

## MANAGING STRESS

### STUDENT COUNSELLING

### MINDFULNESS

Simply put mindfulness is a way of paying attention to your life, your thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, and paying attention in an accepting nonjudgemental way. When you start doing that, you begin to notice that you can spend a lot of time either worrying about the future (even if that is only next lecture), or going over the past. We spend a lot of time on auto pilot, and this does not help us to stay calm and grounded. Studies have shown that practicing being mindful, either in formal ways like doing breath based mediation, or in informal ways like paying close attention to how you brush your teeth, walk or eat, can improve mood, help you to manage distressing emotions and improve cognitive functioning.

### DEVELOPING A STRESS REDUCING LIFESTYLE.

As well as the other stress reducing techniques in this leaflet, try and build some of these lifestyle factors into your everyday life:

**DIET.** Make more of an effort to eat well when there is extra stress in your life

**WATER:** 8 glasses of water a day

**CAFFEINE:** Reduce or eliminate caffeine from your diet, too much is not your friend

**EXERCISE:** aerobic exercise helps reduce stress and produces good endorphins

**TIME MANAGEMENT:** Look at the overall balance of your commitments. A rule of thumb—when there are more stressors you need to add in more self care activities.

**MEANINGFUL SOCIAL ACTIVITIES:** Getting involved in stuff that makes a difference helps manage stress.

**SLEEP:** get enough sleep—if you are struggling with this check out our 'I just cant sleep' leaflet.

**A GRATITUDE ATTITUDE:** Write down three things a day you are grateful for. Doing this regularly has been shown to lower stress and increase happiness levels!

**STUDENT COUNSELLING SERVICES**  
SKILLS – INSIGHT - SUPPORT

### WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

If you would like to make an appointment to see a counsellor to learn more about this topic, please contact the counselling service on your campus.

Distance students can contact any of the campuses. Please tell the receptionist if you need an urgent appointment.

### CONTACT DETAILS

#### ALBANY

Health and Counselling

Hours 8.30am - 5.00pm

Monday - Friday

Phone (09) 443 9783

Email: Studenthealth@massey.ac.nz

#### MANAWATŪ

Student Counselling Service

Turitea Campus, Palmerston North

Hours 8.30am - 5.00pm

Monday - Friday

Phone (06) 350 5533

Email: s.counselling@massey.ac.nz

#### WELLINGTON

Student Counselling Service

Hours 8.30am - 4.30pm

Monday - Friday

Phone (04) 801 2542

<http://crow.massey.ac.nz>

<http://health-counselling.massey.ac.nz>

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**IMAGINE THIS:** it is a week before study week, two weeks before exams. Things have felt decidedly tense in the flat since your flatmates fell out over that guy. There's stuff going on at home with your family too, financial worries, and on top of that you are not sleeping well. You can feel your stress levels rising, and it is affecting how you feel. Your mood is up and down, you can't seem to concentrate like you need to, so now you are really feeling anxious about how your exams are going to go.

Does this sound familiar? The stressors may be different, but sometimes life seems to come along with several slaps in the face just when you need to be performing at your best.

## **SO, HOW CAN WE MANAGE OUR STRESS SO THAT IT DOESN'T GET ON TOP OF US?**

### **WHAT IS STRESS?**

Stress is a response that's created when we react to particular events. It's the body's way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation with focus, strength, stamina, and heightened alertness. Stressors are things that cause stress, and we all face many and varied stressors every day. The right amount of stress can help us to focus and perform well, but when the stressors get too many, or come too quickly, then the stress takes us to overload, and that's when we start to unravel.

Stress affects us physically, mentally and emotionally. The first thing you often notice is the physiological arousal. Multiple stressors can lead to what is called the 'fight/flight' response - it is our body and mind's way of responding to a perceived threat. If you were about to be run over by a car your body would gear up to survive, there would be a surge of adrenalin, your heart would beat faster, blood would be pumped to your arms and legs priming you to run away fast.

Often, though, our 'perceived threats' are not physical, they are more psychological and emotional, like exams, relationship difficulties, assignment overload or money troubles. Our bodies respond to all these threats in exactly the same way as if we were facing that on-coming car.



### **STRESSED BRAIN—SMART BRAIN**

What do you notice about how you think when you are stressed? Do you find it hard to concentrate on work, do you notice you think negative thoughts, or dwell on things, going over and over them in your mind?

If so you are experiencing what we call "Stressed Brain". When we feel under threat, and go into a 'fight/flight' response, our brain also gears up for surviving the threat. Several things happen:

- Become hyper-vigilant – experience negative thinking, always seeing the negative
- Have a sense of urgency – I have to get it done and it has to be done now!
- Emotional – get really tearful, easily upset
- Black and white thinking
- Tunnel vision
- Worst case scenario thinking
- Poor concentration
- Forget everything, lose things etc
- Ruminating, thoughts going around and around

In terms of fight / flight these responses are what we call adaptive – we need to assume the negative when in danger, we need to only think about one thing, and to be consumed with the danger.

However, it becomes unhelpful to us in our modern setting where our threats are usually psychological rather than physical, and in a setting where we really need our mental capacities to be at their best! What we want is to lower the stress arousal so that we can return to 'Smart Brain'

Here is the hopeful bit! If we can learn ways to lower our stress levels, helping our system to calm down, then we can find our way back to what is actually our default setting. It's hard to remember this place when we are in Stress Brain, and hard to believe you will ever get back there (due to the nature of stressed brain thinking!) but actually we are pretty smart when we are calm!

We often tell ourselves things like "You should be able to do this or that" or "You shouldn't be so emotional or forgetful" And often you hear or think "Just pull yourself together," or "Just get over it". The reality is that you can't work your way out of the stress zone.

## **MANAGING STRESS—BUILDING BLOCKS TO A CALMER SYSTEM**

If stress can affect us physically, emotionally and mentally, then we need strategies to help us calm ourselves in all these areas.

### **CALMING THE PHYSIOLOGICAL AROUSAL BREATHE:**

Diaphragmatic breathing helps you to activate calming chemicals in your brain, and reduce the stress arousal. Place your hands on your tummy so that your middle fingers just touch. When you breathe in deeply, imagine there is a balloon in your tummy that you want to fill with air.

Breathe in through your nose, and notice your middle fingers part slightly, as your tummy rises. Let the breath out slowly through your mouth, imagining that you are cooling down a cup of coffee –through pursed lips. This slow out breath is what triggers of the calming effect in the brain. It sends a message along a part of the nervous system that goes from the diaphragm to the brain, to relax.

**MUSCLE RELAXATION:** There are four areas that we carry a lot of stress: our neck and shoulders, our hands, our jaw and our forehead. Practice tensing and relaxing each of these areas, holding in the tension before releasing and feeling the relaxation spreading to your whole body.

### **CALMING THE EMOTIONAL OVERWHELM GROUNDING**

**EXERCISES:** This exercise comes from Russ Harris' book called "The Reality Slap" (© Robinson Publishing 2011). Its aim is to help us reconnect with our bodies and our present moment.

Plant your feet firmly on the floor, and lengthen your spine. Breathe deeply. Look around and name 5 things you can see. Listen and name 5 things you can hear. Tell yourself where you are and what you are doing.

### **CALMING THE MENTAL EFFECTS OF STRESS:MINDFULNESS**

One of the distressing things about being stressed out is being in Stressed Brain when you really need every bit of smartness that you have! Lowering the physical effects of stress will help, but there are also things we can do to help our thinking. If in Stressed brain we struggle to concentrate, can't remember stuff, assume the negative and catastrophise, we are going to want to get out of that state as soon as we can!

