

Stress Management

Strategies and
Resources

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Campus Wellness – Counselling Services



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Reflection

Take a few moments now to reflect on and write down:

1. Which situations do you find most stressful?
2. How does stress usually affect you? (Think about the physical, psychological, emotional, relational, spiritual etc.)
3. What do you currently do to cope with stress?



Definition of stress

A classical definition of stress

Stress is a positive or negative reaction occurring when there is a substantial imbalance (perceived or real) between environmental demand and the response capability of the individual.

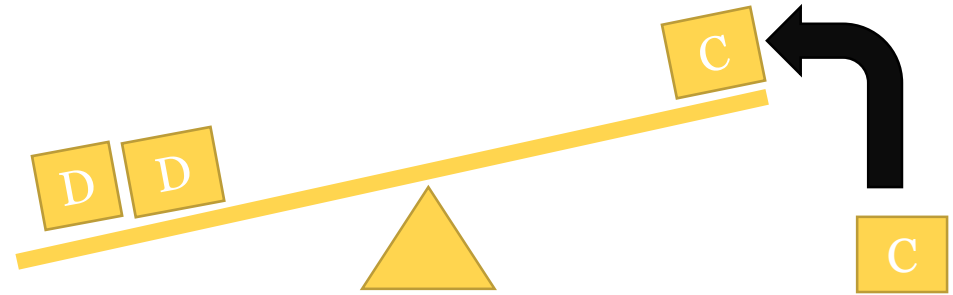
Hans Selye

Another view on stress

How do we create balance?

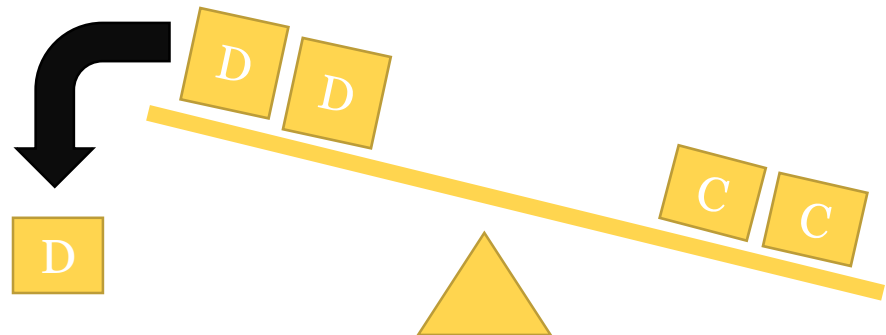
Scenario A: When demands exceed current coping strategies, can we add more strategies?

- Learn to take time for self-care
- Exercise, meditation, social time etc.

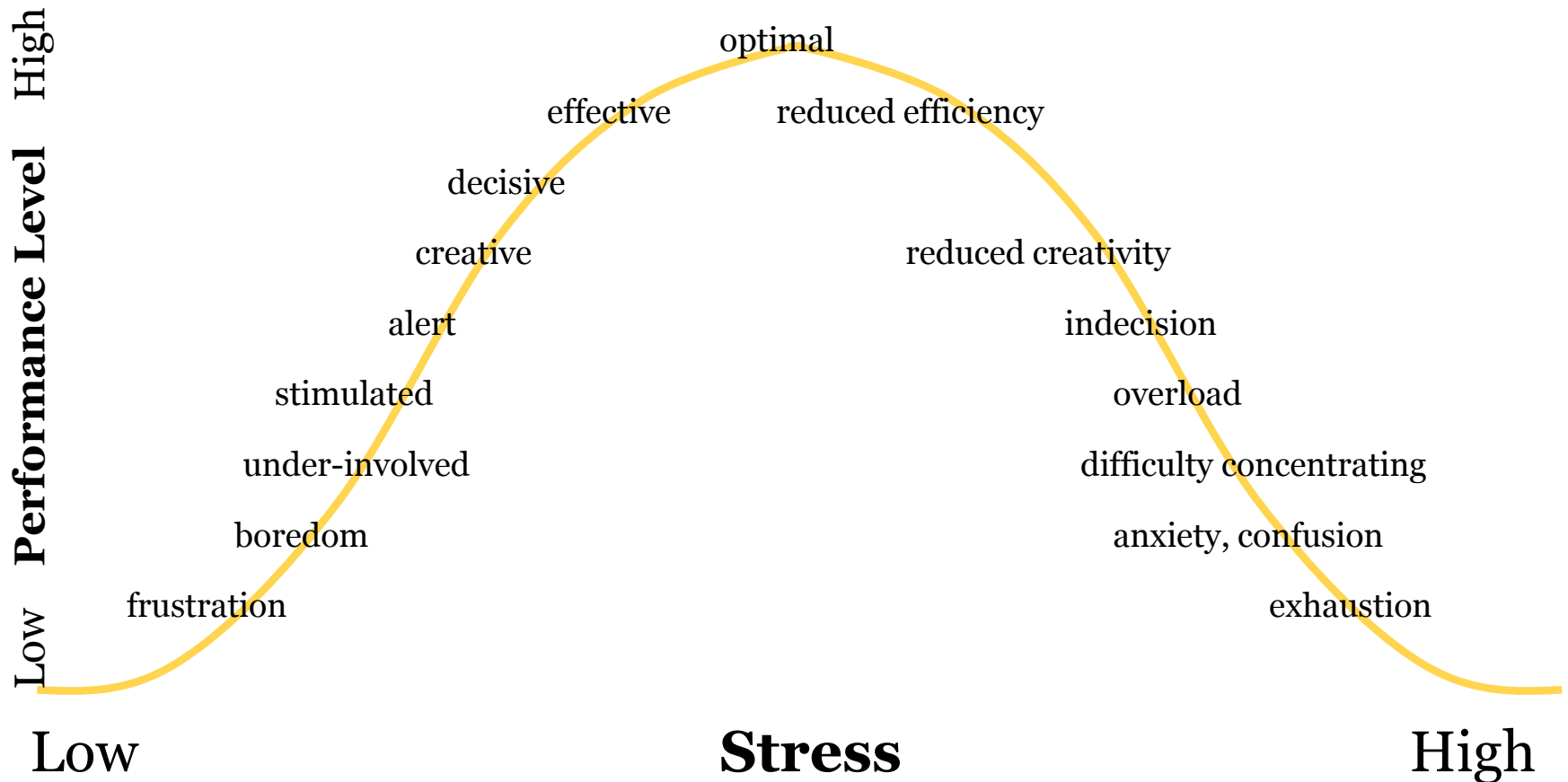


Scenario B: When demands continue to exceed coping strategies, is it possible to decrease demands?

- Time management, say no by prioritizing and setting reasonable limits.



Performance/demand bell curve



Life Goals - Balance

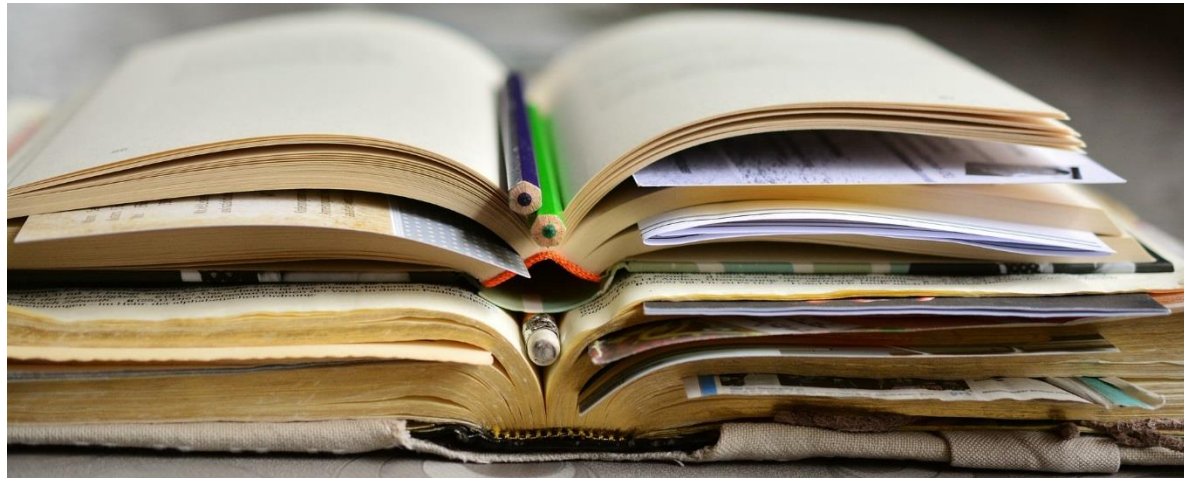
- Stress is the wear and tear our bodies experience as we adjust to our changing environment.
- The goal is not to eliminate stress but learn how to manage it.
- Ideally, you'll find your optimal level of stress that will motivate you instead of overwhelm you.



Sources of stress

Common sources of stress

- Transition issues/times of change.
- Fear of the unknown.
- Pressure to succeed.
- Self-doubt.
- Uncomfortable situations.
- Co-op interviews during mid-terms.
- Moving house.



Vulnerability

Your vulnerability to stress depends on a variety of factors:

- Do you exercise daily?
- Do you practice meditation?
- Do you eat a healthy diet?
- Do you socialize?
- Are you a multitasker?
- Do you have good time management skills?
- Do you take on multiple commitments at the same time?
- Do you get good sleep?
- Do you have a sense of purpose and meaning?

Check your stress count

You may notice the following:

- Some causes of stress are in your control, but many are not.
- Some stress is inevitable. Even good events cause us stress.
- All change is stressful; we cannot totally avoid stress in our lives.



How do you know if you're stressed?

Stress exhaustion symptoms

- We all experience and cope with stress differently.
- What are your early warning signs that stress is building?
 - Physical
 - Emotional
 - Spiritual
 - Mental
 - Relational



Physical signs of stress

- Headaches
- Hot flashes
- The chills
- Skin flushing
- Dry mouth
- Stuttering, stammering
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Muscular tightness
- Generalized or specific pain
- Light headedness
- Tics or twitches
- Stiff neck
- Rapid heartbeats
- Respiratory problems
- The wobbles

Emotional and mental signs of stress

- Sadness
- Frustration
- Anxiety
- Increased irritability
- Poor focus and motivation
- Avoiding academic tasks
- Feels of failure
- Isolation

Coping with stress

Stress reduction strategies

- **Prevent it** – Cut off stress before it develops.
- **Problem solve it** – Reduce or eliminate stress by developing new alternatives.
- **Reduce it** – Learn how to reduce the emotional symptoms of stress such as anxiety, fear, frustration, anger, depression, etc.
- **Adapt to it** – Developing positive attitudes and behaviours that can help you adjust to, live with, and manage situations that cannot be changed.

Stress reduction strategies can be...

Productive strategies

- Vent or pray
- Relaxation, yoga, meditation
- Physical activity
- Humour
- Positive self-statements
- Support system
- Music or hobbies
- Change or vacation

Counter-productive or habitual strategies

- Drugs
- Alcohol or smoking
- Procrastination
- Aggression (verbal or physical)
- Avoidance or denial
- Overeating
- Wishful thinking



Physical strategies

The flight or fight response

- When faced with danger (perceived or real, physical or social, emotional etc) our natural, instinctive reaction is to do one of two things: either confront the danger or run away from it.
- With either reaction, our bodies respond by preparing physically, through hormonal response (cortisol, epinephrine, adrenalin), which allows us to react more quickly.
- The problem for us in modern times is that the danger is not usually physical, so the results are of the hormonal response are often unneeded and unwanted.

Strategies to alter the physical response to stress

- If your difficulty lies in part with a physical reaction to stressful situations, we need to address this with physical means.
- Deep breathing, stretching, yoga, guided imagery, and meditation are some ways to trigger the relaxation response.



Guidelines for practicing any form of deep relaxation

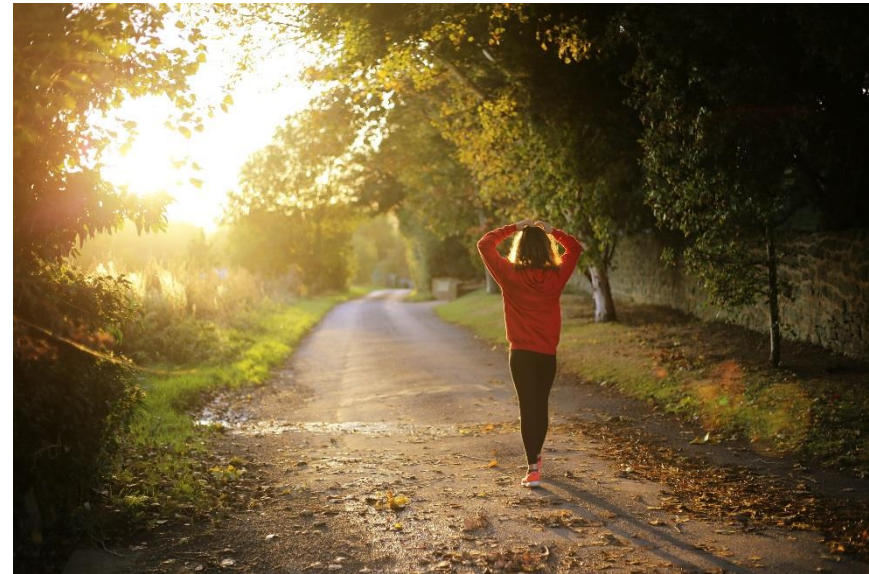
- Practice at least 20 minutes a day.
- Find a quiet location.
- Practice at regular times.
- Assume a comfortable position.
- Loosen any tight garments.
- Make a decision not to worry about anything.
- Assume a passive, detached attitude.

Abdominal breathing exercise

- Retrain your body to breathe naturally, the way babies breathe, with abdominal breathing. With practice, this can help stimulate the relaxation response.

Other physical strategies

- **Healthy sleep patterns** – Try to maintain at least seven hours of sleep a night, and sleep at the same time every day if possible.
- **Nutrition** – Try to eat three healthy meals a day based on nutrition guidelines in Canada's Food Guide.
- **Exercise** – Even low impact exercise like walking around campus or taking the stairs instead of the elevator can make a big difference.



Cognitive strategies

Strategy: Gratitude journal

- Every evening, as part of your bedtime routine, write down five things you are grateful for about that day.
- Some days they will be amazing things, sometimes simple joys, such as a walk in the sunshine or a friend's smile.
- On tough days, focus on the basics (Ex. food on the table, I got out of bed, etc.)
- If possible, use a special blank book for this purpose.



Source: Sarah Ben Breathrach's Simple Abundance.

Other cognitive strategies

- Time management and study strategies.
- Spend time regularly with people doing activities that are engaging and relaxing.
- Encourage positive self-talk and beliefs within yourself.
- See handout: The Stress-Free Week

Wrapping up

Wrap up

- What techniques will you use going forward?
- How will you apply them to the situations you identified at the beginning of the seminar?
- How can you use them to combat the signs of stress you identified?
- What counter-productive coping strategies are you going to change?
- Try making a stress reduction strategy (see handout)

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