

College Life: 10 Ways to Reduce Stress

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College can be an exciting time, but also a stressful one. Learn 10 ways to tackle stress management.

When Stomach Pain Is Something Serious

No one is immune from stress, but those entering the ivory towers of [college](#) are particularly vulnerable to it.

“When you get to college, it’s usually a fairly sizable life change,” says J. David Forbes, MD, a Nashville, Tenn., physician specializing in stress management. “It’s the first time you’re off on your own. You’re out from any kind of adult jurisdiction. That can bring an overwhelming number of choices.”

Stress occurs when your tension level exceeds your energy level, resulting in an overloaded feeling. “As long as our available energy exceeds our tension level, then we’re in an okay state,” Dr. Forbes says.

“But if energy is low and tensions are higher, then that can result in a state of anxiety, depression, and feeling overwhelmed.”

College: Stress Management

If you feel like your brain is melting under the crush of books, classes, and papers, don’t freak out. Follow our stress-management tips to help relieve the pressure.

- 1. Get enough sleep.** It may be tempting to hit the hay at 4 a.m. and then attend an 8 a.m. class, but shortchanging yourself on rest can increase your stress level. “Winging it on not much sleep has a profound effect on how we experience the stressors of the day,” Forbes says. Plus, insufficient [sleep](#) can put you at risk for serious illnesses, such as diabetes, obesity, and [depression](#). Adults typically need seven to nine hours of sleep a night for best health. Forbes also recommends that you align your sleep schedule with normal resting hours by getting to bed before midnight, rather than staying up until dawn and sleeping until mid-afternoon. “The more that our internal clock is closely aligned with the clock of the sun, the better it is,” Forbes says.
- 2. Eat well.** A steady diet of pizza and vending-machine fare can decrease energy levels in the body, leading to a lower threshold for stress. “You end up feeling very tired and looking for the same [junk food] to kick you back up,” Forbes says. “It’s a lousy cycle of hunting for short-term comfort food or sugar highs that actually keep you feeling worse.” Follow a diet rich in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains.
- 3. Exercise.** When you’re stressed, moving around may be the last thing you feel like doing. But as little as 20 minutes a day of physical activity can reduce stress levels. Forbes says just three or four half-hour sessions can lighten stress considerably. As for what type of [exercise](#), try something that you enjoy doing, like swimming or yoga. “You’re not going to continue something you don’t like,” Forbes notes.

4. **Avoid unnatural energy boosters.** Artificial stimulants like caffeine pills or prescription meds may help you stay awake for that all-night study session, but putting off your body's need to sleep will ultimately result in an energy crash, resulting again in a greater susceptibility to stress. "It's like clipping the wires to your fire alarm while the house burns down," Forbes says. "Just because you didn't hear it doesn't mean the house didn't burn."
5. **Get emotional support.** Adjusting to college can be difficult, and venting your frustrations to a trusted friend can go a long way in fighting stress. "It's a way to empty out tensions and make them lower," Forbes says. Choose a friend or family member who won't be judgmental or try to give lots of advice. Or seek the help of a professional counselor or psychologist. To find a trusted practitioner, check with your student health center for recommendations.
6. **Don't give up your passions.** Your schedule may be filled with lectures and study groups, but try to find at least a couple of hours each week to pursue a hobby or other activity that you enjoy. "Do something that feeds the peace of your soul in some way and stay connected with it," Forbes says. "It promotes the anti-stress physiology of your body." Not sure what your passion is? Visit Findmyhobby.com, a directory of Web sites devoted to almost every kind of pastime.
7. **Try not to overload yourself.** Between classes, extracurricular groups, and maybe even a job, it's easy for students to take on more than they can handle. If you've signed up for an excessive number of courses, don't be afraid to drop one, and remember that you can always say no when you're asked to organize the Latin Club's annual yard sale. "Take good, loving care of yourself," Forbes says. "You are your own parent from here on out. Start caring for yourself like you would for a child in your charge."
8. **Avoid relaxing with alcohol.** Having three or four beers to unwind after a hard day of studying may seem perfectly logical, but any unresolved stress that you have will just come flooding back after your buzz subsides. Plus, if you overindulge, you may have to deal with unpleasant side effects, like nausea and hangovers, later on. If you find yourself drinking regularly before noon, become anxious at the prospect of not drinking, or become unable to "just have one," you may be developing [alcohol dependence](#). Your student health center or the National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service at 800-662-HELP can assist you in finding professional help.
9. **Breathe.** When you feel stressed, deep-breathing exercises can help melt away the tension. Try this exercise: Inhale slowly through your nose, hold the breath for a few seconds, then exhale through your mouth, and repeat as needed. This helps prevent the short, shallow breaths that often accompany feelings of tension.
10. **Get a massage.** If you're feeling frazzled, try putting yourself in someone else's hands — literally. Stress often causes your muscles to become tight and knotted, and a professional massage therapist can help to loosen them, providing stress relief. Educational requirements for massage therapists vary from state to state, so finding a knowledgeable one can be tricky. One of the major professional massage associations in the United States, the [American Massage Therapy Association](#), has a searchable directory of massage therapists.

Going to college can put a lot of pressure on you. Using some of these strategies will help you reduce stress and soar through those four years.

ORGANIZATION HELP FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

- **Learn to use electronic devices** like cell phones, smartphones, PDAs, and timers, to remind yourself of things throughout the day.
- **Wear earplugs or headphones.**
- **Use white noise machines to block out distracting noises.**
- **Use a daily planner.**
- **Use a large wall calendar** to get a short- and long-term visual picture of what you have to do.
- **Understand the importance of daily routines and rituals.**
- **Develop a schedule with regular sleep, diet and nutrition, exercise, and study times.**
- **Plan for transition:** Take time to wake up and do your morning routine. Set aside time to settle down and get ready to fall asleep. Take time to gather books and belongings and walk to class.
- **Establish a regular time and place to study.**
- **Plan for long-term projects:** Divide a project into smaller pieces, estimate the time required for each piece of the project, make deadlines for each piece as well as for the entire project.

Increase focus, end procrastination and more with these self-help strategies from cognitive behavior therapy.

Commit to going through a pile of papers for just fifteen minutes.



Mary Solanto, Ph.D.

Be more mindful when you face a difficult situation, or when you notice your emotions changing for the worse," suggests Dr. Ramsay. "Take a moment to reflect on how you're thinking about whatever's going on - what thoughts and pictures are going through your mind, how this is affecting the way you feel, and what you're doing as a consequence. Is there evidence that these thoughts are true? Is there a more helpful, realistic way to think about it?"

Stopping procrastination

Many ADDers put off paying bills, completing chores, and doing other things they consider boring. But other ADDers put off doing tasks they are convinced they *cannot* do - often because of past experience. If you've failed at something many times in the past, you may be reluctant to try again.

Ramsay says, "Ask yourself what you are assuming will happen if you try. Is there another way this could possibly turn out? If a friend had AD/HD, how would you advise and encourage him? Why assume that the same thing wouldn't work for you?"

Another way to beat procrastination is to cut tasks into pieces. If going through a pile of papers makes you think, "I'll never get it all done," commit to going through half the pile.

"Keep reducing the piece of the task until you can say, 'I can do this easily,'" advises Mary Solanto, Ph.D., director of the AD/HD Center at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City. "Once you get started, you may be buoyed by the results and continue spontaneously."

A similar approach is the "10-minute rule." Commit to working at a large job for only 10 minutes. Tell yourself you can stop after that, guilt-free. Since getting started is often the hardest part, you're likely to keep going. That will give you a sense of accomplishment, not to mention a smaller job to finish.

The to-do dilemma

"People make to-do lists but never commit to doing things at a particular time on a particular day," says Dr. Solanto. In CBT, she says, "we have a saying: 'If it's not in the planner, it doesn't exist.' We ask people to schedule the things they want to accomplish, and tell them to carry the planner with them at all times."

Keep all your to-do lists in a single notebook. Link checking it to routine activities, like brushing your teeth, eating lunch, walking the dog, and so on. That way, you'll check the lists regularly.

Staying focused

To focus more easily, Dr. Safren recommends the following: Each time you sit down to tackle a boring task, set a timer for as long as you think you'll be able to stay focused. Whenever a distracting thought comes to mind (typically, something else you need to do), jot it down in a notebook. Tell yourself, "I'll do this later," then go back to work.

When the timer goes off, review your list. If the items you wrote down don't need to be dealt with right away, work a bit longer on the task. Go back to your list at the end of the day.

Another way to stay focused, says Safren, is to place colored stickers on sources of distraction, like the telephone or computer. Each time you spot a dot, ask yourself, "Am I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing?"

When goals prove elusive

People with ADD have trouble achieving long-term goals. And no wonder: It can take years to save for a new home, whereas splurging on a new outfit feels good right away. This kind of thinking can lead to a lifetime of unfulfilled ambitions.

"You have to make distant rewards more present," says Solanto. "One way to do this is by visualization. Imagine what it would be like to accomplish your goal, until it becomes so real, so visceral, you can almost taste it."

A student who is tempted away from writing a paper by friends who want to party might think ahead to how good it would feel to ace the course.

Self-esteem trouble

Years of low self-esteem engender a defeatist attitude: If you're no good at it, why try? "People tend to focus on their weaknesses, and overlook their strengths," says Lily Hechtman, M.D., director of ADD research in the child psychiatry department at McGill University in Montreal.

To overcome this problem, she recommends writing a list of your positive attributes - things that other people might consider your strengths. Then identify one personal shortcoming - and do something about it.

For example, if you seldom finish projects, come up with a task that takes several days. Set a deadline, and do your best to meet it. Each incremental success gives your self-image a boost.

Your inner voice

If you run into trouble putting these strategies into action, tune in to your inner voice. Is it saying, "I just know this won't work, it never did before"? If so, ask yourself why it didn't work. Figure out what you need to do differently. Commit to trying the new approach for a week before deciding it's not worth the effort.

To track your inner voice, keep a daily "thought record." Divide a sheet of paper into five columns. Use column one to record the thoughts that come up in a problem situation, column two to describe the situation itself, column three to list the feelings aroused by the thoughts, column four to list the thought distortions you can identify, and column five to list more realistic thoughts.

Give yourself credit where credit is due. If you catch yourself belittling one of your achievements, recognize this as the distortion it is. When you meet a goal, reward yourself with a special meal or another indulgence.

If you have [adult ADHD](#), you've probably noticed that you procrastinate more than others. Such behavior can cause problems in personal relationships and those at the workplace. When we fail to complete tasks on time, others see it as a sign of disrespect, incompetence, or laziness.

Because [procrastination](#) is essentially a mind-set, cognitive-behavior techniques can help even chronic procrastinators break the habit. If you've been putting something off for days (or months), try the following [ADHD time-management tips](#).

Tip #1: [Do Something Fun First](#)

1. Do Something Fun First

Many people with ADHD find it helpful to do something they love first as a way to get in the mood to do less enjoyable tasks.

Any stimulating activity you enjoy will do the trick. Some ADDers play basketball or computer games. Others dance or take a bubble bath. Set a [timer](#) for 20 minutes to make sure you don't get so absorbed in the fun activity that you forget to do the necessary one.

2. Create the Right Work Environment

People who have ADHD often are most productive in unconventional surroundings. Instead of wearing earplugs to ensure silence, you may find that you get more done when listening to loud music.

If you work best under pressure, but still turn in projects late or exhaust yourself by pulling all-nighters, set your own deadline for completing portions of the project. This way, you can still work under pressure to finish each portion “on time.”

Do it: If you're taking [ADHD medication](#), it's generally best to schedule difficult tasks for times when your symptoms are fully covered.

3. Don't Beat Yourself Up

What we silently say to ourselves about doing the task at hand has a strong impact on how (or whether) we do it. Avoid [negative self-talk](#), and send yourself positive, realistic messages.

Instead of saying, “This will take forever, and it’s so late already…” substitute “I might not be able to finish this today, but I can do the first two steps within the next 30 minutes.”

The messages you send yourself when you complete a task can be powerful deterrents to future procrastination. They can also diminish the guilt that procrastinators often feel about having missed appointments in the past or having turned in work that doesn’t measure up to their ability.

4. Just Do It

Just starting a task — even if it’s begun poorly — makes it easier to follow through. Next time you find yourself avoiding something, take a “first sloppy step.”

If you need to write something, for example, start by typing random letters on the page. It is gibberish, but at least you will no longer be looking at a blank page.

5. Take One Step at a Time

Break large tasks into pieces. The smaller steps aren’t as intimidating and facilitate getting started. If a project can’t be completed piecemeal over several days, keep up your momentum by focusing only on the next doable step. Write this step on a sticky note and post it within your line of sight.

Put on your blinders and focus on this one step rather than on the task as a whole. When that’s done, move on to the next step in the same manner. Before you know it, you’ll be done.

Try it: If you need external pressure to stick to a task, enlist a [body double](#) — someone who will sit with you quietly while you’re working on a boring chore.