Healthy Stress

Have you found yourself with sweaty hands on your first date or pounding heart during an important interview? This is your body’s responses to stress, and it is a natural reaction that equips you to face the challenges ahead.
What is Stress?

Stress is our body’s response to challenges. It is an automatic response developed in our ancient ancestors as a way to protect them from predators and other threats. When faced with danger, the body kicks into gear, flooding the body with hormones that elevate your heart rate, increase your blood pressure, boost your energy and prepare you either to face a threat or flee to safety. This response is called the “fight or flight” response.

Nowadays, we don’t have predators to be afraid of, but we will have different challenges to handle every day, such as deadlines, presentations, examinations, interpersonal issues, financial concerns. As a result, our body’s natural alarm system will be turned on constantly, which can have impacts on our health.

The Stress Response Curve

![The Stress Response Curve](image)

Stress can be Positive

Not all stress is bad. An adequate level of stress can enhance our efficiency and performance in our work and study. However, when the stress is overwhelming, it drains our energy and surpasses our capability to cope. The issue, really, is how to manage it. Managed stress makes us productive and happy; mismanaged stress hurts and impairs our performance and health.

How does Chronic Stress affect your Health?

When the stress is short-term, the hormone released in our body can help us function better and can even boost the immune system. But when stress persists and become chronic, it brings many health consequences. People under stress are prone to more frequent and severe viral infections, such as flu or common cold. When stress becomes chronic, it can cause wear and tear on your body and may lead to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, anxiety disorder, and other illnesses. Therefore, it is important to notice stress symptoms in our daily life and to cope with it proactively.
Common Stress Symptoms

**Cognitive Symptoms**
- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate, racing thoughts
- Trouble learning new information
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Difficulty in making decision
- Forgetfulness, disorganized

**Emotional Symptoms**
- Moodiness
- Increased anger, frustration, hostility
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Excessive anxiety, worry, guilt, nervousness

**Physical Symptoms**
- Muscle tension or pains
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness
- Stomachaches
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Grinding teeth
- Frequent colds

**Behavioral Symptoms**
- Over/Under eating
- Insomnia, nightmares
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibility
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habit (e.g., nail biting)

**How can you Cope with Stress?**

**Identify your sources of stress (Stressors)**
- What events or situations trigger stressful feelings?
- Monitor your state of mind throughout the day. If you feel stressed, write down the cause, your thoughts and your mood.

**Learn your own stress signals**
- Recognize signs of your body's response to stress, such as difficulty in concentrating, difficulty sleeping, headaches, muscle tension, agitated, depressed, or having low energy.

**Recognize how you deal with stress**
- Evaluate if you are using unhealthy ways (e.g., procrastination, smoking, drinking alcohol, over/under eating, and withdrawal from others) to cope.
- Do you make unhealthy choices as a result of feeling rushed and overwhelmed?

**Handle the stress-inducing events**
- Set reasonable expectations for yourself and others. Ask for help and share responsibilities, job assignments or other tasks.
- List all your commitments, set priorities and decide what must get done and what can be waited or eliminated. Learn to say no to new tasks if they are putting you into overload.
Take good care of yourself

- Eat right, drink plenty of water and get enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly. 30 minutes of gentle walking daily can help boosting mood and reducing stress.
- Practice relaxation skills, e.g., mindfulness, yoga, Tai chi, or taking a walk that will enhance both your physical and mental health.
- Pamper yourself. Take regular vacations or other breaks from work. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself - even if it’s just simple things like reading a good book, listening to your favorite music or taking a warm bath.

Reach out for support

- Reach out to family members or close friends and let them know you are having a tough time. They may be able to offer practical assistance and support, useful ideas or just a fresh perspective could be helpful.
- If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk to a Student Counselor, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy coping.

Professional Help-seeking

The University provides professional counseling services for undergraduate and postgraduate students. You may check out the profiles of our Student Counselors on our webpage and make an appointment with them online. Two weeks’ advance booking is allowed. Please be reassured that all sharing and discussion during counseling sessions will be strictly confidential.

Counseling and Wellness Center
http://counsel.ust.hk Room 5003 (via lift 3)
Email: counsel@ust.hk Tel: (852) 2358-6696

Meet Our Counselors