

Coping with stress management during final exams

December 10 2013, by Brittney Dunkins



If it were as easy as the movies depict, studying for final exams would be a three-minute montage of library visits and late-night study sessions set to pop music, but in the real world students often find themselves surrounded by textbooks, outlines and deadlines as they engage in a 'round-the-clock study schedule during the end of the semester.

Though studying during the two-week final exams process can be a juggling act, it doesn't have to be a source of anxiety. George Washington Today sat down with Director of the University Counseling

Center Silvestro Weisner to discuss the best ways to identify and cope with stress during final exam season.

Q: How is stress triggered? What are its effects?

A: Stress is any experience of pressure or change, and a stressor is any event or situation that results in or causes stress. It is a necessary aspect of life and is associated with positive changes, such as graduating, getting a new job or starting a romantic relationship, as well as negative changes, including periods of evaluation such as final exams.

Normal responses to stress such as increased heart rate, rapid breathing and heightened alertness will help to improve performance. For example, any performing artist or athlete will note the importance of "psyching oneself up" before a competition or performance. However, the same stress that may motivate a student to study hard and perform well on exams may also derail the studying process, increase test-taking anxiety and impair academic performance at the end of the semester.

Q: How can students identify stress that is negatively affecting their mental health or behavior?

A: When stressors become too numerous or when our coping resources are depleted due to illness, fatigue or other unrelated stressors, the response is stress exhaustion. At this point stress ceases to be an adaptive force and becomes detrimental to academic functioning and overall health and well-being. The symptoms of stress exhaustion can be physical and include fatigue, headaches, gastrointestinal distress, disrupted sleep, insomnia and more. Psychological symptoms include difficulty with concentration, memory problems, indecisiveness, procrastination, distractibility and irritability.

Q: What are tactics to prevent stress, specifically during final exam season?

A: There are many ways to minimize the negative effects of stress and to prevent stress exhaustion during final exam season.

Prioritize assignments and exams based upon deadline, percentage of final grade or other factors. During high-stress periods, students tend to view all commitments as being equally important. In order to reduce stress, develop a rubric for deciding which assignments and exams are most important and should be completed first.

- Create to-do lists, and be realistic about what can be accomplished in a given day. The human brain is capable of sustaining attention for limited periods of time. For each hour of study time or research and writing time, give yourself five to 10 minutes to re-direct your attention elsewhere.
- Engage in self-care. This is especially critical during high-[stress](#) periods. Attend to physical wellness by eating regular, nutritionally balanced meals. Get at least six or seven hours of sleep at night. Exercise at least 30 minutes each day. If you become ill or injured, take care of medical needs promptly.
- Avoid or limit stimulating substances. Caffeine, tobacco and processed sugar can over-stimulate your system and exacerbate [stress levels](#). These substances, as well as alcohol, can interfere with sleep patterns, memory and other important exam-time resources.
- Schedule relaxation time each day. After particularly challenging papers or exams are completed, allow yourself time off for an afternoon, evening or even for a couple of hours, to share a meal, go to a movie or spend time with friends.
- Temporarily unplug. Disengage from social media, online games,

Internet surfing, texting, messaging and other electronic distractors, or limit your exposure to one or two time-limited periods each day.

- Breathe! Taking slow, deep breaths when studying can help you keep your focus and retain information.

Provided by George Washington University

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