



Identifying Stress

AUSTRALIAN STATISTICS

The Youth Mental Health Report (Ivancic et al., 2014), found one fifth of 15-19 year olds reported high levels of distress. The top two stressors: 1) coping with stress, & 2) school and study stress.

The final years of secondary school can be stressful for many students, with the end of year exams as the high point. Academic stress is common during this period, with most students experiencing mild to moderate levels of stress. To manage and alleviate stress, the first step is to learn how to identify it.

WHAT CAN STRESS FEEL LIKE?

Stress can manifest through physical and emotional sensations such as:

- racing heart
- feeling agitated and tense
- irritability
- constant fatigue
- difficulty concentrating
- sleep problems
- nausea
- headaches, jaw pain
- ulcers
- diarrhoea/constipation
- shaky

CAUSES OF HSC STRESS

- increased workload
- increased task difficulty
- number of deadlines
- high expectations:
 - external high expectations (parents, teachers, schools)
 - internal high expectations (the students themselves)
- beliefs about the future and significance of the HSC
- juggling study and other commitments (work, social life, relationships, family, extra-curricular)

Ultimately, the level of stress experienced is related to each individuals' ability to cope.



Understanding Optimum Stress

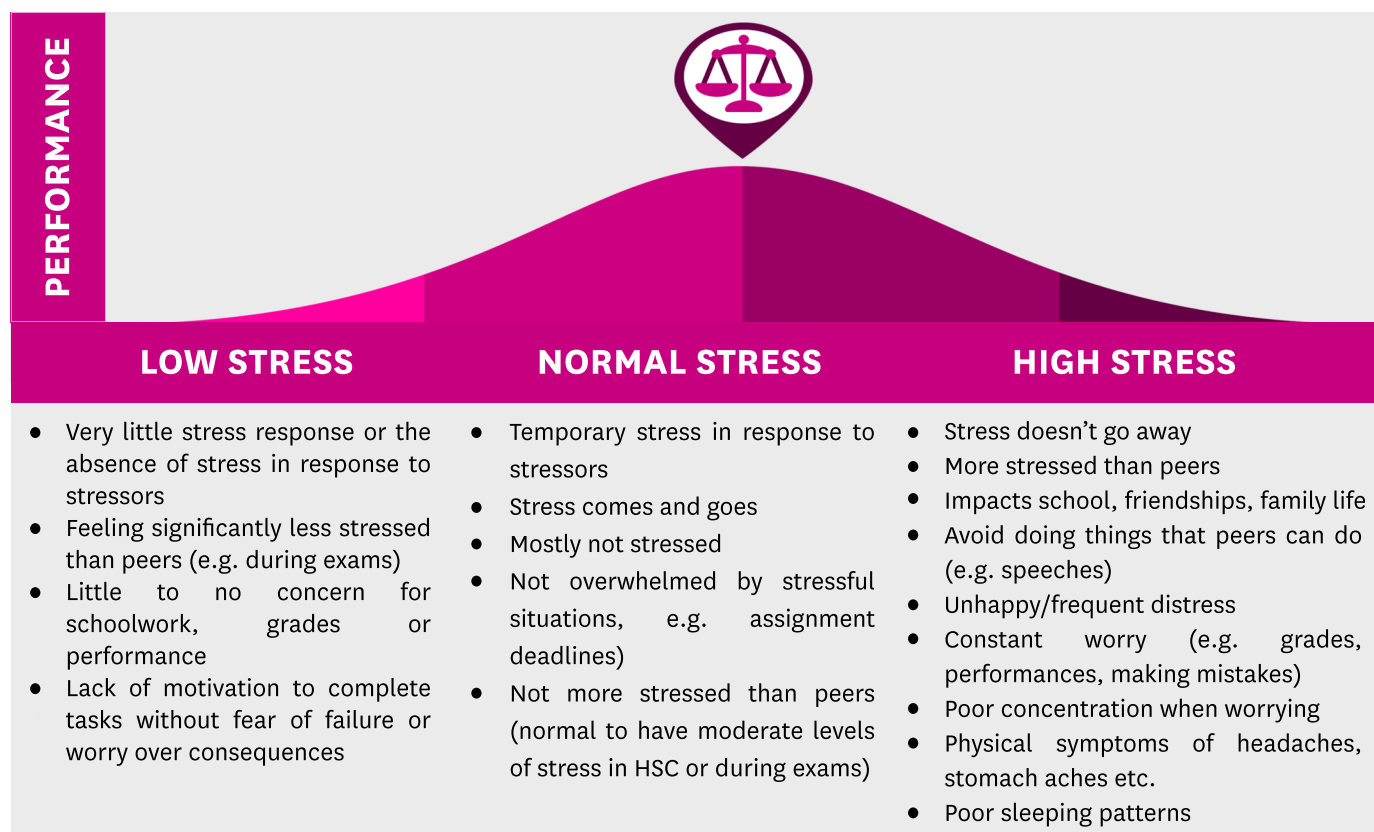
Most students experience mild to moderate stress during their final years of secondary school, particularly as they prepare for their end of year exams. In moderation, stress can be a constructive response to help enhance performance. To achieve this, it is first essential to understand optimum stress.

BALANCING STRESS

Too much stress for too long can be debilitating (**chronic stress**), while too little stress can also be unhelpful. A good balance of stress will ultimately relate to an individual's ability to cope.

THE STRESS RESPONSE IS CONTROLLED BY:

- **SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM:** Releases energy and prepares the body for fight or flight.
- **PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM:** Returns the body to a relaxed state.





Managing Stress

To manage stress it is essential to change **what you do** and **how you think**. Increase a sense of control by doing things to change the situation, and reduce catastrophic and defeatist thinking.

CHALLENGE UNHELPFUL THINKING

Feeling overwhelmed during stressful situations? We can learn to change our thinking so that it is more realistic.

When feeling stressed ask yourself: “What am I doing that is making me think I am in danger?”

Examples: “I can’t do this”, “I am unprepared”, or “If I don’t do well, I won’t find a good job”, etc.

Next, ask yourself:

- Am I really in danger?
- Will it really be as bad as I think?
- Are other students in the same situation?
- Can I find a way to cope with this situation and these feelings?
- What advice would I give to a friend? Can I apply this advice to myself?

It is helpful to look for evidence that shows your thought is true, and evidence that shows your thought is not true. This way we can weigh up the facts and determine which is the most realistic interpretation of the event.

EXAMPLES OF MANAGING STRESS

- **Improve Your Sleep Routine:**
Poor sleep worsens anxiety, so a good routine is important. Keep sleep/ wake times fairly regular, and start a pre-bedtime routine (e.g. no devices after a certain time).
- **Exercise:**
Vigorous exercise burns up cortisol (the stress hormone).
- **Time Management:**
Make time in your day for schoolwork so things aren’t done last minute. This ensures that you give 100% when it counts most (e.g. using study schedules to organise study/ break periods, or screen time/socialising as a reward).
- **Balance Study and Life:**
When we get busy, chill-out/fun time is one of the first things to go, but we should really keep this in as it helps us feel less down/anxious/stressed.
- **Relaxation Ideas:**
Reading, listening to music, spending time with friends, having a bath, going to the beach.

PROBLEM SOLVING is a useful skill when experiencing stress. When we feel overwhelmed, it can be difficult to make decisions about the best course of action. Take time to define the problem or issue. Brainstorm all possible options to solve the problem, no matter how silly they may seem. List the pros and cons and evaluate each of your options then rank them from **WORST** to **BEST**. Take action with your best option and see how you go! You can always review and move on to try the next option if needed.