

# How Has my First Year of University Changed the Way I Deal with Stress?

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## I. “Sticking to the Plan”

Throughout high school, when my academic life became busier, I started using an agenda for the first time. I would write down a to-do list of assignments and their deadlines, set reminders on my phones regarding those deadlines, and form a plan regarding the tasks I have to complete for the day. Spending a couple of minutes everyday after school to form a plan has *encouraged* me to consistently meet assignment deadlines and complete homework on time, *allowing* me to do well in school.

The plans I created were a central actor in my network because they *allowed* me to stay organized and succeed in my academic life, and eventually became locked in as a daily habit. However, there are times when the plans I create for myself *refuse* flexibility. Occasionally, the stress and burnout I experience from schoolwork *discourages* me from sticking to the plan. During these times, I would much rather rollerblade with my sister and go on bike rides and picnics with my family. But, my plan *refuses* this option. However, talking with my parents *encourages* motivation to study because they tell me that stress is temporary — I won’t be in school forever, and the perseverance I invest in now will pay off in the future. This mindset allows me to *punctualize* my stress to overcome this *resistance*, because I want to continue using this system to do well in school. It has *power* over me because I depend on it to ensure that my academic life is organized. When I started university, I decided to have this system remain as a *stable* actor in my network.

## II. The Impact of Stress

During the beginning of my first year as an engineering student, I experienced a tremendous increase in stress from the significant workload. The more frequent assignments and evaluations, and time spent on extracurricular experiences and job-searching, *refused* my free time for mental breaks, replacing them with more time spent on stressing about school. The stress created a greater *resistance* towards my planning habits because it was affecting me physically.

I have been living with a neurological disorder for several years that my family doctor was never able to diagnose. However, as the symptoms barely bothered me, I only regarded it as a minor annoyance and did not care much of it. Within the second week of first-year university, my symptoms immediately worsened. Overtime, I was frequently unable to study due to nerve-related pain, leading to missed school days and late assignments, and resulting in grades I was unhappy with. My disorder caused me to deviate from my carefully-organized daily plans. Ever since it started negatively affecting me, it has introduced a large group of new actors into my network.

When I returned to my family doctor, he referred me to a neurologist, who also couldn’t diagnose me and *demand*ed an ultrasound for me. When the ultrasound showed up to be normal, I was *request*ed to have a CT scan, and an MRI as well. No medical-imaging technology detected a nerve problem, and without a

diagnosis, it *refused* my possibility of receiving treatment. I feared that I would never get diagnosed and would have to deal with my disorder forever.

When I talked with my parents, they helped me *refuse* this fear from overpowering my mind, and *encouraged* me to develop an open mindset by redirecting my focus on the main problem. For all this time, I obsessed over diagnosing my disorder because if I get cured, my migraines and spasms would disappear and I can focus on studying much better. However, the root cause of the worsening symptoms is most likely stress, because after so many years, it only truly affected me when university started. So, instead of focusing on how to get rid of those symptoms, I should focus on minimizing my stress. Instead of waiting for my next referral appointment, which always takes several months, I now gained the *awareness* of finding ways to deal with stress.

### **III. The Power of De-Stressing**

About halfway through first-year, I started engaging in de-stressing activities, my favourite being playing the violin and journaling. Within a few weeks, my symptoms significantly weakened, which reversed several effects that they initially had on my physical and mental health. Less migraines and muscle spasms *allowed* me to gain motivation to study, *encouraging* me to continue pursuing my engineering degree. The idea of de-stressing now has more *power* over me than stress itself, because I now understand that in order for me to function, I have to engage in activities that help minimize the effects of stress. This power led my system of “de-stressing” to maintain as a *stable* part of my network because it *connected* me back to my “planning system,” as the weakening of my symptoms allowed me to stick to my daily plans and do well in school.

My engagement in de-stressing activities *encouraged* more time for activities outside of school. Even though I am no longer a music student, I occasionally visit my violin teacher to talk over a cup of coffee and play violin together for fun. Because I love writing, I have extended my time spent on journal writing into writing for competitions and publication opportunities. The self-fulfillment I gain from these activities reduce my stress levels and *allow* me to perform better in school.

During every school year, I used to not allow myself to engage in hobbies because I thought there was never enough time to do anything other than schoolwork. But now I am allotting time in my plan to do these things unrelated to school because they ironically give me “more time” to focus on school. This was a revelation for me because I no longer view the need to “de-stress” as a *resistance* to my “planning system” to complete school tasks on time. Instead, I view the inclusion of this actor into my network as a positive *translation* because the actors that came along with it improved my mental and physical health, *allowing* me to connect back to my original study habit system. It has evolved into an *ordering* because the de-stressing activities frequently *allowed* me to stick with my study habit system. This is why I have decided to carry on this system into my second year of university, and so far, I am happy to have it in my network.

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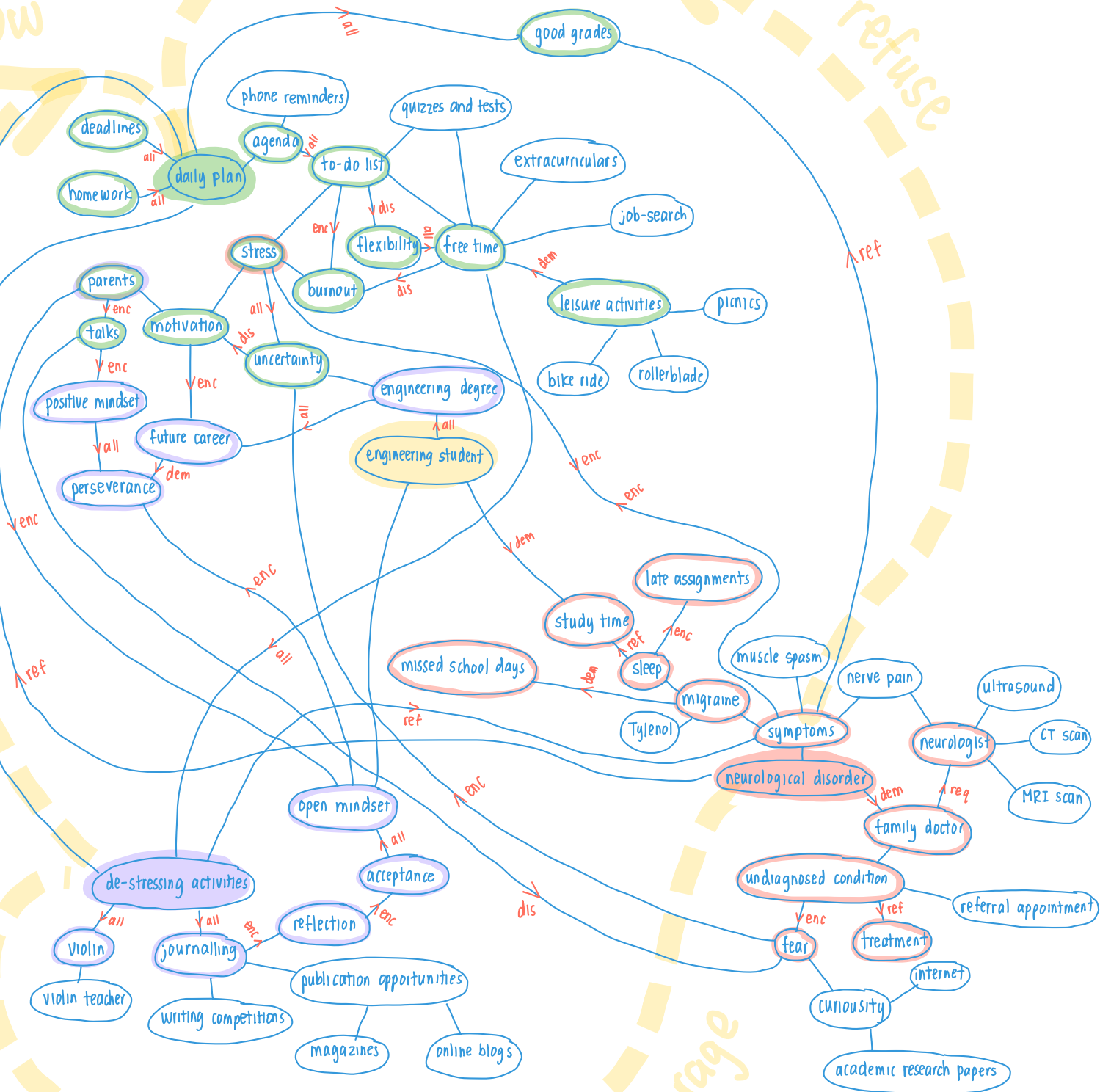
## LEGEND

req — request  
dem — demand  
enc — encourage  
dis — discourage  
ref — refuse  
all — allow

Pt. I

allow

refuse



request / encourage

Pt. III

Pt. II