

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

LEARNING TO MANAGE STRESS IN COLLEGE

There is no separation between the mind and the body. How we feel physically is a reflection of what is happening in our lives. Whether they seem stressful or not, changes in college can cause an internal rearrangement of our biochemistry, resulting in the development of physical symptoms.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

Common stress symptoms include fatigue, excessive sleeping, insomnia, headache, jaw pain, heartburn, stomach pain, diarrhea, constipation, muscle pain, heart palpitations, and chest pain. These symptoms are not “imaginary” or “just in people’s heads” because they are related to stress. Stress is a real phenomenon that can result in real physical changes. Based on individual genetics, each person will manifest stress symptoms differently. Listen to your body, and discover what patterns indicate stress in you. Then take steps to learn the skills to become more stress resilient and make choices to reduce excess stress in your life.

STRESS MANAGEMENT IS A SKILL YOU CAN MASTER

You learn many “skills” when you come to college. One skill that will benefit you for the rest of your life is STRESS MANAGEMENT. The “LEARNS” outline below will help you evaluate and make changes in your life where necessary in order to decrease stress symptoms.

L - LAUGH

How’s your laugh life? Laughter is one of the best coping mechanisms. A good laugh uses up many stress chemicals and relaxes the body. Children laugh 300 to 500 times a day. The average adult laughs only 30 times a day.

- Humor is a skill that can be learned, and it is one of the keys to a healthy life.
- Humor is an attitude that allows you to take your work seriously but yourself lightly.
- Consciously look for movies, books, and people that can add laughter to your life.
- Ever heard of Laughter Yoga? This practice gives you the health benefits of laughter without jokes or comedy. You will still reap the positive effects whether your laughter is spontaneous or “fake”. Learn more at laughteryogarva.com.

E - EXERCISE

Exercise is one of the best ways to become more stress resilient. Exercise increases your clearance of stress chemicals, and it improves your mental and physical performance. Many students mistakenly believe that they don’t have time to exercise. You don’t have time not to exercise!

- Thirty minutes of aerobic exercise three to five times a week will give you more energy and improve your concentration. It can give you the boost to study more efficiently.
- Check out [exercise facilities & programs](http://recsports.vcu.edu) available to students on the Monroe Park and MCV campuses at recsports.vcu.edu.

A - ATTITUDE

Our attitude is one of the most powerful shapers of our destinies. The thoughts or mental tapes we play in our heads either increase or decrease our ability to function effectively. Attitude can give you power or take it away. You can learn skills to reshape your thoughts, attitudes, and learning skills.

- [University Counseling Services](http://counseling.vcu.edu) can help address unhealthy thoughts and attitudes. Both individual and group counseling are available. For more information, go to counseling.vcu.edu or call 804-828-6200 for the Monroe Park office and 804-828-3964 for the MCV office.
- Students with documented disabilities or health-related impairments can request accommodations through the [Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity \(SAEO\)](http://saeo.vcu.edu) office on the Monroe Park Campus (804-828-2253 or saeo.vcu.edu). On the MCV Campus, call the [Division for Academic Success \(DAS\)](http://das.vcu.edu) at 804-828-9782 or visit das.vcu.edu. Services also include assistance with time management and study skills.
- For academic support on the Monroe Park Campus, check out the [Campus Learning Center \(clc.vcu.edu\)](http://clc.vcu.edu) for free tutoring, study groups, and academic coaching. Need help with a paper? Don’t forget about free consultations at the [Writing Center \(writing.vcu.edu\)](http://writing.vcu.edu). Learn about other academic resources at health.students.vcu.edu/patient-resources/academic-resources.

R - RELAX & REST IN YOUR HIGHER POWER

Take some time each day to clear your mind and to get perspective on what's important in the universe. Some experts call this "islands of peace." By taking this time to deep breathe, relax, and meditate, we become more grounded and peaceful. Things get back into perspective, and we can function in a more focused and efficient way.

- [University Counseling Services \(counseling.vcu.edu\)](https://counseling.vcu.edu) can help with stress management & relaxation skills.
- The [Health Promotion and Well-Being Center \(The Well\)](https://thewell.vcu.edu) offers free weekly guided mindfulness sessions, as well as their own [Health Foundations Learning Modules](https://thewell.vcu.edu/health-foundations-learning-modules) that address a variety of topics, including stress and well-being. The Well also offers appointments for the [Resilience Lab](https://thewell.vcu.edu/resilience-lab), a great resource that uses biofeedback to teach students how to reduce stress and increase resilience. Call 804-828-9355 or go to thewell.vcu.edu for more information.
- Take advantage of online resources. In addition to the Well's Health Foundations modules, access to quality self-help material is available at counseling.vcu.edu and health.students.vcu.edu/patient-resources/mental-health. Other resources include www.uclahealth.org/marc (for free meditation podcasts), richmondmeditates.vcu.edu (for info about local meditation courses and groups), www.brown.edu (search "mindfulness"), and counseling.ufl.edu (search "stress and college students").
- Being active and connecting with others can give you a boost of energy and reduce stress at the same time. Wherever your interests may lie, whether it's bass fishing, dancing, knitting, or waffle-eating, VCU has over [400 student organizations](https://vcu.campusgroups.com) to choose from. Check them out at vcu.campusgroups.com.

N - NUTRITION

Fuel your body with healthy food to meet the demands of an active college lifestyle. If you are stressed out, your body is working harder and needs nutrient-dense foods.

- Eat balanced meals with lean protein, whole grain carbs, fruits, and vegetables.
- For more information and free personalized consultations, call Student Health at 804-828-8828 to schedule an appointment with our [Registered Dietitian Nutritionist](https://vcu.edu/registered-dietitian-nutritionist).

S - SUBSTANCES & SLEEP

Substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs change you both physically and mentally. Most college students (6 out of 10) either don't drink alcohol or have 4 or fewer drinks when they do. Most college students (7 out of 10) don't smoke cigarettes.

- Need help quitting or cutting back on tobacco use or vaping? Schedule an appointment at Student Health or the Well (quit@vcu.edu). More resources are available at tobaccofree.vcu.edu.
- If you are worried about substance abuse by friends or for yourself, contact Rams in Recovery (recovery@vcu.edu or 804-366-8027) for nonjudgmental support and resources. To learn more, go to recovery.vcu.edu.

Sleep is not optional! Most people require 7 to 9 hours per night. Uninterrupted sleep is necessary for rejuvenating both the brain and the body. Sleep deprivation can lead to a variety of physical symptoms, including poor concentration. Don't try to cheat sleep. It will only cost you more time in the long run.

- Read our patient education brochure "Insomnia" to learn about healthy sleep habits at health.students.vcu.edu/patient-resources/general-health.
- Schedule an appointment at Student Health if sleep or stress becomes a problem.

"The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people say and do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skills. The remarkable thing is...we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for the day. We cannot change our past. We cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable.

The only thing we can do is play the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you: we are in charge of our attitude."

– C. Chuck Swindoll