

Lifestyle Redesign®

Brought to you by the

USC Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice

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Stress and Your Body

Stress and anxiety can impact a person's health and quality of life. By understanding how stress and anxiety affect you, as well as your stressors and healthy coping strategies, you can learn to manage your stress in a health-promoting way.

What is stress?

- A normal physiological response to a demand
- The “stress response” is the activation of the sympathetic nervous system

What does stress do to the body?

- The stress response is also known as the “Fight or Flight” reaction in response to a stimulus
 - Hormone release causes
 - Increased heart rate
 - Increased blood pressure
 - Increased breathing rate
 - Increased muscle tension
 - The release of cortisol, a stress hormone, can lead to headaches
 - Stress can lead to mood changes (depression, anxiety)
 - Pain or fear of pain is an indication that something is wrong, and can activate the stress response

What causes stress?

- Stress can be caused by both positive and negative experiences
 - Eustress= positive stress that benefits your health (ex: positive challenges such as playing a sport or completing a challenging assignment)
 - Distress= stress that negatively impacts your health (ex: anxiety about a test)
- The stress response can be good or bad—it can help meet challenges, but when unchecked over time, it can have negative effects on the body and mind

Can you identify sources of eustress and distress currently in your life?

Eustress: <ul style="list-style-type: none">•	Distress: <ul style="list-style-type: none">•
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Functioning at an Optimal Level of Stress:

Everyone functions best at their optimal level of stress. When stress is too low, a person may feel unmotivated and performance levels can be low. If stress is too high, a person may feel overwhelmed, anxious or unhappy which can also result in poor performance. However, each person has their own “just right” stress level which results in optimal performance. Therefore, it is important that each individual identify their own optimal level of stress and learn how to manage stress effectively.

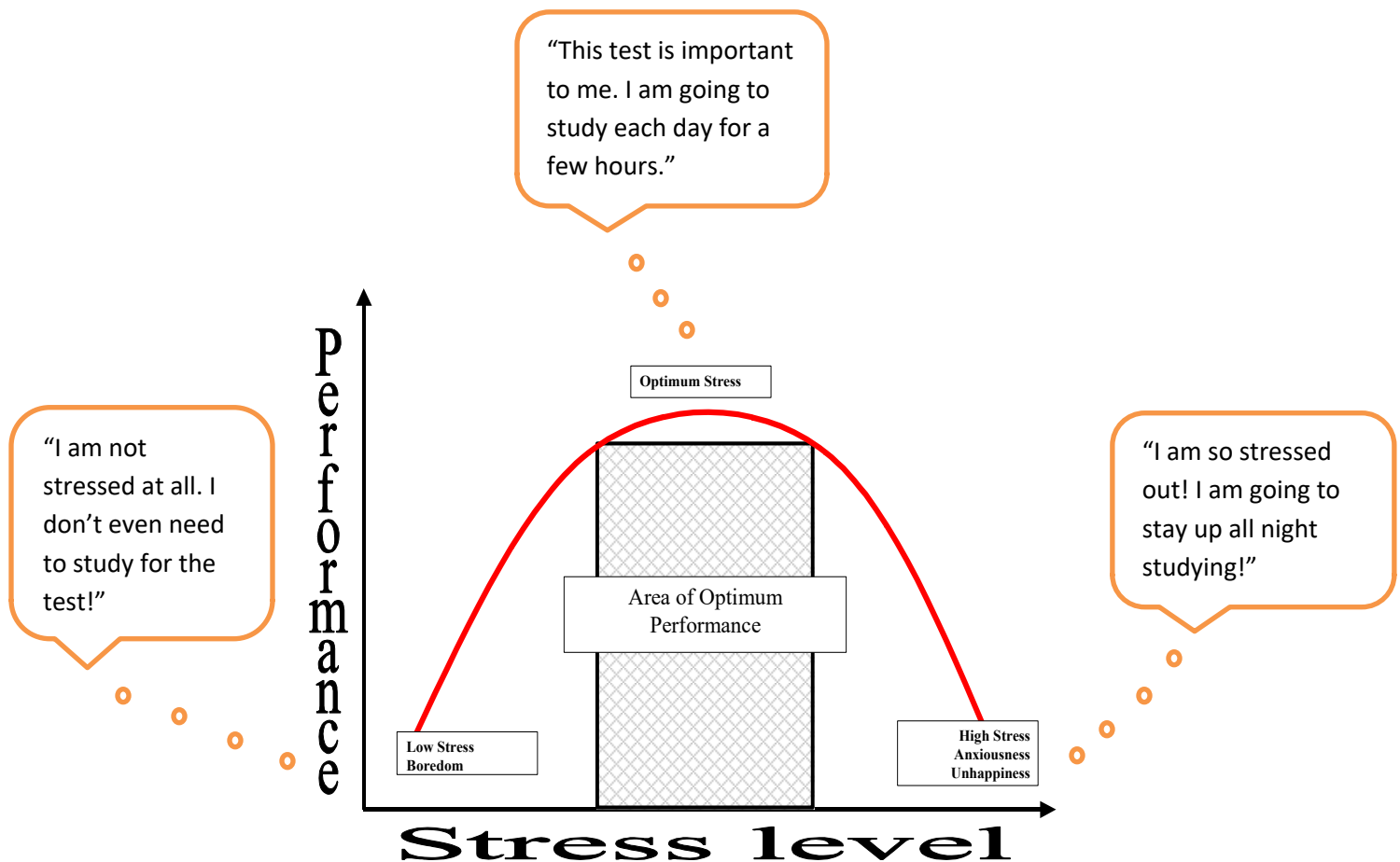


Figure 1.: The relationship between stress and performance

Stress Signals: What does stress feel like for you?

When we become stressed or overwhelmed, we may not be aware of the many signs and symptoms we experience. By identifying stress signals early, you can reduce or eliminate stress before it builds up and becomes unmanageable. Mark which stress signals are common for you:

Feelings Agitation Anger Anxiousness Depression Fear Frustration Guilt Helplessness Hopelessness Hypersensitivity Impatience Irritability Lack of confidence Moodiness Nervousness Restlessness Tension Worry Urge to laugh or cry at inappropriate times	Behaviors Accident prone Avoidance Change in social habits Change in eating patterns or appetite Increased drug or alcohol use Impulsive behavior Procrastination Sighing Difficulty sleeping Academic problems Crying Jaw clenching/teeth grinding Nail biting Neglecting responsibilities Excessive shopping Pacing Loss of intimacy
Thoughts Self-criticism Fear of failure Poor judgment Desire to escape or run away Forgetfulness Confusion Indecisiveness Preoccupation with the future Repetitive thoughts Racing thoughts Difficulty concentrating Negative thinking Impaired memory and focus	Biological Tight muscles Back pain Neck pain Fatigue Trembling Cold or sweaty hands Rapid breathing Dry mouth Headaches Blurred vision Upset stomach/ stomach pain Bloating Pounding heart Tightness in chest Dizziness Shortness of breath

Managing Stress Effectively:

- Identify the *stressors*
- Identify the *symptoms* to be able to catch yourself in a stress response
- Think about *control* – what can you control, and what can't you control in this situation?
A lot of stress comes from thinking about things which we can't control.

Identifying Common Stressors:

Students often experience stress related to school and changes in lifestyle demands. When we are aware of which environments and activities cause us stress, as well as what types of symptoms we experience when we are stressed, there is a greater likelihood that we will engage in stress management techniques and incorporate them into our routines.

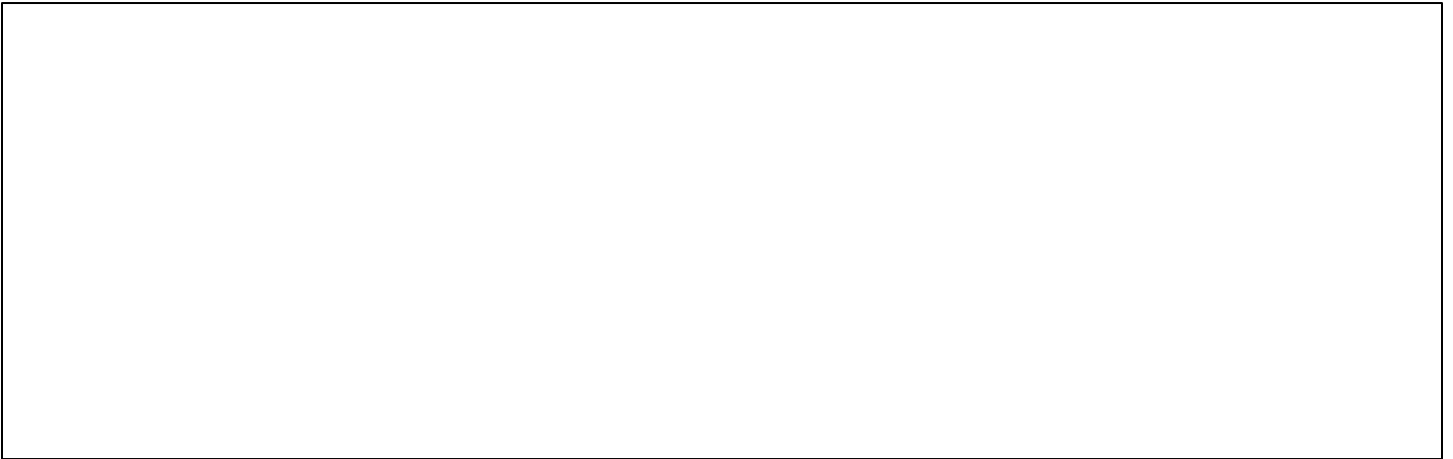
- ***Social stressors*** - strong feelings about interactions with other people. For example, you can feel stressed about attending a large group event or party.
- ***School stressors*** - pressures or tensions related to role as a student. For example, you can feel stressed when a test is coming or homework assignments are difficult.
- ***Mental stressors*** - fears and anxieties, and can include such things as worrying about taking an exam, or dealing with problems with friends.
- ***Physical stressors*** - strains on our bodies from headaches, muscular pain, or lack of sleep
- ***Environmental stressors*** - aspects of our surroundings like noisy spaces or restaurants, or sudden weather changes.

What are some things that are currently causing you stress or anxiety?

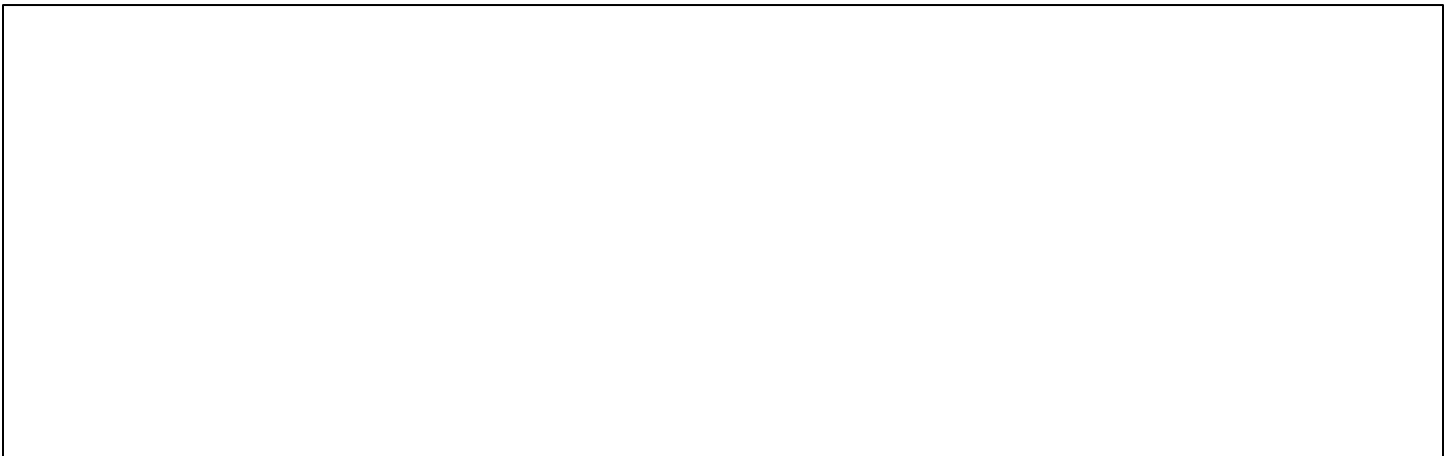
How can I counteract the stress response?

- The body's parasympathetic nervous system counterbalances the fight or flight response
- This system is also known as "Rest and Digest"
- Its effects include:
 - Decreased heart rate
 - Decreased blood pressure
 - Decreased breathing rate
 - Decreased muscle tension

Things you can do before a stressful event/situation:



Things you can during a stressful event/situation:



Things you can do after a stressful event/situation:

Stress-busters



- **Take deep breaths**
- **Hold a fidget (spinners, textured pens, dice)**
- **Squeeze something (stress ball, PlayDough)**
- **Take a walk or do some light exercise**
- **Stretch or do yoga**
- **Play a sport (throw or hit a ball around)**
- **Draw or color**
- **Listen to music or watch a video**

- **Talk to someone you trust**
- **Write in a journal**
- **Read a magazine or book**
- **Give yourself some alone time**
- **Do something you enjoy or feel successful doing**