

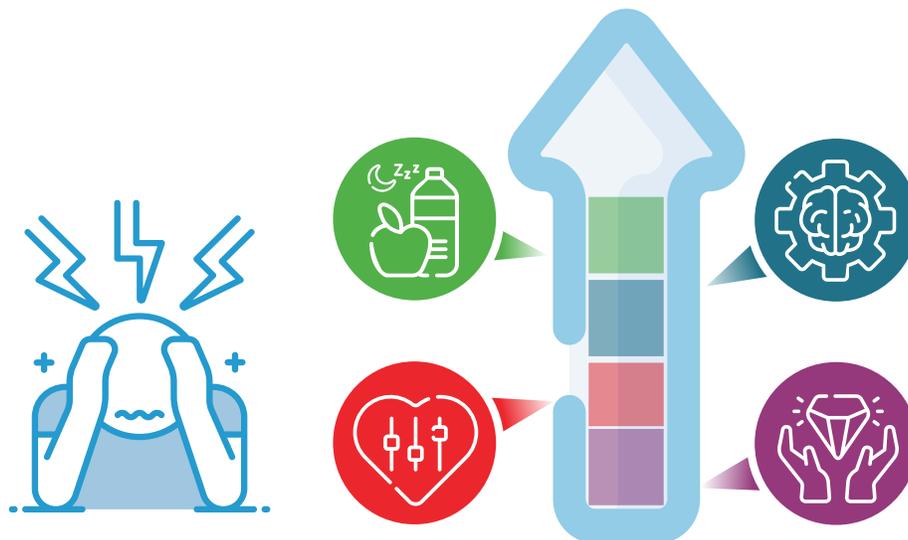
# Stress and Anxiety

Whether meeting someone for the first time, taking on a new project or transitioning into a new environment, everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life. Though feeling anxious in certain situations can be perfectly normal, for some people, feelings of anxiety are more constant and can often affect their daily lives (NHS Choices, 2019).

A holistic approach to mental health acknowledges that health exists in multiple domains, and understands that discussions around mental health are incomplete without acknowledging that each of these domains rely on and influence the others. The domains are:

-  **Physical:** Relating to general physiological wellbeing (e.g., Sleep, Nutrition, etc.)
-  **Mental:** Relating to psychological wellbeing (e.g., Cognitive, emotional, etc.)
-  **Social:** Relating to interpersonal connection (e.g., Social supports, relationships, etc.)
-  **Spiritual:** Relating to personal understanding of the term 'spirituality' (e.g., Motivation, beliefs, religion, etc.)

If we think of health and wellness as existing in these domains, we can better understand how activation or stimulation of our system can occur in any of these areas. And because both stress and anxiety can manifest in similar ways, it's important to be able to identify the differences between them.



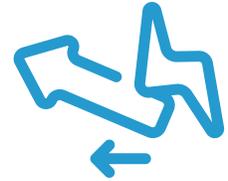
## Stress

Stress is a response to an external cause, such as a tight deadline for a test or assignment or having an argument with a family member. These responses, though they may be strong, often tend to subside once the situation has passed or been resolved, and our system has had a chance to self-regulate. Since stress has a direct external cause, tackling these causes head-on can help to mitigate one's stress response.

Stress is responsive to our circumstance.

Examples:

- Social Stress (e.g., Expectations, assessment, public speaking, entertaining)
- Physical Stress (e.g., Exercise, fatigue, hunger, thirst, temperature)
- Mental Stress (e.g., Motivation, deadlines, worry)
- Spiritual Stress (e.g., Existential crisis, loss of faith, grief)



Changes in our level of stress, like changes in our mood, are normal when responding to various circumstances or contexts. However, when a barrier gets thrown into this natural, responsive mechanism, it isn't uncommon for it to get jammed or stuck. A conflict may occur where a barrier prevents us from regulating our stress responses. One of the most common barriers is anxiety.

## Anxiety

Check out our infosheet on [Panic Attacks and Exam Anxiety](#)

Anxiety is a common response to many of life's stressors and can sometimes even be beneficial, by drawing our attention to things that may be dangerous or otherwise harmful to us (Cleveland Clinic, 2017). Anxiety can become more of a challenge when it begins to interfere with our ability to effectively respond to daily situations. Anxiety is often characterized by a persistent feeling of apprehension or dread in situations that are not actually threatening.

## Stress and Anxiety on Post-Secondary Campuses

In 2019, the American College Health Association (ACHA) surveyed 58 Canadian post-secondary institutions and found that though 87% of post-secondary students across Canada reported feeling overwhelming anxiety, less than half of them (24%) were receiving treatment for it.

Anxiety disorders can often present alongside depression, and though anxiety and depression are separate conditions, it is not uncommon for one to be triggered by the other. Like the findings on anxiety, the 2019 ACHA survey of Canadian post-secondary students found that 50% of their respondents reported feeling too depressed to function, and 17% had seriously contemplated suicide within the last year.

# Managing Stress and Anxiety

When we're looking at ways to manage stress and anxiety, a good place to start is to identify the situations and stimuli that trigger stress responses (Mayo Clinic, 2017). Identifying triggers and protective factors to mitigate the stress response can help return our bodies to baseline.

## Tips for managing stress:

### ➤ Developing a gratitude practice

- Practicing gratitude can help you focus on the good and reframe challenges as less of a threat.

### ➤ Encouraging predictability in your routine

- Often when we experience stress it's because we feel we don't have a sense of control. When a problem arises it can be helpful to respond to the aspects that you can control, and work toward solving the problem in smaller more manageable pieces.

### ➤ Building a social support system

- One of the strongest protective factors against stress is having a stable and supportive relationship with at least one other person. Having someone who we can reach out to in hard times helps us to face challenges and uncertainties.

## Tips for managing acute stress responses

### ➤ Mental rehearsal

- The act of THINKING and VISUALIZING oneself attaining a desired goal. This can be helpful for reframing.

### ➤ Positive self-talk

- Engaging in an internal dialogue that supports you reaching your goal. Research has shown a decrease in emotional distress when people speak to themselves in the third person.

### ➤ Focus on your breathing

- Deep belly breathing (breathing from your diaphragm) tells your brain to relax which can lower your blood pressure, heart rate, and help to regulate other physiological responses to stress.



## Positive stress and Resilience

Not everyone reacts to stress negatively, some people respond to stress with resilience. Resilience is the ability to adapt in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress, it is not something that we inherently have, but it is something we can cultivate.

### Mindfulness and the concept of flow

There have been studies that have shown the benefits of mindfulness-based activities to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety. Flow is a theory in positive psychology that is a type of immersive mindfulness that can come from a variety of activities that an individual might find enjoyable – eliciting feelings of eustress.

**Eustress** is the type of stress that we feel when we're excited. It is not in response to threat or fear, it is an exciting feeling that leaves us feeling confident, motivated, and excited about life. Eustress can improve cognitive function – memory, attention span, and assists with productivity. This in turn can help us to stay motivated, work toward goals, and feel good about life

The concept of flow is characterised as, among other things, a feeling of complete concentration, a heightened sense of control, and a loss of self-consciousness. Below are the 8 elements of flow.

### The 8 elements of FLOW:

**1 Clarity of goals and immediate feedback**  
- Knowing what is required to successfully complete the objective.

**A high level of concentration on a limited field**  
- This allows a person's consciousness to delve deeply into the activity. **2**

**3 Balance between skills and challenge** - The difficulty of a task should provide the right degree of challenge to a person's ability. Flow occurs between the states of 'too much' and 'too little'.

**The feeling of control** - Characteristic for flow is the feeling of heightened control over one's actions. Control in flow is a state of security and relaxation with the complete absence of worry: the paradox known in Zen Buddhism as 'control without controlling'. **4**

**5 Effortlessness** - Flow involves flexibility and ease; everything works harmoniously and effortlessly. All necessary decisions arise spontaneously from the demands of the activity without any deliberate reflection.

**An altered perception of time** - In a deep flow-state, one's normal perception of time is on hold. Time can either feel condensed - two hours feel like ten minutes or expanded - seconds feel like minutes. That is why the flow-mode is called 'timeless'.

**6**

**7** **The melting together of action and consciousness** - Complete involvement creates a state in which there is no room for worry, fear, distraction, or self-conscious rumination. This feeling of unity can expand to a person's surroundings (nature) as well as to a whole group of people working together (team flow).

**The autotelic quality of flow-experiences: IROI** - From Greek autos – self and telos – goal. Not only is achieving the goal of the activity rewarding but the activity itself is fulfilling.

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## Seeking support

If stress or anxiety becomes an impediment to one's life or ability to participate in everyday tasks and activities, reaching out for community or professional support may help. Familiarizing oneself with the resources available can create avenues to support yourself or others in need.

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