
Tertiary studies - managing stress

Summary

- Work out which issues are causing extra or unnecessary stress and try to address them.
 - There are lots of ways to manage stress that can help you avoid becoming overwhelmed as a student.
 - Talk over your problems and concerns with lecturers, counsellors and other support staff at your tertiary institution.
-

Stress is a common issue for all tertiary students (higher education and TAFE), particularly around assessment or exam times. The good news is that there are lots of ways to take care of yourself and manage your stress. Remember, on-campus student support services are there to provide help to all students – don't be afraid to call on them!

Stress management tips for tertiary students

Suggestions include:

- Take care of yourself. Don't underestimate the importance of eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep. These three form a great base from which you can optimise your study ability.
 - Every day, do at least one activity that you find relaxing – for example, aromatherapy, going for a walk, listening to music, gardening, reading for enjoyment, keeping a personal journal or diary, playing with your pets.
 - Discuss your problems. Talking to someone else often puts problems into perspective. Talk to other students, friends, family members or a counsellor. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need to – studies show that the most successful students are ones who seek help when they need it.
 - Work out which issues are causing you stress and try to address them. For example, if you are having problems with a particular subject or assignment, talk to your lecturer, teacher or other students about it. If, despite your best efforts, you feel you are slipping behind, you could consider contacting student learning support at your tertiary institution or arrange for private tutoring.
 - Have a plan to manage the extra stress around assessment and exam times. A good long-term strategy to deal with exam stress is to manage stress throughout the academic year.
 - Learn a relaxation technique such as breathing exercises, muscle relaxation, yoga or meditation, and set aside at least 20 minutes each day to practise it. If 20 minutes is too long, put aside two minutes. You can find two minutes a day to relax. You may have to experiment with a few different techniques before you find the one that works best for you.
 - Learn about mindfulness. When we are stressed, our thinking is often on 'automatic pilot' and contains harsh criticisms and worries. Mindfulness practice teaches us how to shift our attention to the here and now, and adopt an open and non-judgmental attitude to ourselves, which fosters self-acceptance.
 - Keep up regular exercise such as walking, swimming, jogging or gym work – perhaps using it as a break from study. Benefits of regular exercise include improved energy and sleep, which are vital in helping to stay on top of stress.
 - Focus on your strengths. You could keep a list of things that you are good at, your achievements and successes, and refer back to it to give your self-esteem a boost.
 - Keep your life in balance – it's an important key to managing stress. Burnout can be caused by focusing on one aspect of life to the exclusion of all others. Schedule fun and enjoyment into every week, and allow time for family and friends along with your study. Put this into your study timetable.
 - Make time management and getting organised important to you. Remember that you are less likely to worry if you have planned ahead to make the most of your time.
-

Stress and unhelpful thinking

A certain level of stress is necessary to motivate ourselves to study – or perform – at our best. However, there are many ways that we can unintentionally cause ourselves to feel more stressed than necessary. Unhelpful thinking styles and habits are one of those ways.

Try to avoid getting caught up in a cycle of negative thinking. Challenge negative thoughts and self-talk such as 'I should understand things the first time' or 'I'm not smart enough'. Remind yourself that you are there to learn, you're not supposed to know everything already. Ask yourself: 'Are my expectations of myself too high?'

Jumping to conclusions about negative outcomes is another unhelpful thinking style and is more likely to occur when you are under stress. Routinely think about all possible outcomes, including the positive side, so that you get a more realistic overall picture.

Distance learning and stress

Undertaking online or flexible delivery courses can have many advantages for students. However, distance students and online students encounter different challenges to on-campus students.

Common causes of stress can include:

- pressures of juggling work, family life and study
- lack of face-to-face feedback from lecturers and tutors
- social isolation from other students, which can make harder to support one another
- reduced access to student support services and study materials.

Tips for distance learning and managing stress

Your tertiary institution will have services available for online and flexible delivery students. You may be able to arrange a telephone appointment or make contact through email. Find out about these services from your student diary or tertiary institution website, and use them.

It may also help if you:

- Keep in contact with lecturers and teachers via phone, email and computer conference.
- Talk to your lecturers about your concerns and issues related to off-campus study.
- Keep in touch with other distance students via phone, email, or internet-based communications like video chat.

Stress and thinking about quitting study

Sometimes, you may feel that the stress of study isn't worth it or you can't see a way to deal with problems that arise. It is normal for your motivation to drop at times. However, don't be in a hurry to withdraw or leave your course. Take your time, but also find out the key dates for withdrawal and any penalties that may apply.

Suggestions include:

- Remind yourself of your reasons for choosing to study. Don't let stress take your focus off your long-term goals and ambitions. Get some support so that you can keep going.
- Talk over your problems and concerns with lecturers, student counsellors, the disability officer or other support staff at your tertiary institution.
- Seek advice from equity staff, student counselling or student support services if you have experienced harassment or bullying.
- Review your workload. Make sure that poor time-management skills are not to blame for your stress.
- Remember that quitting isn't the only option. After careful review, you may decide that you can't cope with your current workload. You could reduce your study load, or take a semester break or intermission from

study. Consult with the student administration for more information.

- Don't rush into a decision, but make sure you find out about the university census dates (the deadlines for finalising your enrolment and fees for each teaching session) so you understand the timeframe you have in which to make decisions.
- Take the time to get advice, weigh up the options and then follow through – for example, if you feel you are doing the wrong course, make a time to see a career counsellor and plan what you might do about it.
- Make sure you understand the implications of any changes to your enrolment before you go ahead with your decision. For example, find out if any changes will affect your Centrelink study allowance or your enrolment fees.

Where to get help

- Counselling services at your university or TAFE institute
- Other student support services
- Centrelink Students and Trainees Line Tel. 132 490

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Victoria University - Counselling Services

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2019 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.