

# ***Stress Management***

## **Understanding the Stress Reaction:**

**To find the right strategies to cope with stress, it's helpful to understand the biological and the psychological aspects of our stress reaction. Here you find some information to get a first idea:**

The stress/fight/freeze- reaction of our stress-system was shaped in human evolution and has successfully secured survival of humankind until today. This emergency strategy of our brain and body is run by the more basic and older parts of our brain (e.g. the limbic system). This system works very fast, mostly unconsciously and enables us to react with an immediate and strong reaction of our body: fleeing, fighting or (if the two other options are unlikely to get us out of the dangerous situation: freezing). It knows and uses the "language of emotions" (fear and rage). This reaction is executed by our autonomic nervous system. It is called "autonomous" because it does the job without asking our rational thinking part of the brain (the slowly working prefrontal cortex we use for studying) whether it's a good idea to do so or not. It reacts so fast in order to make sure that we're not being eaten up by the dangerous hungry animal in front of us (or being run over by the speeding car or bike on Berlin roads nowadays ☺).

The problem is, that our brain is not always right in judging a situation as dangerous and in addition the fight/flight/freeze reaction is not always a good solution to our problem. Think of an exam situation: would running out of the room or knocking down the professor help you to overcome the fear to fail the exam? In this situation we should analyze the problem rationally ("This first exam question is very difficult"), think creatively about possible solutions ("Maybe I should look for an easier one that I can answer first. I will turn back to the difficult one if I still have time.") and then plan their realization. The problem is: as soon as our brain has judged a situation as allegedly threatening, the stress reaction is on its way and blocks the slow rational thinking part of our brain in favour of the faster limbic system (Survival in early times was – as described above - often a matter of time). This makes it necessary to "cool down" the stress reaction first, before we are able to think rationally about good solutions for our problem.

Cooling down the stress system is also a good idea as persisting ("chronic") stress can lead to serious physical and mental health problems.

If you want to know more about our stress system, have a look here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpolpKTWrp4>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm>

## **Choosing the right strategies for your personal stress management**

**Experiencing stress is neither avoidable in life nor is it detrimental to us if we know how to cope and manage to calm down and relax after a stressful situation. A medium level of stress even helps us to be energetic and focused when working on our goals.**

**In order to cope with stressful situations in our life, it's useful to have a look on the following aspects:**

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**Learn how to cool down your stress reaction:** relaxation techniques such as breathing relaxation can help you to come back to yourself when you are tensed and hyped. To have them at hand when needed, it is useful to train them on a regular basis. Try out and choose what suits you best. Doing sports or music, meditation/mindfulness practice or simply walk in nature can help you to calm down your body and mind.

Find relaxation instructions and calming down strategies on the following websites:

<https://students.dartmouth.edu/wellness-center/wellness-mindfulness/mindfulness-meditation/guided-audio-recordings#deep>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation/relaxation-tips/#.XOUd4CDgqUk>

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm>

### **Find out, what causes stress in your life (your stressors) and check whether you can reduce them or manage them better.**

Become aware of your stress symptoms (body, thoughts, emotions, behaviour), the situations in which they occur and which strategies you use to handle them. Writing down your observations may be helpful to identify typical stressors and stress patterns.

Check whether you can reduce stressors or manage them differently (e.g. by planning, prioritizing, changing goals)

Check, if your life is in balance in terms of physical, emotional, intellectual, social, creative and spiritual aspects. Are there some aspects overemphasized in your life and others lacking?

To find out more, read the following:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>

### **Strengthen your resources to become more resilient towards your stressors.**

- **Take care of the basics:** When we have a lot of things to do and seemingly not enough time, we often cut down on our fundamental needs. This may work for a few days, but certainly not for a whole semester. Organise each day by including time out for a break; enough sleep; some exercise; good food; drinking enough water; seeing other people; taking time out from social media; and taking care with using alcohol, caffeine and other 'social' drugs.
- **Talk to others and maintain/ expand your social contacts (not only the virtual ones):** Getting social support by talking to a friend, family member or a counsellor is often relieving. You can talk over your fears and worries, get new ideas for solutions or spend a good time together.
- **Do one positive thing (however small) different from your studies,** that you enjoy each day. Try to focus on the work done instead of the ever refilling to-do-list.

More to read:

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/surviving-tough-times.htm>

<https://www.helpguide.org/home-pages/stress-management.htm>

## Check your attitude

Our stress reaction follows our appraisal of the situation. Is it important for our life and do we think we can cope? If you can answer both questions with a “Yes”, it’s likely that you will consider even demanding situations as a challenge.

If it is important to you, but you doubt that you will cope or you are even convinced that you’ll fail, you will judge the situation as a threat and a “decent” stress reaction will follow. Thus, the way you think is crucial for the degree of stress you will experience.

The way you think is not only based on “first hand” experiences (made by yourself in the past) but very much also by “second hand” experiences (e.g. from watching role models like parents, teachers, peers or being taught the rules of our society and culture). They provide us with guiding principles such as “If you do A, B will be the result” and very often we believe this rules to be the truth.

However sometimes, a past experience may not fit our current situation and will therefore not provide us with helpful strategies and solutions. Sometimes we even use thinking patterns that exaggerate and aggravate the problem (e.g. black-and-white-thinking, worries and rumination). It may therefore be helpful to consider our way of thinking about a situation as only one possible explanation (or “hypothesis” if you prefer a more academic approach). This opens the door (of our mind 😊) to new ways of thinking and dealing with the situation.

For example, if you think that you should always be strong and solve your problems on your own, it might seem impossible to you to look for support. If you consider that a solution for your actual problem might include asking other people (like friends or an expert) whether they have any other idea on how to solve it, this opens new options to resolve your problem.