

# **Why Am I So Stressed Out About College and**

## **What Can I Do About It?**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Going off to college may be one of the most exciting days of your life, but it is stressful. It is a time of tremendous change which requires much adjustment and the quick learning of new skills. Stress involves perception. People assess their situations in terms of demands on their abilities and/or resources and their internal and external resources to meet those demands. When they perceive the demands to be possibly greater than the resources, they experience stress.

When heading off to college you probably don't exactly know what your resources are. You probably do not know what the real demands will be. In addition to trying to determine whether you have what it takes to meet academic demands, you might be trying to figure out how hard it will be to meet new people and make new friends, how you will balance your time and energy for academic vs. social pursuits, and whether you have the self-discipline to pull it all off.

The beginning of the semester is not the only time that you are making all these evaluations. You are constantly called upon to assess, decide, and adjust. You do not have parents immediately available to assist in these processes. Parents (regardless of how much you may protest this statement) are the cornerstone of a support system and college students are typically trying to manage these challenges without that support system.

The presence of stress, with its physical and emotional symptoms, undermines a person's ability to utilize the very resources necessary to meet the challenging new demands.

Stress can be managed and even reduced. Worry is often a component of stress. It is often possible to replace worry with pro-active problem solving once you identify what you are worried about. If you are worried about things that have no basis in current reality, such as "what if..." thoughts, you can learn to identify these cognitive distortions, challenge them, and replace them with neutral or positive thoughts. If you are worried about something that you have power over, you can apply basic problem solving to the issue, challenge any cognitive distortions that have been keeping you from problem solving, and optimize your chances of success. An example might be worrying about not being able to do well in chemistry because you think you have no aptitude for hard sciences. Because you think you "can't" and you feel stupid and embarrassed, you avoid going to class. This of course, cements the probability that you will not do well in this class. To identify fear of failure and low self-efficacy in this class as the source of your worry, enables you to begin to problem solve and to enact your solutions. Some possible solutions to this problem could involve a) getting a tutor or joining a study group, b) learning cognitive therapy to reduce the negative self-talk and cognitive distortions that get in the way, c) finding a software program or video on chemistry, d)

doubling up the time spent on homework or study, e) recording the lectures, d) many more possible solutions.

You probably already know some stress management techniques. You may like to be outside in nature with a light breeze and a flowing stream. You might like to take a walk, or dance, or play tennis, or tinker with your car. You might keep a journal or a blog and write in it. You might find it relaxing to garden, clean out your closets, get a massage, or make a quilt. You know what has worked for you in the past. Make a list.

Relaxing your body can assist with stress management. Tools for physical relaxation might involve some of the ones you already use (i.e. like many of the ones above). Other relaxation tools that you could add to your stress management arsenal are 1) using relaxation or yoga breathing, 2) guided imagery, self-hypnosis, or progressive muscle relaxation exercises, 3) physical exercises. Keep in mind that the physical component of stress is not all there is to stress.

There are emotional, psychological and even spiritual aspects of stress. There are stress management techniques that address these aspects. Cognitive therapy can help with emotional and psychological contributors to stress and to stress management. With cognitive therapy you can challenge your automatic assessment of a situation, and entertain new, less stressful assessments, which changes how you feel and your responses to situations.

When people are stressed out they often steadfastly cling to whatever courses of action (or inaction) they have decided upon. This closed stance to life and other possible influences tend to prevent you from using your own spiritual resources (e.g. prayer and meditation) when you could most use the comfort that spiritual beliefs and practices bring.

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