

Section 3



INTRODUCTION TO STRESS MANAGEMENT

Key Points

- 1 Defining Stress
- 2 Causes of Stress
- 3 Symptoms of Distress
- 4 Managing Stress
- 5 Depression
- 6 Suicide



Remember that the mind and body are one and that psychological health is just as important as physical health to your overall well-being.

Health Tips from Army Medicine

Introduction

Stress is a fact of life, wherever you are and whatever you are doing. You cannot avoid stress, but you can learn to manage it so it doesn't manage you.

Changes in our lives—such as going to college, getting married, changing jobs, or illness—are frequent sources of stress. Keep in mind that changes that cause stress can also benefit you. Moving away from home to attend college, for example, creates personal-development opportunities—new challenges, friends, and living arrangements. That is why it's important to know yourself and carefully consider the causes of stress. Learning to do this takes time, and although you cannot avoid stress, the good news is that you can minimize the harmful effects of stress, such as depression or hypertension. The key is to develop an awareness of how you interpret, and react to, circumstances. This awareness will help you develop coping techniques for managing stress. For example, as an Army platoon leader, managing stress will require techniques that include an awareness of yourself and your Soldiers.

As you will see, the stress you encounter as a student differs in intensity from what you may experience in the Army, particularly while deployed or in combat. The principles and techniques you use to manage stress are similar, however, as reported by this second lieutenant after returning from the war in Afghanistan:

stress

physical and psychological responses to the pressures of daily life

How do you combat fatigue, stress, and fear in yourself? In your Soldiers?

In the past seven months (in Afghanistan) I have learned a lot about how I deal with combat fatigue and stress. I have found that finding a little time for myself each day or even each week allows me to regenerate and focus. Having a sense of humor and not taking things so personally have also helped reduce my stress levels. Keeping a notebook with me at all times and writing tasks, missions, or even just things to do has helped me keep my mind at ease, rather than thinking that I have forgotten to do something. Maintaining communication with my family and friends, whether through e-mail or phone conversations, also keeps me grounded . . . (3rd Brigade, 25th Infantry Division (L)).

2LT Gisela Mendonca

Defining Stress

Stress is the way human beings react both physically and mentally to changes, events, and situations in their lives. People experience stress in different ways and for different reasons. The reaction is based on your perception of an event or situation. If you view a situation negatively, you will likely feel *distressed*—overwhelmed, oppressed, or out of control. Distress is the more familiar form of stress. The other form, *eustress*, results from a “positive” view of an event or situation, which is why it is also called “good stress.”

Eustress helps you rise to a challenge and can be an antidote to boredom because it engages focused energy. That energy can easily turn to *distress*, however, if something causes you to view the situation as unmanageable or out of control. Many people regard public speaking or airplane flights as very stressful—causing physical reactions such as an increased heart rate and a loss of appetite—while others look forward to the event. It's often a question of perception: A positive stressor for one person can be a negative stressor for another.

Causes of Stress

The most frequent reasons for “stressing out” fall into three main categories:

1. The unsettling effects of change
2. The feeling that an outside force is challenging or threatening you
3. The feeling that you have lost personal control.

Life events such as marriage, changing jobs, divorce, or the death of a relative or friend are the most common causes of stress. Although life-threatening events are less common, they can be the most physiologically and psychologically acute. They are usually associated with public service career fields in which people experience intense stress levels because of imminent danger and a high degree of uncertainty—police officer, fire and rescue worker, emergency relief worker, and the military.

You may not plan to enter a high-stress career, but as a college student, you may find that the demands of college life can create stressful situations. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) notes some of the more common stressors for college students:

- Increased academic demands
- Being on your own in a new environment
- Changes in family relations
- Financial responsibilities
- Changes in your social life
- Exposure to new people, ideas, and temptations
- Awareness of your sexual identity and orientation
- Preparing for life after graduation.

Symptoms of Distress

Symptoms of stress fall into three general, but interrelated, categories—physical, mental, and emotional. Review this list carefully. If you find yourself frequently experiencing these symptoms, you are likely feeling *distressed*:

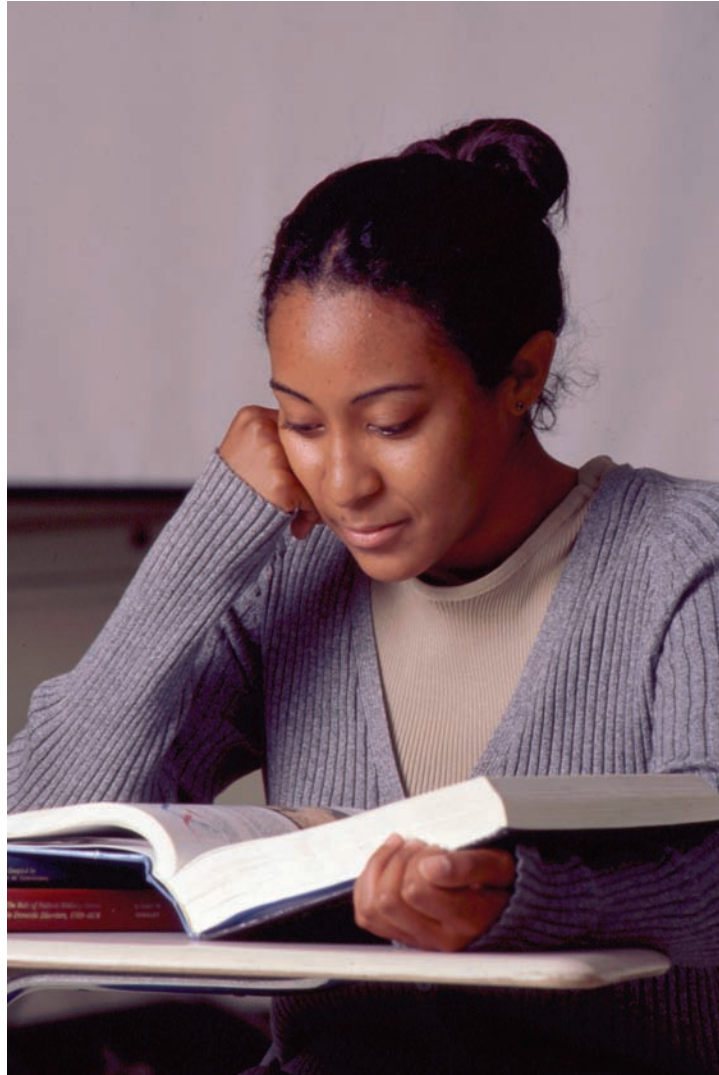
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Heart problems, such as palpitations
- Inability to focus/lack of concentration
- Sleep disturbances, whether it's sleeping too much or an inability to sleep
- Sweating palms/shaking hands
- Anxiety
- Sexual problems.

Even when you don't realize it, stress can cause or contribute to serious physical disorders. It increases hormones such as adrenaline and corticosterone, which affect your metabolism, immune reactions, and other stress responses. That can lead to increases in your heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, and physical demands on your internal organs.

Behavioral changes are also expressions of stress. They can include:

- Irritability
- Disruptive eating patterns (overeating or under eating)
- Harsh treatment of others
- Increased smoking or alcohol consumption

Stress management is key to academic success.



- Isolation
- Compulsive shopping.

A sustained high level of stress is no laughing matter. It can affect every area of your life—productivity in the workplace and classroom, increased health risks, and relationships, to name just a few.

Managing Stress

As noted in the Introduction, you can learn to manage stress. The first step is understanding yourself better—how you react in different situations, what causes you stress, and how you behave when you feel stressed. Once you’ve done that, take the following steps:

Set priorities. Use the time-management tips you learned in Section 1. Make a To-Do list. Decide what is really important to get done today, and what can wait. This helps you to know that you are working on your most immediate priorities, and you don’t have the stress of trying to remember what you should be doing.

Practice facing stressful moments. Think about the event or situation you expect to face and rehearse your reactions. Find ways to practice dealing with the challenge. If you know that speaking in front of a group frightens you, practice doing it, perhaps

with a trusted friend or fellow student. If the pressure of taking tests causes you to freeze up, buy some practice tests at the school bookstore or online and work with them when there are no time pressures.

Examine your expectations. Try to set realistic goals. It's good to push yourself to achieve, but make sure your expectations are realistic. Watch out for perfectionism. Be satisfied with doing the best you can. Nobody's perfect—not you, not your fellow Cadet, nobody. Allow people the liberty to make mistakes, and remember that mistakes can be a good teacher.

Live a healthy lifestyle. Get plenty of exercise. Eat healthy foods. Allow time for rest and relaxation. Find a relaxation technique that works for you—prayer, yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises. Look for the humor in life, and enjoy yourself.

Learn to accept change as a part of life. Nothing stays the same. Develop a support system of friends and relatives you can talk to when needed. Believe in yourself and your potential. Remember that many people from disadvantaged backgrounds have gone on to enjoy great success in life.

At the same time, avoid those activities that promise release from stress while actually adding to it. Drinking alcohol (despite what all those TV commercials imply), drinking caffeine, smoking, using narcotics (including marijuana), and overeating all add to the body's stress in addition to their other harmful effects.

Here are some other strategies for dealing with stress:

- Schedule time for vacation, breaks in your routine, hobbies, and fun activities.
- Try to arrange for uninterrupted time to accomplish tasks that need your concentration. Arrange some leisure time during which you can do things that you really enjoy.
- Avoid scheduling too many appointments, meetings, and classes back-to-back. Allow breaks to catch your breath. Take a few slow, deep breaths whenever you feel stressed. Breathe from the abdomen and, as you exhale, silently say to yourself, "I feel calm."
- Become an expert at managing your time. Read books, view videos, and attend seminars on time management. Once you cut down on time wasters, you'll find more time to recharge yourself.
- Learn to say "no." Setting limits can minimize stress. Spend time on *your* main responsibilities and priorities rather than allowing other people's priorities or needs to dictate how you spend your time.
- Exercise regularly to reduce muscle tension and promote a sense of well-being.
- Tap into your support network. Family, friends, and social groups can help when dealing with stressful events.

depression

a common mental illness that affects a person's body, mood, and thought—it causes people to lose pleasure from daily life, can complicate other medical conditions, and can even lead to suicide

Depression

Unfortunately, a person's inability to deal with stress can often lead to clinical **depression**. People with depression have similar symptoms to stress, except the symptoms are not temporary—they can last for weeks at a time. Because of the sustained symptoms, the effect on the body, mood, and behavior is often more serious than with temporary stress. Depression can have severe effects on your eating habits, your relationships, your ability to work and study, and how you think and feel. The illness is not unique to a particular group of people or area of the country. Millions of adult Americans, including many college students, suffer from clinical depression.

It's important to understand that clinical depression is a real, not an "imaginary" illness. It's not a passing mood or a sign of personal weakness. It demands treatment—and 80 percent of those treated begin to feel better in just a few weeks.

According to NIMH, the following symptoms are signs of major depression:

- Sadness, anxiety, or "empty" feelings
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, oversleeping, or waking much earlier than usual)
- Appetite and weight changes (either loss or gain)
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or remembering
- Irritability or excessive crying
- Chronic aches and pains not explained by another physical condition.

It's normal to have some signs of depression some of the time. But the NIMH says that if someone has five or more symptoms for two weeks or longer, or suffers noticeable changes in normal functioning, that person should go to a mental health professional for evaluation. Depressed people often may not be thinking clearly and may therefore not seek help on their own. They frequently require encouragement from others—they "need help to get help."

Mental health professionals say depression among college students is a serious problem. A recent UCLA survey of college freshmen indicates that today's students are feeling more overwhelmed and stressed than students did 15 years ago. The National Mental Health Association reports that more than 30 percent of college freshmen report feeling overwhelmed a great deal of the time.

If you think you might be depressed, you should talk with a qualified health-care or mental-health professional. The resident adviser in your dorm, the student health center, your family health-care provider, or a clergy member can help steer you to treatment resources. Several effective treatments for depression are available, and—depending on the severity of the symptoms—can provide relief in just a few weeks. But individuals respond differently to treatment. If you don't start feeling better after a few weeks, talk to your treatment provider about other treatments, or seek a second opinion.

Suicide

As noted above, severe depression often manifests itself in thoughts about death or suicide, or in suicide attempts. Many people are understandably uncomfortable talking about suicide, but doing so can save lives. The NIMH reports that in 2000, suicide was the 11th leading cause of death for all Americans and the third leading cause of death for those aged 15 to 24. While women are three times as likely to attempt suicide as men, men are four times as likely as women to succeed.

There are many common myths about suicide:

- *If someone wants to die, nobody can stop that person.* False. Most people thinking about suicide don't want to die: They want help.
- *If I ask someone about suicide, I'll give that person the idea.* False. That you cared enough to ask may offer comfort to the person.
- *Suicide comes "out of the blue."* False. Usually, the person exhibits several warning signs.

Critical Thinking

What are some of the stressors you currently face? Develop an action plan to improve your stress management skills by either eliminating a cause of stress or reducing its effects on you. Incorporate at least three techniques described in this section of your textbook.

You should always take suicidal thoughts, impulses, or behavior seriously. If you are thinking or talking about hurting or killing yourself, or know someone who is, *seek help immediately*. The NIMH recommends you turn to your student health center; a family physician; a professor, coach, or adviser; a member of the clergy; a local suicide or emergency hotline (one number is 1-800-SUICIDE); or a hospital emergency room. If you have to, call 911.

Some of the warning signs of suicide include:

- Talking about suicide
- Statements about hopelessness, helplessness, or worthlessness
- Preoccupation with death
- Becoming suddenly happier or calmer
- Losing interest in things one cares about
- Setting one's affairs in order for no apparent reason—such as giving away prized possessions or making final arrangements regarding finances and property.

More on Stress

If you would like to do further research on stress, more information is available at these websites:

1. US Army HOOAH 4 Health:
www.hooah4health.com/mind/combatstress/default.htm
2. If you enter “stress management” into web search engines such as Google, you will find numerous references from which you can choose.



CONCLUSION

Stress can have consequences far beyond temporary feelings of pressure. While you can't avoid stress, you can learn to manage it and develop skills to cope with the events or situations you find stressful. By learning to cope with stress, and by recognizing the symptoms of depression and the warning signs of suicide, you'll be better prepared to help not only yourself, but also friends, fellow students, and the Soldiers you will someday lead.

Learning Assessment

1. Define stress and list some of the symptoms.
2. Explain what causes stress and list some of the ways to deal with it.
3. What is the difference between stress and depression?
4. List some warning signs of suicide.

Key Words

stress

depression

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