

Stress and Anxiety



REFERENCES

Stress and Anxiety on Post-Secondary Campuses

Stress and Anxiety among post-secondary students has always been a prevalent issue on campus. In a 2019 survey, 87% of post-secondary students across Canada reported feeling overwhelming anxiety, and only 24% were receiving treatment for it. A 2021 survey showed international students were deeply impacted by the pandemic, where 50% of students from 84 countries responded that they were at risk of anxiety disorders with social isolation, mental exhaustion and panic attacks.

What is Stress?

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

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a common response to a lot of life stressors. It can be beneficial as it draws our attention to things that may be harmful to us. Anxiety is characterized by a persistent feeling of apprehension or dread in situations that are not actually threatening. Anxiety can become a challenge when it begins to disrupt our ability to respond effectively in daily situations.



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 or signals that trigger stress responses in order to return our bodies to its natural state.

Tips for managing stress



➤ Building a social support system

One of the strongest protective factors against stress is having someone whom we can reach out to in hard times to face challenges and uncertainties. This might take some time if we have to build our support systems within a new setting, a new culture or a new country.

Tips for managing acute stress responses



➤ Mental rehearsal

Visualize yourself attaining the goal you want to achieve. This might look like picturing yourself doing a presentation calmly to a class or picturing yourself starting your assignment. This can be helpful for reframing your mindset and providing a new perspective.

Tips for managing stress



➤ Encouraging predictability in your routine

When we experience stress, it's often because we feel we don't have a sense of control. Respond to the aspects you can control when a problem arises, and work toward solving the problem in smaller, more manageable pieces. For example, if you missed classes due to being sick and you are likely to feel overwhelmed by the amount of content you need to catch up with. However, if you breakdown the topics and concepts you have to cover, across a span of time, it may look less daunting to complete.

➤ Developing a gratitude practice

Practicing gratitude can help you focus on the positive and reframe challenges as less of a threat. Writing down the things you're grateful for in a journal can be particularly helpful.

Positive Stress and Resilience

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 and practice.

Seeking support

While it may feel scary at first, reaching out for professional support can be helpful if you are finding daily tasks challenging due to stress and anxiety. They will provide a safe space to speak about your feelings and can provide guidance. There are a number of ways you can access services:

- 1** Find out what services are available through your post-secondary counselling department or student wellness services. Many schools even have support programs specifically geared toward international students!
- 2** **Good2Talk** is a free resource for post-secondary students. Trained professionals are available for support through a helpline or text.
- 3** **Connex Ontario** provides information on treatment services as well as confidential support across Ontario.

Keep in mind, the help you seek will stay confidential unless there is an immediate risk of harm. If seeking support by yourself is daunting, asking a trusted friend to be there when you're calling a helpline or scheduling an appointment can help. It can also be hard if you're struggling with stigma, have a fear of being stigmatized, or you are not used to seeking mental health support. Educating yourself on mental health, showing yourself-compassion, talking to people who are open about their own mental health, and advocating for yourself are some steps to reduce the stigma.

Tips for managing acute stress responses



➤ Positive self-talk

Engage in an internal dialogue that supports you in reaching your goal. When people speak to themselves in the third or second person, it can decrease emotional distress. For example, if Alex is stressed about an upcoming assignment, they may decrease their stress by saying "Alex, you're capable and smart, and you have completed similar assignments on time with the skills you have. You got this."

➤ Focus on your breathing

Deep belly breathing (breathing from your diaphragm) tells your brain to relax, which can lower your blood pressure and heart rate and help to regulate the physical signs of stress.

***Eustress** is the type of stress we feel when we're excited, and it leaves us feeling confident, motivated, and excited about life. It can improve cognitive function – memory, attention span, and assists with productivity. This turn can help us to stay motivated, work toward goals, and feel good about life*