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HEALTH & FITNESS

Learning to control stress important for overall health

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College is a time of deadlines, financial concerns, social pressures, and major life decisions, in other words, college is stressful, perhaps one of the most stressful times during life. If stress is managed ineffectually, high levels can impair learning and memory, and over the long term, cause shrinking in the hippocampus, an area of the brain. Also, stress, interacting with heredity, personality, environment, and behavior can significantly increase your risk for temporary illnesses like colds or chronic diseases such as diabetes, arthritis, and heart disease. Now, should we try to eliminate all of the stressors in our lives? Absolutely not—we need stress to challenge us to perform our best. In essence, we should be like Goldie Locks and find a stress level that is "not too high, not too low, but just right."

Unless your professors cancel midterms, the winning lottery ticket is in your hand, and your dream date is knocking on your door, it is unlikely that your stressors, or situations that trigger an emotional and physical response, are going to be eliminated. And that is alright if you don't let stress control you, but learn to control stress by developing a plan to manage it. Start by simply identifying the stressors in your life. Try keeping a journal for a few weeks noting when you experience stress and what you were doing at the time. Also, describe what you were thinking and feeling and the outcome of your response. After recording your behavior, review your journal and look for patterns. What people, places, and activities are causing the most stress? Were your responses appropriate or did you make matters worse? Creating a journal to objectively identify stressors helps to develop effective strategies for coping.

To develop a strategy for managing your response to stressors, incorporate a variety of stress management techniques into your day, and work to make them second nature, just like brushing your teeth.

Social Support: Develop meaningful connections with others. Sharing life's frustrations and accomplishments contributes to improved

well-being. Developing a social network is important—try volunteering, joining a campus organization, or striking up conversations with classmates.

Exercise: Physical activity helps dissipate nervous energy, stimulate birth of new brain cells, and minimize the physical response to stressful stimuli. Research shows that people who walk 3 times a week at least 45 minutes per session report less daily hassles. Add functional exercise to your routine and use human powered transportation often.

Nutrition: A healthy diet that involves moderation, plenty of fruits and vegetables, and limited caffeine help to maintain weight and well-being. Erratic eating patterns often result in low energy stores, low self-esteem, and feelings of guilt and lack of self control.

Sleep: While requirements vary for everyone, it is important to get sufficient sleep to improve mood, concentration, and alertness. Levels of stress hormones are related to sleep patterns, and sleep deprivation alters hormone concentrations. Budget adequate sleep time into your schedule.

Time Management: College students often have



Photo courtesy of KRT Wire Service

The stress factor can begin as early as high school. Twin sisters Stacy (left) and Tracy Chen, say getting into college is a major stress factor.

too little time, and in some cases, too much time. Perfectionist, over-committers, and procrastinators need to practice good time management skills. Improve your time management skills by setting priorities, scheduling tasks during peak efficiency, setting realistic goals, combining task when possible, delegating responsibility, and most importantly, stop thinking and start doing.

Spirituality: Faith and

commitment to a belief system, whether it is found in religion, nature, or other, fosters a meaning and purpose to life and provides perspective and connectedness during stressful times.

Relaxation: Lower blood pressure and breathing rates, as well as quiet mental alertness result from relaxation. Try meditation, yoga, deep breathing, or listening to music to elicit a relaxation response.

As midterms approach, don't let life toss you around like laundry in a dryer that you should have done yesterday, take control of your life. Identify your life stressors, devise a strategy to manage them, and then practice your stress management techniques everyday. Maybe while you are de-stressing the meaning of life will become crystal clear—or NOT. But who cares, life is totally manageable.

Making wise food choices can help you feel you best

MyStudentHealthZone.com
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While some students stock up on fruits and vegetables in the dining hall, sometimes it's hard to resist the less-healthy options. The foods you choose affect your energy, concentration, and memory, because your body and brain need the right nutrition to function properly. So before you reach for a cup of coffee or another slice of pizza, remember that the right choices from the different food groups will help you feel your best.

WHAT DOES YOUR BODY NEED?

Each person's nutritional

requirements can vary, but your diet should provide you with a balance of protein, dairy products, carbohydrates, vegetables, and fruits. For specific recommendations suited to your needs, talk to a doctor, registered dietitian, or your student health office or your school's nutritional counselor.

Many nutritional experts recommend that the majority of a person's diet come from grains, vegetables, and whole fruit. Whole-grain carbohydrates, like brown rice and whole-grain breads, cereals, and pasta retain more vitamins, minerals, and fiber than their

more processed counterparts (like white bread and regular pasta).

It's better to eat fresh or frozen vegetables and fruits, because those that come in cans sometimes contain lots of added salt or sugar. Also, try not to skip your vegetables in favor of fruit. (You should actually eat more vegetables than fruit for an ideal balance.)

Protein is another essential part of any diet. It's found in meat, fish, poultry, eggs, or nonanimal sources such as beans and nuts. Dairy products like cheese,

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expenses. Look for cheaper solutions to a dull, hungry Friday night — such as lunch meat and a board game with friends. Never budgeted before? Learn how on www.CreditTalk.com.

Use credit cards wisely. Credit cards build credit history, which is good for getting credit on future big-ticket purchases. However, experts warn students not to use a credit card without a compelling reason. "If you're using your credit card just for convenience, you're getting yourself further and further behind," said Jean Ann Fox, director of consumer protection for the Consumer Federation of America.

Watch your food costs. If a meal plan is required at your school, sign up for the one where you pay for the fewest meals per week. The meal plan is usually more expensive than buying groceries. So unless you are in love with the cafeteria food,

opt to go with the cheapest plan, then take your savings to the store.

Make saving money a priority. Computers and automobiles crash. But a rainy-day fund can get you back behind your keyboard or steering wheel. Saving money can also make for a more pleasant life after graduation, Fox said. "You don't want to spend your 20s bailing yourself out of debt from things you don't even remember you bought," she said.

Comparison shop for food, clothes and books. It might sound tedious going to several different grocery stores to compare prices. But the practice could save a lot of money throughout the semester. It's also good to shop around for books if there is more than one bookstore on campus. And if money is really tight, don't rule out a trip to the second-hand clothing store.

Use an online application to speed the student loan process. It could save three to four days, said

Denny Welch, cashier manager at the University of Akron. "Online you get to see what you're doing right away and you see if it was accepted," Welch said.

Stay eligible for financial aid. If you receive aid, be aware of the minimum GPA to retain it. For federal financial aid, students must keep at least a C average, UA's McNutt said.

Apply for loans early to keep from getting kicked out of classes. Don't be the subject of a horror story about being dropped from classes a few weeks into the semester because the loan still hasn't gone through. Get it done sooner to eliminate that stress ahead of time.

Avoid taxes on stupidity. Parking tickets, library fines and video rental fines are unacceptable for college students who have to pinch pennies.

Mike Raser of Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT) contributed to this story.

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