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MANAGE YOUR STRESS

Learn to take back control of your life.

As a graduate student, stress may seem like a shadow that is always tailing you. There are always stressors: meeting deadlines, research that seems to be going no where, balancing coursework, research and teaching, and so on. In general, there is always too much work and too little time, and you may feel as if you just can't seem to have a life outside of school. When you do try to have a little bit of a personal life, there comes with it different stressors: meeting new people, managing your relationship with your significant other, having difficulty dealing with emotions, family obligations, etc. Yes, perhaps we all feel that we are masters of *experiencing* stress. The question is, if we can become experts of *managing* stress.

What is stress? We use the word stress to refer to outside events. Actually it is our response to what is happening to us. Stress affects our spirit, mind and body, and it can create positive and negative effects. On the positive side, stress can compel us into action, result in new awareness and perspectives, and give us challenges. On the negative side, stress can result in various physical and psychological responses. Because stress has a curvilinear relationship to performance, we all need a certain amount of stress to maintain our optimal level of functioning. With too much stress, we may feel overwhelmed; with too little stress, we may end up feeling bored. It depends on the individual to find out your optimal stress level.

Stress symptoms. The body shows all kinds of symptoms in reacting to stress. *Physiologically*, you may experience headache, chest pain, nausea, sweating, abdominal pain, insomnia, elevated heart rate, increased blood pressure, indigestion, etc. *Emotionally*, you may feel anxious, depressed, agitated, angry, frustrated, irritated, guilty, hopeless, and/or a combination of mixed emotions. *Cognitively*, you may have difficulty staying focused and maintaining concentration, feel preoccupied with obsessive thoughts and worries, be unable to make minor decisions, and become forgetful. *Behaviorally*, you are likely to procrastinate and want to give up doing anything, withdraw from friends and social situations, easily get into fights with others, take longer time to do your routine activities, and increase your use of alcohol, drugs, especially caffeine or any other kind of stimulant. Caffeine and other stimulants are likely to make you feel even more stressed out.

Cope with stress. The following are tips for how to maintain a healthier lifestyle and to prepare you to cope with the stress of everyday living. Most of them are things that you already know; it's up to you to turn knowledge into action.

- **Take charge.** Learn how to accept responsibility for yourself, because with that comes control.
- **Recognize your own resources.** Knowing your strengths and weaknesses can help you see what you have at your disposal when you need it. It also helps you learn when to ask for help.
- **Be realistic.** You can avoid setting yourself up for disappointment by setting attainable goals. Often times we want to give up trying because we feel/think the task is too big to be accomplished in a timely manner. Take one step at a time and do what you can at that moment. By doing a little something each time, it's easier to gain a sense of control and then work toward bigger goals.
- **Be flexible.** It's difficult to accept that we cannot always achieve absolute control, but

it's reality and it's OK not to have control all the time. It is also OK to make mistakes. Learning to accept your limits will reduce your stress level significantly.

- **Be aware of danger signals.** The stress symptoms that were discussed above will give you the indication that you need to slow down and take some time to relax.
- **Maintain good physical health.** You might think that you don't have time to exercise, sleep, and eat properly, but you can work much more efficiently if you have a regular exercise routine and you sleep and eat adequately. Try to structure each day to include a minimum of 20 minutes of aerobic exercise; eat well-balanced meals including more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.
- **Avoid stress enhancers.** Avoid caffeine. Stimulants may aggravate anxiety, insomnia, and nervousness. Reduce refined sugars. Excess sugars cause frequent fluctuation in blood glucose levels, adding stress to the body's physiological functioning. Reduce alcohol and drugs. These substances may add to headaches, decrease coping mechanisms and add to depression.
- **Relaxation.** Even 3-minutes of simple relaxation can be very beneficial. Deep breathing can be done while sitting, standing, or lying down; close your eyes and breathe in slowly, then let the air out for a count of 5-10 seconds; simple stretches, such as rolling the neck in half-circles.
- **Get in touch!** Hug your family and/or friends, or stroke a pet. Physical contact is a great way to relive stress.

If all of this sounds like too much to tackle on your own, or you aren't sure how to get started, consider talking with someone at the Counseling Center. We offer individual counseling as well as Stress Management Workshops. Feel free to call us at X8311. We also have more information about stress on our web page and links to additional resources on stress. [Caltech Counseling Center](#)

Wishing all of you a less stressed-out New Year!

Hsing-Fang Chang
Counseling Center

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