributing to their stress.
- They might not know who to turn to.

Coping Methods

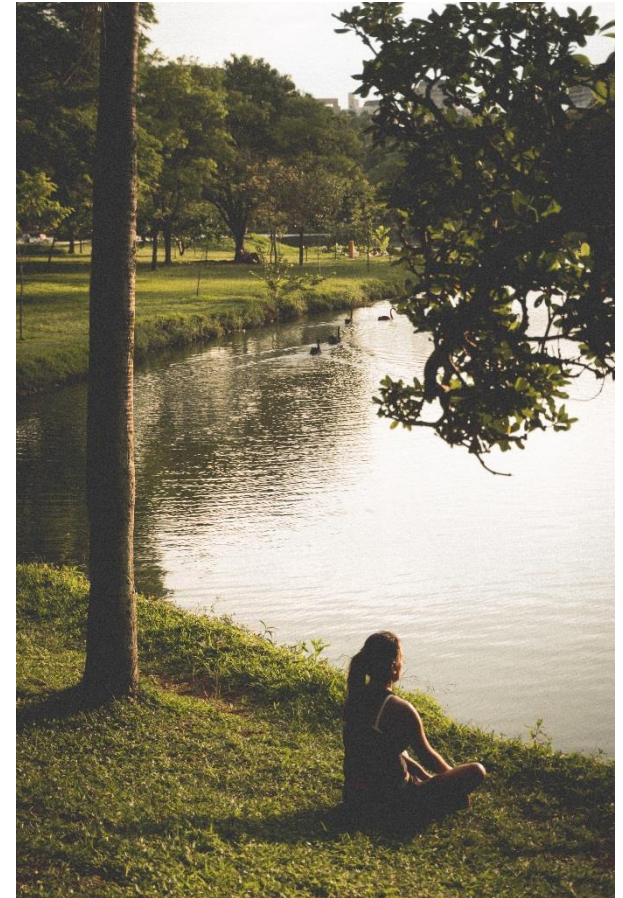
That you can use

It Is Important to Remember

- You are not alone - If you are struggling, it is crucial to seek professional help, even if you believe that it is a temporary issue.
- Be aware of what is good for your physical and emotional health and take control. Find out the optimal workload and realistic pace to keep in order to complete your work in a timely manner and to help decrease burnout.
- Create an effective strategy to monitor and manage stress.

Practice Self-Care

- Keep a regular sleeping pattern
- Eat healthy meals at regular intervals
- Try to maintain consistent exercise levels
- Maintain and develop your support network – Create a peer support and monitoring group
- Maintain your social life and continue to pursue your interests outside of your studies



Coping With Stressful Situations in the Moment: Bullying

1. Practice learning to establish physiological control when in a less stressful state – use slow deep breaths to help regain control.
2. Take a time out, if possible, until you regain emotional control.
3. Consult with your peers.
4. Take opposite action. E.g. Being open; not your fault.

Coping With Chronic Continual Stress

1. Problem-solving: What are the facts in the situation? What is the story I am telling myself about these facts? Where is my responsibility in all of this?
2. Accept the reality of the situation.
3. Take action.

Resources Available

- Counselling Services, Needles Hall North: 519-888-4567 ext. 32655
- Health Services: 519-888-4096
- UW Police Services ext. 22222
- UW Graduate Student Association ext. 36015
- Good2Talk: 1-866-925-5454
- Here 24/7: 1-844-437-3247
- Grand River Hospital Emergency (835 King St W) or your local regional hospital or emergency services

Disclaimer

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