



SCOPE Tip of the Week Member Newsletter

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Teaching Students to Manage Stress

There is no college without stress. They go hand in hand. It's like the Western Kentucky University counseling center motto: "College should be stressful, not overwhelming." And this sums it up. Stress, in and of itself, can be a good thing. It keeps us working and moving ahead. It inspires and drives us forward when we would rather loaf about and listen to *Dave Matthews Band*.

Good stress -- useful stress -- is called Eustress. It gets students jazzed up to study for that exam and helps them fill out their FASFA on time. It makes them send thank you cards and print out cover pages for their final papers. It nudges them to give their final exam one more read through before turning it in. It helps them go to the gym when they would rather sit around watching *Hulu* and eating pie.

The bad stress, well...that's called distress. It needs to be closely monitored. Distress has a way of getting away from all of us, just piling up with our unwashed laundry, unread study guides and unwritten papers. Distress causes bad things in students' lives. It can give them ulcers, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, worry and generally tires them out. Distress, left uncontrolled, saps productivity and keeps us all from completing the things we need to do.

Distress accumulates from many sources. It comes from the daily hassles of life such as paying bills, keeping track of where you parked your car and remembering when you have a test. Distress comes from environmental factors like having no air conditioning in the summer, no hot water for a shower, construction noises outside your room when you are trying to sleep, or a roommate playing the iPod on an endless loop at 2am.

How to help our students to control distress

- 1) **They need to organize what they have to do.** The leading source of stress for college students, the thing that impacts all other things, is a lack of organization in setting out a plan for the tasks that need to be completed. The first step in tackling an over-stressed life is developing a plan to tackle the competing needs they face.
- 2) **It's as simple as A, B, C.** One way to address organization is to sit down and make a master list of all the things that you have to do in the semester. Brainstorm everything and anything that you've had on your mind, from homework to getting the oil changed in your car. The next step is sitting down with that list and labeling each item on it with A, B or C. "A" items are those that need to be completed today or tomorrow (or should have been done last week). "B" items are those that need to be done soon, but not immediately. These can wait a week or so. The "C" items are important to do before the end of the semester, but don't need to be done for a while. Once you have the list labeled, begin with the "A" items and take care of those first. Work on the "B" items next and don't mess around with the "C" items until you've made some progress in the other two areas. Students get caught up with "C"-fever by spending time working on things that they don't need to worry about right now, while letting the more pressing (re: less fun) tasks go uncompleted. Isn't it always the case that your room is never so clean or well vacuumed as when you have a paper for Western Civilization you are supposed to be working on? This is a classic, working on "C" and letting an "A" go.
- 3) **Work Smarter, Not Harder.** This was a saying I first heard from a writing professor at New England College and it always kind of stuck with me. The idea behind it is to work smart on the things you need to do and not to waste time on things that don't matter. Don't spend weeks working on a paper that counts for 5% of your total grade and then have no energy left to study for the final that is worth 50%.

- 4) **Take breaks.** Too many times I've heard from a student who spent 6 hours "studying" for a test coming up the next day and ended up doing poorly. When I questioned the student, I learned that they were productive for about 45 minutes and spent the rest of the time reading and re-reading the same sections of the textbook because their roommate was playing *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. It's better to study for a half hour and take a half hour break then to study for two hours straight and then spend four hours half-focused on the material and worried that you aren't getting your work finished.

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