Stress Management

So, you are in a Health Sciences Program at UNMC . . . The thought has probably crossed your mind a time or two (or several thousand) that there will be some stress involved. Yes, it is likely, but it needn’t be overwhelming. First of all, congratulate yourself for spending some time to inventory your repertoire of stress management skills. Next, give yourself permission to experiment with methods new to you so that you have them in place when classes begin.

Some of the methods in this section will be familiar to you, but experience tells us that Rule #1 in psychology is “Under Stress, We Regress.” Most of us are not our best selves when we are under pressure, and we forget to do the very self-care things that could assist us in getting through tough times with less wear-and-tear. Allow yourself to become reacquainted with techniques you may have heard of or tried in the past. Questions we often ask students who access Counseling and Student Development Center are “What has worked for you in the past?” And “How can you employ similar tactics now?” We also sometimes challenge students to give additional methods an honest try. That often means scheduling time for the activity and taking notes on it. We also set a time to review results and assess the value of that particular approach. It makes sense to have a “bag of tricks” to utilize, so that at any given stress point you have a variety of ways to handle it.

Here is an overview of some of the methods we suggest:
Let’s take them one by one so that you can either review or add them to your set of skills.

Mindfulness

This is a philosophy for living happily. It includes meditation as well as cultivating an attitude of non-judgmental acceptance of the present moment.
Attention Regulation
Body Awareness
Emotion Regulation
Sense of Self

These components synergistically create that sense of calm and well-being that mindfulness is known for.

**Attention Regulation** is the ability to focus on an object of awareness. Training the mind to overcome distraction helps you feel less flustered and “all over the place” and more centered.

**Body Awareness** contributes to the ability to sense your own emotions and as a bonus, the emotions of others. In order to develop empathy, it’s key to be able to sense how you are feeling.

**Emotion Regulation** builds by allowing feelings and emotions that might normally be avoided, to come up, be expressed, and fade away, mindfulness builds the capacity to bear undesirable feelings and works in a similar way to exposure therapy.

**Sense of Self** is enhanced and changed with this practice. It leads to a less static definition of one’s self, and the clear realization that we’re always changing. A more fluid existence can lead to less suffering and more “in the moment” enjoyment.
Mindfulness: TWO ASPECTS

Mindfulness is about bringing non-judgmental attention to experiences in the present moment. It is not about blanking out your mind or becoming devoid of feelings.

Mindfulness includes living every day life mindfully as well as using more formal practice such as sitting meditation, walking meditation, or mindful movements.

MINDFUL MEDITATION
(Basic)

• Sit or lie comfortably and close your eyes or soften your gaze.

• Select something to use as your mental focal point. A common focus is to simply pay attention to your breath.

• You will quickly notice that your mind has a mind of its own and will run off like a wild monkey, chattering and leaping from thought to thought. Each time you become aware of this, gently note what was happening and bring your attention back to rest on your breath.

• Eventually, you will notice mind patterns, emotion patterns, body patterns. Make a soft notation of what is going on, then come on back to the breath. This helps us realize we can choose to let go of these things and choose how to relate to them!
Excitement: Neuroscience and Brain-Imaging are proving that for each of the four components of mindfulness, a specific region of the brain is being developed through neuroplasticity (the ability for our brains to physically change in response to our thoughts, actions, and environment.)
We now know that to a large degree, your brain does not discriminate between real life practice and imagined rehearsal when it comes to learning a given skill or behavior. This leads us to the next method, that of Positive Imaging.

**POSITIVE IMAGING**

- Immediately after evoking a relaxation response, move your mind to a positive focus.
- Your brain gathers sensory input especially effectively at this time.
POSITIVE IMAGING

• Mentally rehearse success.
• Include as many sensory components as possible. For example, think of how you will look, how you will move, how you will speak, how you will breathe, etc.
• You may even imagine yourself becoming flustered and the ways you’ll calm yourself.

When you had to interview for acceptance to UNMC, you may have mentally practiced how you would handle yourself. You might have instinctively known it would benefit you to rehearse in your mental venue the art of looking poised, making good eye contact, etc. You were right!

A large body of studies has demonstrated that what we mentally practice, we DO. Professional athletics has made hearty use of this principle, with detailed coaching focused on mental practice taking on nearly as much importance as the physical practice.

On the other hand, if you worry and vividly imagine the horrors of freezing up during a test or bumbling during a Practical Exam, what are you rehearsing?! You could be setting yourself up to actually do the very behaviors you fear. Every time you notice yourself going down a mental pathway of this nature, substitute imagery of yourself handling the situation successfully.

The benefits of this kind of positive imagery are dual. You will enhance the likelihood of performing in your preferred manor, and you will be taking a stress-break while rehearsing.

The above are good habits to get into. We develop habitual behaviors by doing something repeatedly. This is as true with mental habits as it is with physical habits. As with any other kind of habit, we may have developed some cognitive habits that are beneficial, and some that get in our way. The way to modify a habit is to be conscious of it and repeatedly engage in an alternative. **Cognitive restructuring** is a systematic method of changing mental/emotional habits.

Cognitive therapy is based on the notion that how we think about something determines how we feel about it. It is our thoughts and attitudes, not external events that create our feelings.

Here is an example: Suppose the professor in your Anatomy class one day exclaimed “You are the most wonderful class I’ve had in all my years of teaching! Each
one of you is exceptional and I consider it a joy to be in your service.” How would you feel? Some of you would feel proud and happy. Some might feel embarrassed or sad, others annoyed. Why the difference? If you felt good, you likely thought “He likes us and sees we are quality students. That’s great.” If you felt embarrassed or sad, you may have thought “He doesn’t really mean it. He is just saying that because we are so pathetic that he feels sorry for us and thinks we need a boost.” Anger could stem from thinking “He wants something from us. He wants us to give him good evaluations at the end of the course. This is flattery with an ulterior motive.” In each case, the comments from the professor would have been the same, but differing emotional responses were dependent on each person’s thoughts.

You can change the way you feel by changing the way you think. You can use this in a given situation or to change habitual ways of thinking and feeling.

CHALLENGING NEGATIVE COGNITIONS

• PREMISE: Often, the thoughts we have about events produce more stress than the situations themselves merit.

• Our thoughts lead to our emotions. By guiding our thoughts, sometimes via challenging distorted thoughts, we can shift our emotions.

Here is a systematic method you can use to change habitual thinking patterns. It helps to write these out. Many people plan a time each day to practice the process.

Here is a list of common thought “filters” or distortions:

**All-or-nothing thinking:** You look at things in absolute, black-and-white categories.

**Overgeneralization:** You view a negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat.

**Mental filter:** You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.

**Discounting the positives:** You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities don’t count.
Jumping to conclusions:  (A) Mind reading – you assume that people are reacting negatively to you when there’s no definite evidence for this; (B) Fortune-telling – you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.

Magnification or minimization:  You blow things way up out of proportion or you shrink their importance inappropriately.

Emotional reasoning:  You reason from how you feel: “I feel like an idiot, so I really must be one.” Or “I don’t feel like doing this, so I’ll put it off.”

“Should statements”:  You criticize yourself or other people with “shoulds” or “shouldn’ts.” “Musts,” “oughts,” and “have tos” are similar offenders.

Labeling:  You identify with your shortcomings. Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you tell yourself, “I’m a jerk,” or “a fool,” or “a loser.”

Personalization and blame:  You blame yourself for something you weren’t entirely responsible for, or you blame other people and overlook ways that your own attitudes and behavior might contribute to a problem.


The essential idea is:

DON’T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK!

Good books on the topic are available at most bookstores. We recommend David Burns’ “The Feeling Good Handbook” or “Mind Over Mood” by Greenberger and Padesky. They make use of worksheets and exercises to help you change the ways you think and feel.

Now we shift to more bodily oriented methods. Let’s look at Breathing Techniques that can help you manage anxiety.
Many students are surprised at what they find when they decide to notice their breathing patterns during the course of a stressful day. Simply shifting this pattern can make a significant difference during a regular hectic day, and can make a vast difference at test time.

For those who find themselves beyond anxious and actually encountering panic attacks, the next method is what works. When we are in a panic, we breathe rapidly, preparing for fight or flight. Since we usually do neither, we create an imbalance that leads to too much oxygen and not enough CO2 in our bodies. The purpose of this breathing pattern is to hold some of the CO2 in the body to restore normal pH levels. It can work very quickly.
Breathing to Curtail Panic

- Begin at the onset of panic symptoms such as butterflies in the stomach, palpitations, light-headedness, trembling, cold sweat.
- Take in a NORMAL breath, hold it as long as you comfortably can, exhale, and without taking any breaths in between take in another normal breath, hold, and so on.

This next one is good to use any time you notice tension, and especially good at night when you are getting ready to go to sleep. Muscles that are purposely over-tensed relax more after release than they were prior to the tensing.

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Select body areas to clench and release. For example, clench your fists, hold tightly for several seconds, then release. Shrug your shoulders and hold, then release. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation.
- Move through your entire body, tensing and releasing muscle groups
- End with more deep breathing. As you inhale, think the word “I’m” and as you exhale, silently say “relaxed”.

And now for something extremely important: Sleep. Are you getting enough? Will you be getting enough when the pressure is on? The Multiple Sleep Latency Test is used by sleep experts to determine a patient’s level of sleep deprivation. If you were to lie down in sleep friendly place right now, how many minutes would it take for you to fall asleep?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SLEEP MSLT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 0-5 = Pathological</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 5-10 = Borderline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 10-15 = Manageable</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 15-20 = Excellent</td>
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</tbody>
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Learning and mood are both negatively affected by increasing sleep debt. Moving learned material from short-term to long-term memory requires adequate sleep. Sleep deprivation leads to being irritable, volatile and depressed. If you drive sleep-deprived, you are as dangerous as a drunk driver!!

Adequate sleep will allow you to not only recall information, but will enable you to integrate that information with other things you know. At the level of education in Medical School, you will be constantly called upon to not just memorize things (though there is a certain amount of that) but to be able to synthesize and apply what you know. If you must choose between some extra study time and getting the sleep your body requires, sleep will yield the better pay-off.

Another body-connected method involves your nose. Practically every store you go into these days has some kind of aromatherapy product to sell you, many of them claiming de-stressing qualities. Do they work?

While we aren’t here to endorse any commercial products, we can tell you there are some studies verifying that some scents have specific impacts on human functioning. In one example, a five-year-long study at Yale concluded that the relaxation effects seen within one minute of subjects smelling spiced apple were “quite remarkable”. The study measured brain waves, respiration, blood pressure, muscle tension and heart rate. In another, patients at Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center undergoing MRI’s had vanilla-almond scents introduced to help them relax, and experienced 63% less anxiety than a control group. Several other studies indicate there are scents that impact alertness and efficiency.

Here is a summary of aromas that can be documented to have particular impacts:
Students have found they can dab a small amount of a particular scent on their wrist or on a tissue to sniff intermittently for the desired effect. Be thoughtful about entering a class or a test engulfed in a cloud of smells that could trigger someone else’s asthma! Also, remember that we habituate to any constant smell, so the impact will be lost after a time of constant exposure to a certain smell.

You can also use the food – mood connection to help you either relax or be alert, depending on your need. In summary, carbohydrate and protein ingestion will sway how you feel and operate. If you eat protein either alone or followed by a carb, you’ll respond more quickly and with greater accuracy to mental challenges. If you eat carbs alone, without protein, you will feel less stressed, less anxious, more focused and relaxed. Judith J. Wurtman, Ph.D., gives a complete explanation in her book “Managing Your Mind & Mood Through Food”.

For most students, eating a high protein breakfast will help them be alert for morning classes and those delightful Saturday morning exams, and saving carbs for evenings could optimize relaxation and getting to sleep. Most people also enjoy knowing there is also a small body of evidence that chemicals particular to chocolate (not the sugar or the caffeine) enhances performance for 1 – 2 hours after consuming it. There is NO evidence that the more chocolate you have, the better you’ll do, however. About two ounces, or the amount in a few candy kisses, is enough to create the impact.

To pull some of this together, here are strategies many students use to help with test-time jitters:
## TEST ANXIETY

### The Night Before:
- Choose sleep over more study time.
- Cool it on chemicals (alcohol, caffeine)
- Have a high carbohydrate snack

### The Day of the Test:
- Eat high protein foods
- Avoid rushing
- Saturate yourself inside & out with positives
- Give yourself a “kiss”
- Utilize “Slow and Low” That is, move slowly and breathe down low.

We can go a long way in managing stress with the above approaches. None of them works optimally without exercise, however. We all know the physical benefits of exercise are immense and essential. Did you know, though, that emotional well-being also is enormously enhanced by sufficient exercise? Don’t fool yourself that you are too busy to keep up a regular exercise routine. It doesn’t have to be a huge time investment. The Student Life Center has good facilities and programs, the campus Wellness Center has a Walking Club with indoor walking paths charted, and it is often possible to just get outside for a brisk walk even during winter months. It will be worth the time you take for it.

Naturally, if you embed all of the above strategies in a generally healthy lifestyle, you’ll do better academically and personally. Some of these elements might include:
HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

- Sound nutrition
- Exercise
- Sense of humor
- Balance of work and play
- Spirituality
- Massage
- Supportive relationships

At the **Student Counseling and Development Center**, we work with students on all of the items above. We also use a variety of other modalities.

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More Options

- Free personal counseling
- Hypnosis
- EMDR
- Light Therapy for SADS
- Guided Imagery
- Referral for medication
Use of the Counseling and Student Development Center at UNMC is highly accepted and encouraged by the faculty and administration. It is considered a sign of wisdom to seek assistance from whatever resources are appropriate for your needs here at the Medical Center. As you’ll hear repeatedly during your early days as a medical student, getting help sooner rather than later is one of the greatest favors you can do for yourself from now on. When you think about it, you’ll probably some day encourage your patients in the same way.

For more information on any of the above topics, set an appointment to see a counselor by calling 559-7276. It is our aim to assist students to reach their goals in a relaxed and dignified atmosphere. You do not have to use your insurance, nor is a co-payment necessary. All appointments are free and confidential.