The Nature of Stress

Stress is a reaction to change; it can be either positive or negative, and it affects both the body and the mind. Normally, stress stimulates the release of hormones such as adrenaline, quickening the heart rate, accelerating the metabolism, and generally preparing the body for emergency action—whether or not the opportunity for action exists. Stress can destroy a promising academic session, not only killing the joy of learning but seriously affecting a student's general health and scholarly performance. Recognizing the sources and the effects of stress as early as possible is crucial to coping with it.

1. Types of Stress

The body does not distinguish between negative and positive stress: both excitement and anxiety strain the body's resources and depress the immune system. Stress varies in intensity and duration. Acute stress, intense stress that lasts a short period of time, can rapidly exhaust you, even to the point of triggering anxiety attacks or states of shock. Chronic stress, stress that extends over time, is a subtle condition. You may become accustomed to some level of continual tension, but this stress will nevertheless damage you. Chronic stress is often ignored until obvious physical symptoms appear.

2. Causes and Symptoms

Common sources of stress ("stressors") include examinations, bereavements, parental expectations, homesickness, conflicts with intimate partners, and thoughts of the future. Even moderate stress can cause behavioural changes:

- loss of spontaneity, happiness, or enthusiasm;
- irritability and anger;
- restlessness and difficulty in concentrating or speaking;
- inability to make decisions;
- increase in alcohol/drug consumption (including prescription drugs);
- loss of efficiency;
- obsessive "replaying" of events, particularly negative ones;
- nightmares and disturbing dreams;
- withdrawal from friends and social situations.

Depression and lethargy, or violent swings between lethargy and anxious energy, may indicate chronic stress. One withdrawal pattern often exhibited by students under stress includes sleeping late and skipping classes, and then engaging in compulsive activity until well after midnight. Such behaviour creates a destructive cycle which feeds itself and eventually consumes the student.
Early physical signs of stress can include frequent illness, slow recovery from disease, hypersensitivity to irritants such as pollen, and persistent rashes or headaches. These conditions may develop too gradually to be noticed. More serious symptoms can develop:

- sweaty palms or heavy general sweating,
- insomnia,
- changes in appetite and weight,
- breathlessness,
- dizziness or fainting spells,
- a racing pulse or heart palpitations,
- overwhelming anxiety, panic attacks,
- persistent back and neck pain,
- chronic fatigue.

If the symptoms you experience are new and have no obvious cause, you should seek medical attention immediately. At the very least, you might wish to check some of the detailed files at the US National Institute of Mental Health Web site.

3. Stress and Stimulants

Some substances are mistakenly considered harmless stimulants although they often significantly increase stress. Paradoxically, many of these are a staple of social occasions through which stress is dissipated--until recently, at least, sugar doughnuts, coffee, and cigarettes were a popular combination of refreshments at student events!

**Caffeine** can be damaging in large quantities (it genuinely does seem to stimulate mental acuity in more reasonable doses). It stimulates your system for up to 24 hours, and some recent studies suggest that it actually **reduces** concentration and **increases** response time when used to excess. Excessive coffee drinking causes headaches, sleeplessness, and indigestion. Caffeine dependency can be physically disturbing; withdrawal symptoms include nervousness, irritability, and rapid heartbeat.

**Sugar** is harmless in reasonable quantities, but eating foods rich in sugar tends to be habit-forming because such snacks are convenient (sugar is an effective preservative) as well as tasty. Sugar provides a quick burst of energy, but this is followed by sluggishness, as it depresses your system. If sugary foods displace more nutritious ones in your diet, you will become deficient in valuable vitamins and minerals. You may also gain weight rapidly, and sudden weight gain is an additional stressor.

**Cigarettes** heighten your stress level through chemical stimulation; they may also rob your body of vital substances such as Vitamin C. Their cost in money and risk (notably of cancer) also causes stress. Studies suggest smoking can impair short-term visual memory--a special concern for students. Finally, smoking may isolate you: it is increasingly a socially unacceptable practice. Although quitting smoking can be stressful, its long-term benefits outweigh the temporary anxiety. With the best of intentions, anti-smoking groups have exaggerated the addictive nature of cigarettes: most people can quit without major physical withdrawal symptoms and without using expensive aids such as nicotine patches or hypnotism sessions. Quitting does involve abandoning a source of pleasure, but if stress is already a problem, recognize the pleasure trap--and quit.
Drugs and alcohol increase stress. Although these substances are clearly toxic, their effect on mood is so striking that the damage they do is easy to overlook. Most are strongly habit-forming; all of them absorb your energies and blunt your intelligence, while giving you the impression that they produce the opposite effect. Although prescription drugs such as tranquillizers may temporarily reduce stress, their benefits are short-lived and their side-effects can be drastic. Because of the dangers of long-term use, they are usually prescribed only to offset the effects of a temporary situation. As they never remove the underlying causes of stress, discovering the sources of your stress is a safer and more natural solution.

4. Coping with Stress

If you recognize developing symptoms of stress, take action at once. Ultimately, you must gain control of your own situation, but reaching that point may be difficult, and you may need expert help: the UNB Counselling Services team (call 453-4820) is very experienced in dealing with stress. If you wish to begin with your own resources, do not overlook your friends and family: they can be your most valuable allies (although they can also be the most extreme stressors). They offer you an external view of behavioural changes that you may not notice. Much stress can be avoided by maintaining a realistic outlook: setting unattainable goals for yourself creates a stressful situation. Accept that some of your ambitions will not be fulfilled immediately, and that some situations will be largely beyond your control.

a.) Developing a stress strategy

Controlling stress is easier if you enter a situation with a clear plan for dealing with stressors. Try to develop a comprehensive stress strategy. The FARE approach, outlined below, addresses four key areas:

**Flexibility:** accept change, disappointment, and even failure with genuine composure. Accepting does not mean submitting, but it does mean not denying. Trying again--or trying something new--usually improves the situation. Learn when it is best to walk away from a source of stress.

**Awareness:** Learn to recognize your reactions to stress. Identifying signs of strain and sources of stress is the first step to controlling your stress response.

**Rest/Relaxation:** Relaxation exercises should be a regular part of your day; some forms, such as tension/relaxation stretches and deep breathing, can readily form part of a physical workout. Work on key tension areas, massaging the area between the ear and the jaw, relaxing your facial muscles, and gently rolling your neck in half-circles. You may want to develop a complete relaxation routine; sample routines are outlined below.

**Exercise:** An exercise routine helps reduce anxiety, and it also helps you endure the stress you cannot avoid. Remember not to neglect your general health: sleep is essential; proper diet is crucial. All three--exercise, sleep, diet--are closely related; a disturbance affecting one spreads to all. Maintain a careful balance.
b.) Stress control exercises

Tension/relaxation exercises concentrate tension, spread it out over the whole body, and then release it to break up unconscious patterns of local contraction.

TENSION/ RELAXATION

- Stand, spread your legs, plant your feet, and extend your arms above your head; stretch moderately and then rise up on your toes.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your arms, legs, and back, curling your arms across your chest, bending forward, and crouching.
- Hold this position for at least a slow five-count, tightening your muscles continually.
- Relax completely, sitting or lying down if possible. Breathe deeply and slowly.
- Repeat the entire exercise.

ABDOMINAL BREATHING EXERCISE ("BELLY BREATHING")

Tension in the abdominal and chest muscles limits breathing. Breathing exercises can counter persistent tension in this area. Perform the following exercises while sitting or lying down, with your hands resting on your abdomen, below the navel.

- Breath slowly through your nose, pushing out your belly so that it presses against your hands. Imagine your belly is a bag you are filling with air.
- Relax your chest by rolling your shoulders as you inhale.
- Exhale slowly (work toward a ten-count) through your mouth, dropping your jaw.
- Repeat until you feel thoroughly relaxed.

RATIONAL-EMOTIVE THERAPY

While the other routines work on the body to release stress, rational-emotive therapy uses visualization and positive suggestion to change outlook.

1. Imagine a room, a pleasant, comfortable room with furniture. On a small table is a vase of fresh flowers; the windows are open and you can feel a warm breeze and hear the curtains rustling gently. When the scene is clear and real in your mind, let it fade until your mind is a blank.

2. Imagine an outdoor scene. You are in a field of sweet timothy hay bordered by pine and maple trees; you can hear the leaves rustling in the wind. While clouds are moving briskly across a blue sky, coiling and turning in an invisible wind. The sun is high and warm. The breeze brings the scent of ripening apples to you, and off in the woods a small brook trickles over boulders. Now let this scene fade as well; let your mind go blank, and let yourself relax completely.

3. Now create your own pleasant scene. Nothing exciting--a place where you can rest. Give it colour and shape and sound; let it become very real in your mind. And think
   - there is no place I must go;
   - there is no problem I must solve;
   - there is nothing I must do;
   - I am relaxing.