



UAF news and information

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— By Anupma Prakash, provost and executive vice chancellor

This week (Nov. 4–8) is International Stress Awareness Week. As I reflected on the semester so far, messages about stress awareness popped up on my news feed and I paused to think about how stress impacts our lives. Over the past few weeks, I noticed an uptick in the number of students and colleagues talking about how they felt stressed, or burned out, or simply that their energy level was low. Submitting assignments, grading papers, meeting proposal deadlines, attending to student needs, keeping the campus safe, mentoring students, balancing professional and personal needs, the pressure of a never-ending to-do list, and the feeling of insufficient progress were just a few of the reasons I heard. The lengthening darkness of Interior Alaska, this particular phase of the academic cycle, and for some, the approaching festive season likely brought on or heightened this stress-induced fatigue. However, it is an unavoidable fact that we will all experience stress to different degrees, at different times, and with different frequencies throughout our lives.

In my leadership role, I often feel the stress from both external and internal factors. I have little to no influence on short-term and external stressors such as disease outbreaks, weather conditions, power outages, political unrest, budget allocations, and flight disruptions. Yet all these factors influence the day-to-day operations of the university and have a direct or indirect impact on every student and employee. Then there are institutional swirls and management challenges which, if not effectively addressed, magnify and add to the stress. Finally, there are internal reactions and triggers to these stressors, which, if not recognized and worked on, can make us unhappy and our environment unnecessarily chaotic. I have been putting in a deliberate effort to recognize and acknowledge the external and internal stressors and to de-escalate how my mind and body reacts and copes with them.

If you search the internet for stress management resources, you will find hundreds of articles and ideas on how to reduce or manage stress for yourself or your employees. Not everything you will read will resonate with you, so take any piece of advice from these sources that works for you and ignore the rest. Many of those suggestions (e.g., walk your dog; take a long run; take a long vacation) don't work for me. I do not have a dog and I certainly do not like running. If I go on a vacation amidst upcoming deadlines, I keep thinking of work that may be mounting up instead of relaxing. Instead, I manage my stress by cooking or dancing with my family to our favorite Bollywood tunes.

I come from a family that is very hard-working, deeply values a strong work ethic, and is driven and ambitious. My parents and extended family encouraged me to dream big, take risks, and pursue my dreams with gusto. And so I did, succeeding against all odds. This upbringing is so hard-wired into my personality that even today, big visionary goals motivate and drive me. It is only recently, through focused coaching and training, that I learned to recognize my blind spots. My biggest blind spot was that I was too harsh on myself and was not giving myself due credit for my accomplishments. In a recent exercise, where I recounted my daily tasks and my contributions over the last three years, I realized there was so much to be proud of. And instead of taking the time to celebrate the accomplishments, I was judging myself harshly for not completing the tasks that remained on my to-do list. I was worrying about the future without celebrating the present. Celebrating success is an energy booster that fuels further work, and I was missing out on the much-needed booster.

A lesson I have learned in my leadership journey is that we bear the burden of our strengths and we have to use those same strengths to combat the burden. If you ever feel like you are not doing enough, pause and recount the things you have already done. Be kind to yourself and give yourself credit for all that you have accomplished. Reflect on and celebrate the smaller victories, as they are important milestones in your individual journey to achieve your larger personal and professional goals; and remember that sometimes keeping the ship afloat is just as important as getting the ship to shore.



Photo courtesy of Julie Fry
Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor Anupma Prakash takes a photo break while cooking.