

The logo for Bowdoin College, featuring the word "Bowdoin" in a white serif font on a black rectangular background.

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## Counseling Services

### Stress!

Stress is a common experience. For many college students, it can be caused by too many reading assignments, too many late nights partying, too much dirty laundry left around by your roommates, too many arguments with your girlfriend or boyfriend, too much competition, too many choices in the cafeteria, too little time to study for exams. Over time, accumulated stress can be deadly. It interferes with your ability to function, damages your relationships, leads you to destructive behaviors, and causes physical illness. For many Americans, the prolonged state of heightened arousal, otherwise known as stress, causes hypertension, suppresses immune responses, provokes gastric distress, and leads to muscle deterioration.

Our bodies are highly resilient tools, but they are not designed to be in a chronic state of arousal. Our sympathetic nervous systems, which are responsible for the stress response, evolved so we could respond to danger and threat, but they evolved alongside a parasympathetic system, which takes care of eating, sleeping, and maintaining health and well-being. Unlike the parasympathetic daily routines that keep us alive, however, signals of danger arouse and alert us.

The sympathetic nervous system converts sensory input (for example, the sound of a grizzly crashing through the woods, or the sight of an oncoming car in the wrong lane) into neurochemicals that quicken our breath, increase our heart rates, stop all nonessential processes (such as digestion and fighting off disease), dilate our pupils (so we can see better), activate our sweat glands (to make us slippery), and constrict our arteries, raising blood pressure so our hearts will work extra hard to pump blood to large muscle groups. Our muscles respond by tensing for "fight or flight". Their quickened metabolism produces lactate, which circulates in the blood, providing energy and interacting with more neurochemicals, which trigger mental responses to tell the readied muscles what to do. Thanks to this series of incredibly well-designed electrochemical responses, our nervous systems keep us alive both by maintaining homeostasis (the parasympathetic system) and by motivating us to act when we are threatened (the sympathetic system).

Unfortunately, we are not so well designed when it comes to the dangers and threats of contemporary culture, which are often more emotionally or mentally challenging than they are actually physically dangerous, even though they provoke the same physiological readiness response. In hunter-gatherer cultures, the fight or flight response ensured survival. In everyday twenty-first century life, fight or

flight is rarely appropriate and almost never enacted, although our bodies are left with muscles tensed, lactate converted to the toxin lactic acid, emotional systems geared to handle crisis. When repeated over time and not acted upon, the fight or flight response initiates a "kindling effect" so that fewer, weaker sensory messages to the nervous system can trigger the same response. In other words, *overlearning prompts biobehavioral dysregulation*. Stress accumulates, not only in the form of overlearned mental responses, but in the neurochemical disequilibrium of our cells. And as anyone knows who has tried to study when stressed out, your emotional and physical state affect your ability to learn.

There are several things you can do to alleviate this disequilibrium. The quickest and most reliable method for short-term relief is to change your autonomic functioning with your breath. Deep, slow, rhythmic, diaphragmatic nostril breathing slows your heart rate and stimulates the parasympathetic system. How many times have you noticed that when you are stressed out, taking a deep breath helps you to deal with things more calmly? It also oxygenates your cells and carries away lactic acid so your muscles can resume their normal tone. You can learn diaphragmatic breathing in any yoga or meditation class, from an athletic trainer, physical or psychotherapist, or by practicing on your own.

For more long-term stress relief, you will probably need to change your thoughts and behaviors as well as your breathing. While this may not be as easy as it sounds, the first step is to recognize your typical tendencies. Counseling can help you do this, and so can talking to friends or family who know you well and whom you can trust.

There are two parts to the stress response: *appraisal* and *coping*. Appraisal refers to the learned responses you have to typical situations. For example, when you see a professor getting ready to hand out exams, when someone asks you for a favor, or when you see a group of acquaintances in the cafeteria, what are your first thoughts? These thoughts fuel your emotions (fear, sadness, happiness, anger, etc.), so if the thoughts are negative, the emotions will be, too. Neutral thoughts are less likely to provoke a stress response. Practice watching your appraisal tendencies; if your first response stimulates a desire to fight or flee, no matter how appropriate or inappropriate it may be, chances are that you are adding to the stress in your life.

Coping refers to the way you respond to your appraisal. If your appraisal tends to arouse your nervous system, your coping will be affected, sometimes negatively. Conversely, if you choose a coping behavior that's not appropriate to the situation (for example, running away from conflict with your roommate, or denying that you are not prepared for a test), you will ultimately add to your stress. Examples of coping responses include denial, discounting, numbing, blaming yourself or others, distraction, social strategies, and sublimation, or making the most of it. Obviously, there are some coping responses that are considered more adaptive than others,

but most healthy people use a range of coping skills every day. The amount of stress you generate for yourself depends on how many *different* coping skills you have, and on how appropriately you can use them in any given situation. For example, emotional numbing might not be such a great coping response if you are trying to maintain a relationship, but in an emergency, when you must act quickly and can't afford to get caught up in emotions, it is an adaptive coping skill. One coping skill that almost never works is that of blaming (otherwise known as guilt when it's directed at yourself, and projection when it's directed towards others). Blaming may help you feel better in the short-term, but it usually backfires and causes more stress later.

In general, action-based coping strategies work better than emotion-based strategies; distraction, social strategies, and sublimation are good coping skills to have. One of the best forms of distraction is physical exercise, since it also provides rapid, positive changes to your autonomic system. Social strategies often involve finding support from friends, family, or a mental health professional. Sublimation refers in part to your ability to learn from your mistakes, which helps you to feel competent, which alleviates stress.

Perhaps the best way to prevent stress in your life is to live a healthy lifestyle. Good nutrition, moderate exercise, adequate sleep, meaningful work, sufficient leisure time, and satisfying connections with other people will almost always reduce stress. And if you practice breathing and noticing your appraisal and coping styles, you are much less likely to feel out of control next time you find yourself in a stressful situation.

Listed below are some checklists of the causes and effects of stress, as well the best predictors of good stress prevention. As you can see, many of the "effects" of stress often generate more stress. Use the list of prevention strategies to ensure that you can handle challenges in ways that will not interfere with your physical or mental health.

### **Causes of Stress**

- Lack of sleep
- Competition
- Doubt or not knowing
- Transitioning
- Lack of role clarity
- Perceived over-responsibility
- Poor interpersonal skills

### **Effects of Stress**

- Poor health
- Lack of self-care
- Disconnection from others
- Unclear thinking and poor decision making
- Irritability
- Burnout
- Substance abuse
- Depression and anxiety

## **Preventive measures**

- Good health
- Activities over which you have conscious control
- Exercise
- Skillful emotion management and expression
- Support from others
- Role clarity
- Flexibility and curiosity
- Realistic appraisal of others, especially superiors
- Spirituality
- A sense of community or belonging
- Connection to nature