

1 Manage yourself

Studying can be quite a stressful process if you have a lot of pressure on your time due to part-time work and the bunching of assessment deadlines. It is important therefore to realise the kind of learner you are and the things that make you feel stressed. By developing this awareness you can start to see your studies, work and social life differently and 'get on top' of your stress factors. Another area that probably needs some attention is your time management. Students repeatedly say that they feel their inability to manage time effectively is a stress factor. Poor time management also compromises your ability to do well.

Both chapters in Part 1 will help you focus on developing these key skills that will enable you to juggle your busy life and come out on top.

2 Managing your stress

Most of your time at university will be a happy and enjoyable one. There may be times, however, when you feel things are getting out of control and you feel uncomfortably stressed. This can be related to your studies, your personal life, or both. Knowing what stress does to our bodies, our own tendencies towards being stressed, and the approaches we use to handle stressful events is an important life skill.

In this chapter you will learn how to:

1. identify signs of stress in yourself and others;
2. develop proactive strategies to dealing with stress;
3. recognise a personal tendency to be more stressed;
4. recognise what your stressors are and how to manage them.

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Estimate your current levels of confidence. At the end of the chapter you will have the chance to re-assess these levels where you can incorporate this into your personal development planner (PDP). Mark between 1 (poor) and 5 (good) for the following:

I can recognise my own signs of stress.	I can recognise what stresses me.	I can apply proactive strategies to combat stress.

Date: _____

1 Introduction

Of students surveyed for the Student Experience Report in 2006, 98% said that university life is a happy one. You may well be one of those and may look at the title of this chapter and feel that you are not particularly stressed and that, if you were, you could cope with it. However, 56% of those students also said that since being at university they were under a lot more stress than before.

If you are thinking of not reading this chapter because you currently don't feel stressed, **stop now** and consider the following: I know what happens to my body when I am stressed, I can recognise the symptoms and I fully understand what stresses me. I have also reflected on my attitude to things in my life and realise this plays a role in how stressed I feel and I have enough belief in myself to solve any issues that cause anxiety. If you are happy with all these statements, move on. If not, and you wish to develop or hone this life skill, read on.

2 What happens to our bodies under stress?

Richard Lazarus, an eminent psychologist who won the prestigious award of 'American Psychologist' in 2002, claimed that stress and anxiety mainly occur when we believe we can't cope with the problem we perceive as stressful (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). When we see this problem as overwhelming and feel we have no way of escaping or solving it, we experience anxiety or stress. However, we don't all see the same events as stressful.

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We have different perceptions of what is stressful, we have different levels of confidence in dealing with it and different ways of coping with it. There is therefore no one solution, but in general, it is the feeling of being out of control that makes us anxious and stressed.

How do our bodies respond to stress?

When we perceive an event as stressful, our bodies react physiologically to it. The Harvard physiologist Walter Cannon coined the term 'fight or flight' in the 1920s and it refers to our body's physiological response to a threatening situation, be this physical or emotional. When we feel threatened our heart rate speeds up, our blood pressure rises and our muscles tighten. At the same time our body releases the hormone cortisol that increases the flow of energy to our muscles. This makes us ready for action; we either stay and fight or run. Once we have dealt with the threat our body returns to normal. However, if our perceived threat doesn't result in action, then cortisol takes longer to disappear. If we 'run away' from a piece of coursework, for example, it isn't going to help very much. We may find ourselves even more stressed. 'Running away' from many of our stressors often means making excuses, and this can make things worse in the long run, making us feel even more stressed. If this continues over a long period of time, it attacks our immune system, our cardiovascular system, digestive system and musculoskeletal system until we are exhausted and eventually become ill.

Excess cortisol also affects the part of the brain that is central to learning and memory by interfering with how our brain cells communicate with one another. In a crisis, we often don't remember what went on exactly; it is as if our 'lines are down' and we only react to that which is vital. So, not handling stress well, or being under constant stress will affect our ability to learn.

Being alert to what creates stress in our lives, and developing techniques that can enable us to cope with these, and reduce excess flow of cortisol, is therefore an essential life skill.

NOTE Although stressors increase the amount of cortisol in our bloodstream, we also have 'daily shots' of cortisol throughout our daily cycle (circadian rhythm). This helps to keep us alert, by maintaining our blood pressure and enabling us to react to our environment.

3 What are the symptoms of stress?

When we feel stressed we notice changes in our emotions and our behaviour. Activities 2.1 and 2.2 help you to identify stress in yourself and others.

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ACTIVITY 2.1 Identifying signs of stress

Look at the scenarios below and complete the table.

Carlos is a very outgoing and confident person and has decided to study abroad. He is now reaching the end of his first semester. He is very gregarious and has a good friendship group. However, his friends are noticing that he is becoming increasingly withdrawn, is not eating properly and appears 'on edge' a lot of the time. When they try to talk to him he becomes irritable and no one feels they should pry any further.

Lucy is a third-year student and has always had a very full social life. Her tutors have spoken to her many times for handing work in late and missing classes. However, she always seemed to pull things together at the last minute. Just recently, however, you have noticed that she has started drinking more and when you pointed this out to her she said she wasn't sleeping well and needed some alcohol to help. You have also noticed that your fun-loving friend has little interest in the things you used to do together. She is also getting into difficulties with her third-year project group who are complaining of her forgetfulness and lack of interest in the project.

	Signs of stress	What he/she might be feeling	What he/she should do
Carlos			
Lucy			

Check the feedback section for more information.

ACTIVITY 2.2 Recognising your own symptoms of stress

When you feel stressed what symptoms do you have? List them under how you **feel** – including physical characteristics (e.g. heart pounding, feeling sick, tired) and how you **act** (e.g. irritable, lack of interest, get emotional).



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How do you feel? (include physical and emotional characteristics)	How do you act and behave?

Check the feedback section for more information.

Let's keep things in proportion. We all get stressed at times. Most of the time symptoms are uncomfortable but short lived and manageable. Sometimes we aren't even aware of feeling stressed until someone points out how irritable we are. However, we can get chronic stress symptoms and this needs to be dealt with.

Is all stress bad?

Stress can be both positive and negative. Positive stress is having just about enough stress to motivate and challenge us. It can give us a buzz. However, generally when we hear the word 'stress' we associate it as a negative state, as our symptoms above show. So, for some a group project, an essay or a presentation may be seen as positive and challenging while for others it could be seen as negative and worrying.

Also, we need some stress in our lives to keep us alert and ready for that challenge. We have probably all experienced a rise in our heart rate just as we are about to do something we feel challenging or stressful, but often that is what we need to get us up and running – a healthy dose of cortisol that dissipates quite soon afterwards. How many of us have put off a task because the deadline is just too far away? As the deadline approaches, we get the 'rush' and this stimulates us into activity. The trick is knowing when this can flip over from being the kick-start you need to being stressful.

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Reflect on how you deal with deadlines; are you generally operating too close for comfort or just about right? You will probably find you have a particular tendency (see Chapter 3, 'Managing your time'). You need to identify this so you can tackle it, if you need to.

Some symptoms of positive stress are:

- I feel excited.
- I get motivated.
- It gives me a buzz.
- It stretches me intellectually or physically.
- It enables me to learn.

4 Personal development in handling stress

Broadly speaking our attitudes will affect how we relate to others, how we cast blame when things don't work out, how we go about our tasks and the degree of control we feel over our lives. We need to develop our self-awareness in identifying stress and stressful events as well as confidence (self-belief) in being able to regain control over our lives.

Making personal changes – developing emotional intelligence

Daniel Goleman, author of the popular book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), claims that intellectual IQ alone does not give us all the skills needed to be successful in everyday life. We need to develop self-awareness and recognise what others are feeling (empathy), know how to handle our emotions and to have self-discipline. This, Goleman claims, is emotional intelligence or emotional quotient (EQ). Group work projects, for example, if taken seriously, develop our interpersonal skills (emotional literacy). Similarly, effective use of the personal development planner (PDP) enables us to reflect on our progress and personal development. These aspects of the curriculum therefore have good reasons for being there.

Activities 2.1 and 2.2 have been included so that you can see the importance of being aware of your own and your friends' behaviour as an initial step in dealing with stress.

Emotional intelligence comprises, in essence, three areas: know yourself, choose yourself, give yourself. These are summarised in Table 2.1.

By developing your emotional intelligence, you have the grounding to develop your self-belief and self-confidence, which gives you confidence to become more in control of your life. You also become aware of your own behaviour and how this can limit you as well as increasing your empathy towards your friends' troubles.

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Emotional intelligence categories	Questions	Application to your studies
Know yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What makes you think and feel the way you do? ■ What parts of your reactions are habitual or consciously thought through? ■ What are you afraid/ anxious of? 	Being honest with yourself enables you to reflect on your qualities and faults. You learn from your experiences. Reflect on this through your studies, part-time work, etc., and make notes in your personal development planner. This reflection should alert you to habitual actions – possibly fear of exams, particular coursework, etc. When you become aware of this you can then try to prevent yourself being a hostage to previously learned negative reactions.
Choose yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How do you know what's right for you? ■ If you were not afraid or anxious what would you do? ■ Can you increase your awareness of your actions? 	Manage your feelings. If something starts to stress you, identify exactly what it is and objectively assess why this is a stressor for you. Can you manage it yourself or do you need help?
Give yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Am I helping or hurting people? ■ Am I working interdependently with others? ■ Have I developed empathy? ■ Do I work by a set of personal standards? 	Be aware of your fellow students. When working together be alert to their needs as well as yours (be empathic).

Table 2.1 Emotional Intelligence

Source: Adapted from the Emotional Intelligence Network, <http://6seconds.org/index.php>

Making personal changes – developing self-belief

As we have mentioned, an important aspect of dealing with stress is this ability to feel you can control your life. The modern day reaction to the ‘flight or fight’ is our ability to change things that stress us and to do that we need to have confidence in ourselves (see Activity 2.3).

Albert Bandura, a famous Canadian professor in Psychology, began to see personality as an interaction between psychological processes, the environment and our behaviour. He noticed that those who felt more in control of their lives (had high self-efficacy) behaved differently and personally achieved more (Bandura, 1997).

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ACTIVITY 2.3 Is it all down to fate?

Look at the following statements – do you agree with them or not?

	Agree	Disagree
When things go wrong for me, it is just bad luck.		
It doesn't matter how well I plan, what's going to be, will be.		
Friendships are a result of chemistry – they work or they don't.		
Some people have all the luck.		
When things go wrong, I can usually find out who is to blame.		

As you probably realised, these are statements that reflect someone who has little self-belief in their own ability to make changes. Take a note of where your tendency lies. Check the feedback section for comments on these statements.

Write a new list of statements below that reflects someone who has self-belief.

	Generally me	Generally not me

Check the feedback section for some more examples once you have written your own.

Strategies for improving self-belief

1. Select a specific task/activity you want to improve and feel confident about. Think of a *specific* task.
2. This activity needs to be important to you as this will give you the motivation to work on it.
3. Has your previous experience of doing this activity been negative? If so, identify the specific negative aspects so you can work on them (don't generalise because you can't work with generalisations).

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4. Develop a picture of yourself, or someone, doing this activity well. What makes it good? Make sure you 'see' this performed well. Keep that picture in mind.
5. Set yourself specific and short-term goals to deal with aspects of the activity you have identified. See the section below on approaches to dealing with stressful events.
6. Seek feedback and work with it positively. If you feel you 'can't do something' always say 'I can't do that *YET*'. It has a powerfully confident feel about it.
7. Verbalise (write it out) your strategy for achieving your short-term goals. This way you have articulated your success and you can 'hear' it, and it primes you for action.
8. Small successes breed overall success.

NOTE Being 'in control' of events in your life is not about being a 'control freak'. It is about feeling that you can *DO* something to help. The higher your emotional intelligence, the better you will be at trusting others in order to give and receive help. Recognise when you need support and be proactive in seeking it out.

Checklist for signs of stress

Take the list of symptoms here as a warning signal. If these symptoms become chronic you must seek help.

Physical

Headaches, backache, exhaustion, insomnia, pounding heart, diarrhoea or constipation, stiff neck and shoulders, rashes, nausea.

Emotional

Feeling useless, worthless, not confident of abilities, not recognising your strengths, talking yourself down, feeling lonely, feeling 'out of control', feeling irritable and angry.

Intellectual

Feeling you can't learn another thing, you can't remember things, you don't process information very well in class, you have to keep going over something to make it 'stick'.

As a result of some of these symptoms you may find that you have negative reactions, such as: withdrawal from friends, mood swings, angry outbursts, inability to make decisions, weepy, not hungry or eating too much, feeling sick when you open 'that' book or go past the library, possibly excessive drinking, drug abuse or self-harming.

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NOTE If things have gone on too long or have become worse you may start to show more serious symptoms such as obsessive behaviour, suicidal feelings or depression. If you feel your symptoms are getting worse and you are worried, you must get professional help either from your doctor or the counselling service at your institution. If you do this, make sure you tell your personal tutor so that he/she can make allowances for late work or postpone certain assignments.

5 Do I have a personality that stresses me out?

We are all aware that some of our friends get more stressed than others and we may envy them if we are the one that gets stressed out while they remain calm. We should be aware by now that there are (a) individual differences in how stressful or challenging we see particular events, and (b) individual differences in how we think we can deal with these events, once we see them as stressful. One of the factors for these individual differences is our different personality styles.

How does your personality affect your stress levels?

In the 1950s, two cardiologists, Dr Meyer Friedman and Dr Ray Rosenman, observed that there was more heart disease in their male patients with high-pressured jobs. This may seem obvious to us now but it wasn't at the time. They also noted that particular personality types were also more prone to heart disease. The personality type they felt was more 'at risk' was their so-called 'Personality A' person. Incidentally, Friedman regarded himself as a 'recovering type A'. The Type A personality has now become synonymous with 'driven' people, obsessed with time and perfection. The counter to that is the Type B personality that is laid-back and easy going.

Are you a Type A or a Type B?

Type A and Type B is essentially a continuum of personality traits from being uptight to laid-back. It is not an intricate measure of your personality but serves to give you a guideline of where your tendencies are.

Type A personalities tend to:

- be very goal driven (in the extreme often at all costs);
- be competitive;
- need recognition and advancement;
- multi-task when under time pressure;

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- be keen to get things finished;
- be mentally and physically alert (above average).

NOTE There is continuing debate as to whether Type A personality people are more at risk from heart disease. But the potential anger and hostility aspect of this personality type does seem to be a factor.

Type B personalities tend to:

- be more relaxed;
- be more easy-going;
- socialise a lot;
- be less competitive;
- set realistic goals that don't overstretch them.

If you are not sure which personality type you are, the Science Museum has a short online fun quiz that allows you to find out. This can be found at: www.sciencemuseum.org.uk. Search on 'stress' from their search engine.

Help! I'm a Type A personality and I'm already stressed out about it

Not all characteristics of Type A people are bad. You will know yourself if you feel too driven or uptight. If you feel you are a Type A person you may feel stressed out, for example, if you can't achieve what you set out to do, or if you see coursework deadlines looming and you think you are going to be late. You may need to re-adjust your personal standards and become a little more relaxed, if you feel you are overdoing things. Some of your friends may hint at your behaviour and you may want to consider if you are being too 'driven'.

Think about yourself and develop your emotional intelligence. Are there ways you can tone down your Type A characteristics? Identify some of your characteristics you think you can work on. Also, check out the stress busting techniques to help you when you need them.

Why bother – I'm a Type B personality?

Not all the characteristics of extreme Type B personalities are good. You may find yourself too laid-back where nothing stresses you until things get out of hand. You need to submit work tomorrow and suddenly you have got to get into action and you may not have the time to give your best. But, if you are an extreme Type B this may not worry you either! However, try and balance your relaxed style and ensure you are keeping to the goals you have set.

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We need to get a balance

As with everything, we need a balance of drive and relaxation. Ideally you should be halfway between a Type A and Type B person. This way you can deal with unexpected deadlines and other stressors by calm planning. You feel in control and not stressed out.

So once you have become self-aware, emotionally literate and believe in yourself, how do you approach stressful events?

6 Proactive strategies for dealing with stress

Stress-busting techniques are one way of coping with stress (see Section 8), but they are just that, 'techniques', and they are good to have. However, a more fundamental way of dealing with stress is to be **proactive** in your management of it. Psychologists have identified two broad types of coping strategy:

- problem-focused strategy
- emotion-focused strategy.

Problem-focused strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Know your stressors.■ Analyse what stresses you about an event.■ Break down the various components of the situation into manageable chunks.■ Identify which part is the problem.■ Look at the options.■ Develop an action plan.■ Check your resources – do you need help?
Emotion-focused strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Know your stressors.■ Reflect on how you <i>feel</i> when confronted with this stressor.■ Resist your feeling to avoid thinking about this.■ Reflect on how you can start to change this emotion.■ Trust in others and discuss with a friend or counsellor.

Source: Coping strategies from Lazarus and Folkman (1984)

If you are already a proactive stress-buster, you may find you have a preference for one or other of the strategies above. Ideally, you should be using both strategies and they tap into your self-belief and your emotional intelligence. Activity 2.4 asks you to think about how you solve problems.

ACTIVITY 2.4 Problem solving as a way of dealing with stress

Now think of an example that is pertinent to you. How would you use this problem solving strategy?

1. Identify a stressful problem.
2. What makes it stressful?
3. How do I feel about it?
4. What can I do now to manage it?

<i>Checklist for proactive coping strategies</i>	
	Need to work on this ✓
Personal development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Self-belief (I am a ‘can do’ person) ■ Emotional intelligence (I know myself and trust others) 	
Personality type: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Type A (perfectionist, driven, high standards) ■ Type B (relaxed) 	
Strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Problem-focused (analyse, action plan) ■ Emotion-focused (realign emotions) 	

7 What makes studying stressful?

Learning can cause stress and your ability to handle some degree of stress will help you. You may well find you are in your comfort zone at the beginning of a course where you feel in control of your learning and you can predict what is going on. However, you may find that as the difficulty increases, you feel less in control of what you know and don't know and very soon fall outside your comfort zone. At this stage you are learning! It is important to recognise that you must go through this stage in order for your new knowledge to find its place and become your new comfort zone. It is important to fit into your new comfort zone, although for some students this takes until the exams before everything starts to fall into place. Look at the graph in Figure 2.1.¹ Where do you feel you are now? Are you happy to be outside your comfort zone while you learn?

¹ Thanks to Professor Mark Lutman from the University of Southampton who discussed these ideas. He feels that a good learner is one who can cope with being outside their comfort zone – as long as it is not for too long.

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Becoming a student can be seen as a 'rite of passage'. It is something you probably feel you want to do; it does mature you. You leave home, make a new home for yourself, make new friends and learn about something you are interested in. Or you may be returning to study a career you have always wanted, perhaps after raising your family. These are all exciting challenges and can give you such a buzz – **or** – completely stress you out. Which is it for you? Activity 2.5 asks you to identify stressors in academic life.

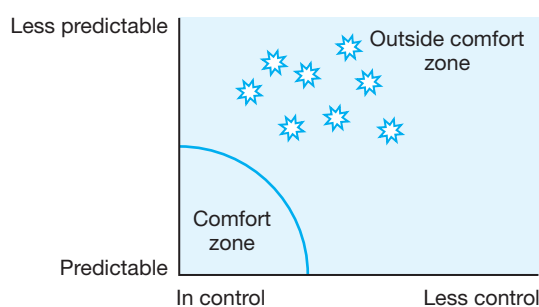


Figure 2.1 Are you in your comfort zone?

ACTIVITY 2.5 Stressors in academic life

Identify some of the stressors in academic life from this typical scenario. What do you think Sarah should do? Then identify academic stressors that particularly affect you.

Sarah was the first of her family to go on to further study and she was very excited at studying nursing. She made friends quickly through her studies and the clubs she joined. However, now in her third year, money, or lack of it, is an increasing worry. She has taken out several loans but has now decided to take a part-time job to make ends meet and has found herself a job in a local restaurant. She works two evenings a week on four-hour shifts finishing at midnight. She has also taken on another small job in the local supermarket working a busy afternoon shift. While her bank balance is now looking healthier, she feels that the late nights and the extra supermarket job are beginning to affect her work. Her studies are increasingly complex and she has several assignments to complete. As this is her third year she needs good grades to get the degree she wants. She is beginning to feel there are too many demands on her life and doesn't know how to cope, especially as she is about to go on placement for three months.

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	Academic stressors	Coping strategies
Sarah		
You		

Will I/Do I fit in?

When you leave home to study you leave behind something you have grown familiar with: your friends, your town, your boyfriend/girlfriend and your family. This familiar environment has helped make you and support you. Although you are excited by leaving all this behind, you may find that once you are away things do not feel as comfortable or safe as they did at home. You are basically homesick. Many of your fellow students will also be feeling the same and you know you have to make an effort to fit in, find new friends and belong. The best time to do this is right at the beginning of your studies when everyone is looking out for new friends. You may find that you don't mix with the right group in the first instance, but by the second semester you will be feeling confident enough to know who you'd like to be with and how to go about it. Being shy may make this process slower, but try and join clubs you are interested in and that should automatically link you with like-minded people.

I never seem to have enough money

The Student Experience Report 2006, carried out by MORI (Unite, 2006), with over a 1000 face-to-face interviews with undergraduate and post-graduate students, found that of those sampled, over half reported difficulties managing their finances and one-third had already asked their families to help them out in a crisis. Postgraduate and mature students, however, were least likely to turn to their families for financial support.

Finances are an increasing source of stress for students and finding part-time work is an obvious solution. The trend towards part-time work when in full-time education is growing. The Student Experience Report 2006 reported that four in ten of those interviewed had done part-time work during their studies, and this is set to increase. In a *Guardian Unlimited* article in 2002 it was reported that the National Union of Students in the UK estimated that approximately 42% of students worked part time, whereas the Trade Union Council's survey in 2000 claimed that 60% of students needed to work to meet basic living costs (Henessey, 2002). Although working gives you that added work experience and responsibility, too much can damage your studies. The Government recommends that you spend no more than 10 hours/week in part-time employment. There are some programmes such as Nursing and Midwifery where part-time

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working is not really encouraged. It is likely that you are receiving a bursary from the NHS – this is designed to enable you to be a full-time student. Students often forget that they are classed as full-time, because they are not in lectures every day but this is the nature of Higher Education. Remember that any outside work commitments you sign up to will also have to be combined with clinical practice placements. Not only will you be working 37.5 hours per week, covering different shifts, whilst on placement but you might have to travel some distance to get to and from your placement at each end of the day. If you must find paid work, choose something that is flexible and can be left off when other demands on you are high.

Lack of money is the route cause of other stressors, e.g. poor accommodation, cheap food and lack of course materials. So getting your finances right is crucial (see Activity 2.6).

ACTIVITY 2.6 Budgeting

Budgeting is something we have to do all our lives. However, if finance is a particular stressor for you then you must get to grips with budgeting. This is rarely anyone's favourite activity, but to prevent debts building up you need to know what comes in and what goes out and work within that budget as much as you can.

How do your finances look? Work on a weekly or monthly basis, whichever suits you best.

	Amount incoming weekly/monthly	Amount outgoing weekly/monthly
INCOME:		
Bursary or loan		
Part-time work		
Family		
Savings		
Other		
ACCOMMODATION:		
Rent or Mortgage		
Electricity		
Gas		
Water		
Telephone		
Council tax		
Other		

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	Amount incoming weekly/monthly	Amount outgoing weekly/monthly
STUDIES:		
Travel to placement		
Stationery		
Project costs		
Other		
LIVING COSTS:		
Food		
Eating out (evening and day)		
Toiletries		
Mobile phone		
Travel: car		
Travel: bus fares – daily		
Travel: long-distance trips (home?)		
Clothes		
Other (dentist, doctor, prescription, etc.)		
SOCIAL LIFE:		
The pub		
Cinema, clubs		
Sporting activities		
Other		
TOTAL		

Do the incoming and outgoing columns balance?

What should you do if you find yourself in need of financial support? Your institution will have a student support centre where you can find out information on the student hardship fund that they operate. They may have other schemes to help you budget more effectively. These are people in your institution whose job it is to help you; you should be proactive and seek them out.

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I don't know what my tutors expect of me

A problem for first-year students is that move into Higher Education. You may have come from an 'A' level course in the UK, be an international student or a mature student returning to full-time education.

Always check your programme and course documentation (see Chapter 1, 'Learning in Higher Education') as this describes the aims of your courses and the learning outcomes. Always make sure you know exactly what is needed in an assignment, never assume. Remember you will be expected to develop an independent style of learning (see Chapter 1, 'Learning in Higher Education'). If you are in doubt regarding what is expected either ask your tutor or a student in the second or third year.

If you have a study buddy or peer mentoring scheme in your institution, take full advantage of it. If not, you may want to ask if one can be set up. See the Peer Assisted Learning website at Bournemouth University, in the UK.

I just can't learn everything I am expected to

The academic load and demands of coursework are another area that has been identified as a cause of stress. You may find that your assignments are bunched towards the end of the semester and you struggle to hand in on the deadlines.

Assignment deadline bunching is a problem. But, if you are given the task way ahead of time, you will be expected to time manage all your assignments (see Chapter 3, 'Managing your time'). Plan when you can fit each assignment in given the amount of knowledge you know at the time. Sometimes you may have to get started before you have had the lecture or seminar. You can make an outline plan and fit in as much as you can as you go along.

Academic load in terms of sheer quantity of what you are expected to learn will mean that you need to develop some effective academic skills. The chapters in this book are designed to do just that. Actively take what you need from each chapter and **act on it** and this will start to reduce your stress as you begin to feel in control. Activity 2.7 asks you to identify your stressful events.

The complexity of the material you have to learn will also increase with the years and this has been shown to be another stressor. Don't suffer in silence over something you are struggling with. Ask your tutor, or others, who may be helping on the course. Don't forget you can ask your friends or student mentors, if you have this set up in your programme.

In Chapter 1, 'Learning in Higher Education', we discussed the characteristics of a novice and an expert; you may want to check this out again later.

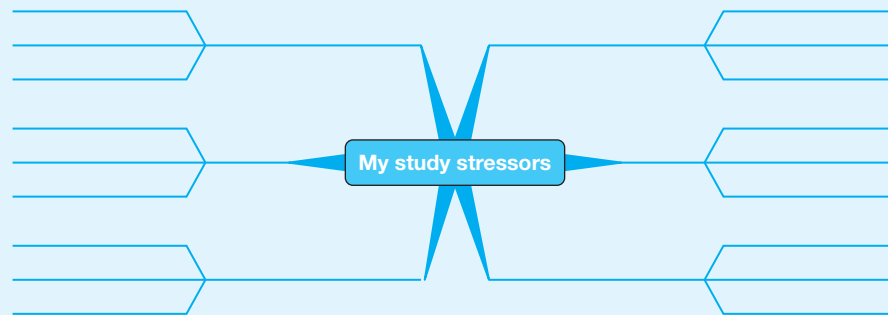
ACTIVITY 2.7 Identifying your stressful events

Which of the following, if any, do you find stressful:

- not understanding what is expected;
- bunched assignment deadlines;
- the sheer quantity of work to get through;
- complexity of the work;
- writing assignments whilst on placement;
- starting a new clinical placement.

How can you be proactive in managing these potential stressors for you?

Complete the concept map below with the different types of study stressors and list ways of dealing with them. Place each study stressor on the first branch and the ways of dealing with it on the lower branches.



See the feedback section for a map of the result of stress on study.

Dropping out: a response to stress?

Dropping out from your studies can be a response to stress, but not necessarily. If you feel that you really have chosen the wrong subject, the wrong place to study and you now know exactly what you want to do and it is not studying, then leave. You will become even more stressed if you stay and will only be staying because you want to 'save face' or not offend someone. According to a BBC article (BBC News, 2004) one in seven students in the UK drop out. However, this varies greatly across institutions. Learning how to keep stress under control and not letting it ruin your life is vital.

If you want to leave because you feel you can't cope or you are generally unhappy, **think again**. With the help of your personal tutor, a student adviser, a friend, or a religious leader, discuss why you are unhappy and what your options really are. You will find there are various options and one could be just right for you, enabling you to go on and graduate. **Don't let wanting to leave be a flight reaction to stress.**

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Who gets more stressed out?

As we should know by now, being stressed out varies between individuals. However, some groups of students are more likely to feel the pressures than others. Stressors can be external or internal. External stressors refer to things outside of us that we have to deal with, e.g. exams, coursework, finances, etc. Internal stress refers to our own personality characteristics, or if we are dealing with some incapacity or illness. So, all stress is an interplay between what we bring to the event and the event itself. The imbalance between internal and external stressors can affect our psychological and physiological well-being and cause stress (Lazarus and Cohen, 1977).

Since external factors play a role in stress, certain students may find themselves under additional pressures.

Are you a mature student?

This refers to any student coming back to study after some time out of education. You may find that you are unsure about how you will:

- fit in with youngsters;
- be able to cope academically;
- be able to juggle home life and study;
- be able to cope financially.

Are you an international student?

As an international student you also have additional things that add pressure. You will have to deal with:

- setting up home in another country;
- being homesick;
- understanding the cultural differences (socially and academically);
- working in a language that is not your native language;
- facing, possibly, racist comments. Do report this if within the university.

External pressures are discussed in Activity 2.8.

NOTE You are probably a happy and well-adjusted student even though you may have these added pressures. Please don't feel you have to be stressed out. If you are coping well, you may want to be alert to students in a similar situation to you who are not coping well and you may be able to give them some support (develop your emotional intelligence).

ACTIVITY 2.8 My external pressures

	Applies to me	Do I need to do anything?
Just returning to full-time education after many years and wonder how I will cope.		
I'm homesick (or may become).		
My English is not good enough.		
I'm not giving enough time to my family.		
I miss my friends back home.		
Can I cope?		

List more pressures that apply to you and check if you think you need to do something about them to keep them in check. What personality type are you – could this influence your reaction to stress? Are you proactive and use problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies (see Sections 4, 5 and 6 above)?

8 Stress-busting techniques: a maintenance strategy

In addition to the personal development and proactive strategies above, we can develop a maintenance programme that enables us to cope with on-going stress that hits us once in a while. Some basic techniques are:

- **Exercise.** This will help the physiological aspect of stress and the release of endorphins will give you a feeling of euphoria as well as help your heart. It is also ideal for getting rid of anger and frustrations. If you want to choose only one stress-busting technique, then choose this one.
- **Relax.** When you are feeling stressed out it is difficult to unwind. You may find you have to make a big effort to do this. It may be better to go to classes such as yoga or tai-chi. Exercising also helps you to relax. If you want to develop your own relaxation techniques then try deep breathing or meditation. Go out with friends and have a good laugh.

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- **Eat well.** Avoid junk food and too much alcohol – both of these can sap your energy and make you feel low.
- **Talk.** Open up to friends and family. They will feel honoured that you trust them enough to discuss your problems. Talking allows you to see things in perspective and get another view.
- **Stress diary.** By keeping a diary you start to articulate what your feelings are and what stresses you out. Once you do this you become conscious and self-aware, which is where you must start in order to cope. You can couple this with talking to your friends.
- **Focus.** When we are stressed we start to feel overwhelmed. Go back and look at the strategies for developing self-belief above and focus on each part of your plan.
- **Get support from others.** There are some problems you can't and shouldn't face on your own. Don't try and be superman or superwoman. Most Higher Education institutions are caring and will have support in place for you. You should make yourself familiar with what is available, for example: student services, students' union, religious chaplains, counselling services, medical services, your personal tutor and, of course, your friends and family.

Exams – the special case

During revision:

- plan a realistic revision timetable – this will help you stay on top of things;
- summarise your notes, make key points, highlight important information and use concept maps for quick overviews;
- take breaks so you can stay alert.

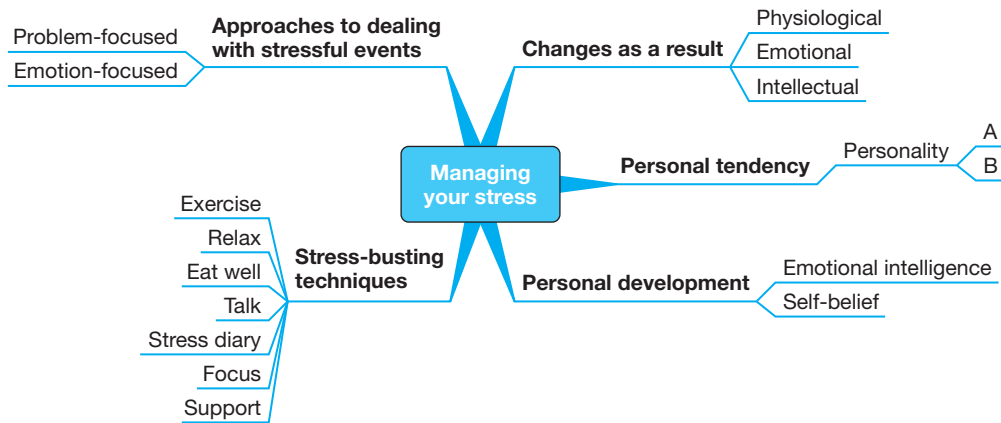
During the exam:

- 'feel' calm – breathe slowly and deeply;
- feel in control;
- read the instructions carefully (very often students don't do this);
- read the questions calmly – underlining key aspects;
- mark the questions you want to do first;
- allocate time for each question;
- allow time to check your work.

9 On reflection

Stress management, as you have seen, is much more than learning a few techniques; it is life changing. It cannot guarantee you a stress-free life, and would you want one? But, it will enable you to manage it and keep the health-threatening aspects of stress under control.

Summary of this chapter



Now reflect on your current abilities to work through a stress-management plan and consider what you need to do to improve. You may want to transfer this information to your own institution’s personal development planner scheme.

ACTIVITY 2.9 Update your personal development planner

Having read this chapter, gauge your confidence again – how does this compare to your confidence levels at the start of the chapter? What can you do to improve? You can incorporate this in to your own personal development planner and of course add anything else that you feel is appropriate.

Grade your confidence on a scale of 1–5 where 1 = poor and 5 = good.

My stress management plan	Confidence level 1–5	Plans to improve
Recognise how I react to stress. <i>Section 3</i>		
Check my self-belief. <i>Section 4</i>		
Improve my emotional intelligence. <i>Section 4</i>		
Recognise my personal tendency to being stressed (personality Types A, B). <i>Section 5</i>		

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My stress management plan	Confidence level 1–5	Plans to improve
Identify proactive strategies in dealing with stress that suit me best. <i>Section 6</i>		
Identify what stresses me. <i>Section 7</i>		
Identify and use the best stress-busting techniques for me. <i>Section 8</i>		

Date: _____

Getting extra help

- Talk to your university counsellor. He or she will be able to give advice on how best to deal with the common problems associated with the stresses of studying.
- Ask friends how they cope with stress – not only will you discover that it's more common than you think, but also they may have some useful stress-busting tips for you.

Consult a few interesting websites:

- **Student Mental Stress: Dstress**. This site is produced by Loughborough University and is full of useful information. It is a good interactive site. See: www.d-stress.org.uk [last accessed November 2008].
- **Mind: How to Cope with the Stress of Student Life**. They have a guide and a series of tips for getting help if you need it. Search on 'student stress' using their search engine: www.mind.org.uk [last accessed November 2008].
- **Channel 4, 4Health**, Student Stress, Wendy Moore. Search on 'stress' using their search engine. 'Most students will feel the effects of stress at some point in their studies and a small number of students may feel stressed or depressed for a lot of the time.' See: www.channel4.com/health [last accessed November 2008].

Feedback on activities

ACTIVITY 2.1 Identifying signs of stress

	Signs of stress	What he/she might be feeling	What he/she should do
Carlos	Becoming withdrawn Not eating properly On edge/irritable	Emotional. This can be weepy, or aggressive. Emotional exhaustion	Notice that things aren't right and something needs to be done before you get too behind with your studies. Talk to someone you trust – friend, tutor or counsellor. Make sure this doesn't go on for too long.
Lucy	Heavy drinking Not sleeping well Disinterested, forgetful	Feeling unwell and possibly depressed from too much alcohol and not enough sleep. Mental exhaustion.	Be alert to a change in behaviour that is unhelpful. Identify the first thing that needs to be done, i.e. stop drinking. Seek help from a friend or counsellor to prevent serious alcohol damage.

NOTE In these case studies the key to moving on is being alert to your own stress patterns and recognising when they are becoming overwhelming. Seek help and allow your friends to help you. As a friend, you may have to help someone who is trying to push you away. Be patient and try not to abandon him or her during this difficult phase of your friendship.

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ACTIVITY 2.2 Recognising your own symptoms of stress

Here are some symptoms of stress. Check the ones that you have identified. You may recognise more symptoms that you didn't realise indicated stress.

How do you feel? (including physical and emotional characteristics)	How do you act and behave?
Feeling overwhelmed	You are disorganised and forgetful. You are over-cautious and have difficulty making decisions. You panic. You have lost your confidence. You can't concentrate on your work. Mental exhaustion.
Feeling tired and exhausted	You have no or little interest in things. You don't sleep well. You cry about things easily.
Feeling anxious and nervous	You are moody, irritable, aggressive and get angry easily. You may resort to recreational drugs to alleviate symptoms.
Feeling very emotional and tearful	You react emotionally and are often near to tears ... emotional exhaustion.
Feeling sick/tight feeling in stomach/not hungry	You have diarrhoea and/or lose interest in food.
Heart is pounding	You perspire more than usual.
Feeling homesick	You withdraw from your friends.
Being anti-social	You want to be on your own. People irritate you and you get short tempered.
Feeling depressed	Everything becomes too much and you have little interest in doing anything.

NOTE If your list was rather short, you might now recognise some of the symptoms you have. Add them to your list in this activity. Being aware of our stress symptoms is very important, as we saw in Activity 2.1.

ACTIVITY 2.3 Is it all down to fate?

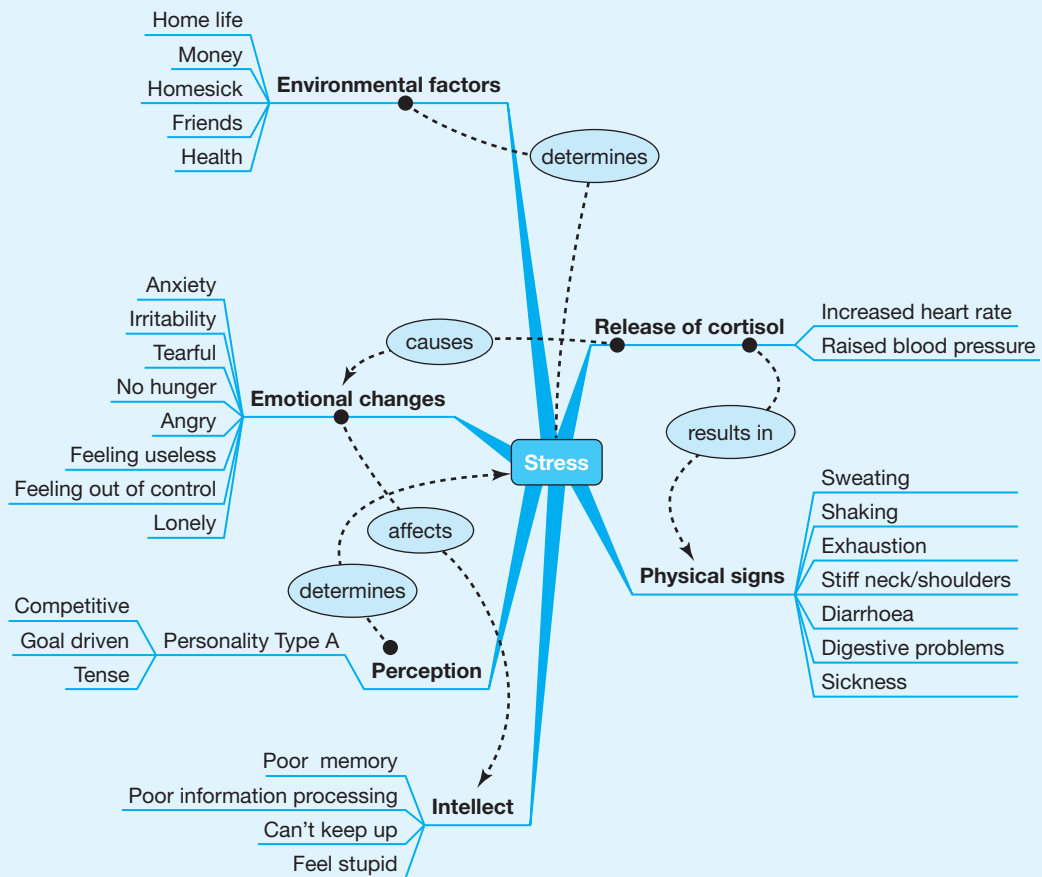
	Comments
When things go wrong for me, it is just bad luck.	This means that you feel your behaviour doesn't contribute, or contribute much to things that go wrong for you. You are placing the blame on something external – 'bad luck'.
It doesn't matter how well I plan, what's going to be, will be.	You feel you have no control as your whole life is already mapped out for you.
Friendships are a result of chemistry – they work or they don't.	Chemistry is definitely part of friendship, but not everything. If you don't work at finding and keeping friends, you will be on your own. Social well-being is very important in controlling stress.
Some people have all the luck.	See the first statement above. In this case you assume other people's successes are a result of 'good luck' rather than their efforts.
When things go wrong, I can usually find out who is to blame.	See the first statement above.

Statements of self-belief

I can influence what happens to me.
If I make specific short-term plans I know I will be able to keep to them.
I know friends are attracted to each other, but I can still influence how well I integrate with my friends. I have the inter-personal and emotional intelligence to do that.
When things go wrong, I work out why and sort it out so that it doesn't happen again.

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ACTIVITY 2.7 Identifying your stressful events



Map of study stressors – summary chart

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