**Stress**

Everyone experiences stress.

It is an important motivator but can also very problematic.

This information will help you to understand stress and reduce the negative effects on your life and develop healthy coping strategies.

**What is stress?**

Stress in manageable amounts can be motivating, if we felt no pressure to do anything we would probably have very few goals or aspirations.

Usually when people talk about stress however they refer to it as a negative thing. It is worth bearing in mind though that stress is not your enemy, an approach to life which involves avoiding stress is likely to be very dull, and is also likely to reduce our ability to cope with the difficult things which life will inevitably occur during our lives.

A person may be referred to as ‘being stressed’ when they feel they are unable to meet the demands of the situation they are in. Everybody feels like this sometimes.

Stress can have physical effects - the heart beats faster, adrenaline races through the body, breathing quickens, blood is sent to the muscles (this is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to a situation), and emotional – worry, racing thoughts, decision-making difficulties and negativity.

Stress is not an illness but it can make people vulnerable to developing both physical and mental health difficulties.

### Causes and effects

Causes include; bereavement, marriage, pregnancy, finances, divorce, illness, changes or deadlines at work, and having high of standards for yourself or others. However, much of our stress comes from everyday responsibilities, and pressures that are not always obvious to us.

If you are constantly reacting to stressful situations without managing your stress, the effects can include; depression, feeling helpless, aggression, lethargy, drug dependence, forgetfulness, difficulty ‘switching off’, self-criticism, obsessional and intrusive thoughts, rigid attitudes, migraines, hypertension, digestive problems, suppressed immune system, nausea, fatigue, sleep problems, emotional outbursts, difficulty relaxing, avoidance of situations and restlessness.

### Identify your stress

* What causes *tension* in your life
* How this affects you in the short and long term
* What you are willing to change for a less stressful life
* Friends/family who will support you
* Things you have tried that didn’t work
* Obstacles to reducing your stress to manageable levels
* If you cannot change a situation, can you accept it?

### Stress management tips

**Become aware of physical responses.** When you next find yourself becoming stressed, annoyed or angry, make a conscious choice not to. Step away from the situation for a while and notice what your body is telling you. Consider your response in terms of what is best for you. For example, when people feel stressed, they tend to talk quickly and breathlessly. By slowing down your speech you'll appear less anxious, more in control of the situation, and you may think and react more effectively in the situation.

**Anticipate potentially stressful situations and ways to manage them.** Whether it’s a presentation or a bus journey, many people find rehearsal boosts self-confidence and enables a more positive approach. Similarly, identify when you work best and plan the most demanding tasks for that time.

**Be flexible.** High expectations intensify stressful feelings. You may be expecting too much of yourself and others. Identify your rigid attitudes (such as beliefs about what ‘should’, ‘must’, ‘ought’ to be done) and how they influence your response to situations. If you’re feeling frustrated or disappointed when you or another person does not meet your standards, rethink your position. Everyone (including yourself) is unique, and has their own virtues and shortcomings. Make allowances for other people’s opinions and be prepared to compromise. Not only will you reduce your stress, you may find better solutions to your problems.

**Be realistic.** If you feel overwhelmed by something, ask yourself, “Is it my problem?”, “What really needs to be done?”, “How much can I do?” and “Is it realistic?”. If you feel a situation is unrealistic then say so, and give reasons. You may have many things to do, but you cannot do them all at the same time.

**Begin using relaxation techniques.** Before reacting to a stressful occurrence, take deep breaths and release them slowly. If you have a few minutes, try out a relaxation technique such as muscle relaxation, meditation, guided imagery or deep breathing.

**Improve two-way communication.** Learn to really listen to what others are saying rather than getting upset because you disagree. Find areas of common ground and work for a compromise. Stay in touch with friends and family and let them provide support and guidance. It can be a great relief to delegate a responsibility to someone. Express the way you feel openly and don’t try to bury anger, fear or sadness. Humor can sometimes be used to lighten difficult situations.

**Develop good time-management.** If you have multiple stressors (such as deadlines, or negative life events), you must prioritize your time. Rank your priorities by asking “How important is this task to me?” Break large demands into small, manageable parts and identify what needs to be done first. Once you accomplish the first task, you will feel more motivate for the second and so on. However, leave some time free in each day so that if something unexpected occurs, you are not overwhelmed.

**Problem-solve.** Consider one problem at a time, and identify a concrete, specific solution. Spend some time generating a list of possible options – be creative! Decide on which ones are realistic and choose one that is feasible and has the most advantages. Then prepare a plan for accomplishing that option. You will find that you have addressed the problem as best you can.

**Take breaks.** Take twenty minutes every day for undisturbed time away from work, the phone and/or family commitments. Get outdoors, even for ten minutes, as this can be very rejuvenating.

**Relax.** Allow time to recharge and energize yourself and you'll be much better prepared to manage stress. For a brief period before bedtime, allow yourself to fully relax. Use the time to listen to quiet music, relax and try to think of pleasant things or nothing. Don't spend this time planning for tomorrow.

**Develop a healthy lifestyle.** Along with improving your ability to relax, you must assess diet and other strains on your body. Limit your intake of stimulants such as caffeine or nicotine, drink plenty of water and eat small, nutritious snacks. Hunger and dehydration provoke aggressiveness and exacerbate feelings of anxiety and stress. Avoid or reduce alcohol and drug use to help you relax and avoid dependency.

**Exercise, and consider your posture.** Regular exercise is a popular way to relieve stress. Half an hour of physical activity benefits both the body and the mind. Hold your head and shoulders

upright to avoid muscle tension, pain, and increased stress.

**Reward yourself.** Schedule something you enjoy doing - a relaxing bath, gardening or painting

### People who may be able to help

If you are having problems with your course, contact the course or module leader. Do this early in the course so it’s not left too late.

**Student Support Services – including:**

**The Mental Health Support Team**

**(**If you have a mental health difficulty)

Tel: (0115) 848 2536

E-mail: mental.health@ntu.ac.uk

**The Counselling Service:**

Tel: (0115) 848 6487

Email: counselling@ntu.ac.uk

**GP Services:**

**Sandby Medical Practice (City Site)**

Tel: (0115) 848 6481

**Sunrise Medical Practice (Clifton Campus)**

Tel: (0115) 848 3100

**Southwell Medical Centre (near Brackenhurst campus)**