Success Over Stress

Academic and Interpersonal Stress

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

• Identify sources of academic and interpersonal stress and discuss ways to prevent and manage this stress;
• Recognize the importance of effective communication to manage potential conflicts with roommates, partners, professors, family members, and others; and
• Identify and practice effective and assertive communication strategies and techniques.

Academic and interpersonal stress can be significant during college, even for students with high grades and positive relationships.

As with time and money-related stress, many strategies exist to help mitigate and ideally prevent stress associated with studying, working with others, and maintaining effective relationships. Chances are most people will always have deadlines, projects, and changing and challenging relationships with peers or coworkers, so taking the time to learn effective strategies to use in these situations can help you turn them into lifelong habits.

We know that stress can impact many different areas of wellbeing.

Specifically, increased stress can negatively impact academic success. Research shows that the more stressors a student reports, the lower their average GPA. Additionally, students who feel less effective in their abilities to manage stress also have lower average GPAs compared to those that feel more effective. What about when the source of stress is academics itself?

For the purposes of this lesson, academic stress is defined as a demand that strains, exhausts, or exceeds a student’s available resources or skills as perceived by the student. Academic stress might manifest as frustration, conflict, anxiety, or poor performance. As with other types of stress, the symptoms and impacts of academic stress will be different for each student, and certain aspects of
college life likely cause more stress than others depending on the student and year in school. While many external sources of academic stress aren’t within our control—class times, course demands, group members’ personalities and preferences—we can strengthen our available skills and resources and practice strategies to exert some control over perceptions and experiences of stress.

As a student, it is reasonable to expect that you will experience at least some academic stress during your time at school.

Remember that moderate amounts of stress can serve as a motivator, pushing us to work hard and persevere when things get tough. Deadlines and internal or external pressures and expectations can push you to succeed and maintain motivation despite obstacles along the way. Feeling challenged, practicing problem solving skills, and coping with and learning from mistakes or failures is a part of life. However, it’s important to recognize the difference between typical academic stress and feeling overwhelmed by stress. When stress is impacting your health, frequently making you unhappy, affects your relationships, or leads to feelings of hopelessness or lack of control, it’s time to find other strategies, ask for help, or re-evaluate your commitments.

Recall that recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress is a good first step toward determining effective strategies.

Some of the more common physical symptoms might come to mind when you think of academic stress, including raised blood pressure, sweating, rapid heart rate, indigestion, headaches, and muscle tension. As a result of academic stress, students might also recognize changes in their behaviors like increased alcohol or substance use, poorer mood, and changes in eating and sleeping habits. If you’ve experienced academic stress, do you recall exhibiting any of these signs? Were you short-tempered with a friend or roommate? Did you lay awake at night worrying about a test or eat comfort foods for temporary relief? Have you caught yourself using negative self-talk about your academic performance or gotten sick around midterms or final exam time? When and if you see these changes, the next step is to determine the source of the stress and identify coping strategies that work for you.
What study tips can you offer other students?

**Video Transcript**

Mariam: I'm still learning how to learn. I think it's a really challenging thing to figure out because I feel like we aren't taught how to learn.

Grady: Studying with friends is huge. I always strive to find friends right in the beginning of the semester because it's really important to, for me, to A) develop friends in the classes to help my social wellbeing, but also simply have some study buddies in every class so that I can study with them.

TaeYoung: There's like a smart learning center in the library where you can get tutors. So if you have a hard time, then just go on there and ask them since it's all free.

John: I know anytime I wanna study or do homework and I got the, you know, the Wild game on or the Vikings, I am worthless. I'm always turning my head and looking and watching the games, so. Minimize distractions. If there's something you really wanna do, go ahead and do it, but prioritize and do your homework, either before or after.

Jean: Doing your homework is like practicing what's gonna be on the exam because it helps you to study and then you can just look over that many times and then just re-practice it. It's easier to actually do a problem and practice than to read.

Hannah: My favorite thing to do when I'm studying is go through my notes, go through the book, and write down everything that I think I need to know. 'Cause when I'm writing it down, then I'm thinking about it, and then it places it in my brain so that I can use it for the test.

TaeYoung: If you just Google online for some help, like YouTube, there's a lot of videos on how to solve problem that you are having troubles on.

Courtney: I like to use a reward system when I study. Like if I have to read a chapter of one of my textbooks, I'll set a reward like after I read five pages or so, I can have a piece of chocolate or something. And that gives me motivation to get through.

Kevin: I find using flash cards really helpful when studying for classes like biology because there's a lot of memorization, and for classes like chemistry, mathematics, I think memorization will not help you a lot. And I tend to focus on doing more exercises for classes like chemistry and mathematics.

Julie: Don't wait until the last minute because it's totally a train wreck waiting to happen.
What Study Tips Can You Offer Other Students? Video Transcript Cont’d…
Dale: When I take a class, I don’t take it to get the grade; I take it to actually learn what’s going on. And so, cramming for a test has never been something that appealed to me because even if I know I’m not going to get a good grade on a test, it’s not worth my time to cram for the test just to get a good grade on it because I’m not going to remember anything that I crammed then.

A common source of stress during college is preparing for and taking quizzes and exams.
It can be challenging to accurately prepare for a test given that we don’t always know what is being asked. However, here are some general study tips and strategies other students have found to be helpful:

- Ask the instructor for a sense of what you’ll be tested on and how to study. Should you focus more on key terms, formulas, real-world applications, or something else? If the instructor provides learning objectives or a study guide, take the time to read through them and be able to address each concept.
- Find study partners; they might know how to explain a concept in a way that helps increase comprehension. Ideally, quiz each other and share notes. Teaching others can also help you retain information.
- Identify with whom you study best and which classmates are more distracting. Don’t feel compelled to study with students that like to spend study time chatting or procrastinating. Their study style might work for them, but it doesn’t mean it will work best for you.
- When memorizing definitions or translations, use flashcards or an online flashcard generator and sharing site.
- Generate examples to apply the material. If you’re asked to learn a formula or process, walk through it with actual real-world illustrations.
- Create mnemonic and image-based learning tools. For example, pair a formula or series of events and their dates with a song to improve retention. Or, create a sentence in which the first letter of each word represents one of several items in an ordered list, like “My Very Easy Method Just Set Up Nothing”—used to remember the order of the planets in our solar system.
- To remember a certain number of items from a non-ordered list, pair each
one with a room in your house or apartment. For example, to remember the five food groups, picture a loaf of whole grain bread at your front door, an apple on your pillow, a carrot on your sofa, a fish in your shower, and cheese on your kitchen counter. While studying or during the test, take a mental walk through each room. The visual pairing can help promote recall.

• Lastly, if you don’t understand something after spending some time trying to master it, go to office hours to ask in-person. Your instructor or teaching assistant might be able to help resolve some confusion.

Community Resources:
Boynton Mental Health Services
University Counseling Center

• Read the text carefully and take good notes in class. This might sound simple, but just skimming readings can lead students to miss key concepts and specific details and skipping class or giving into distractions during class. If you’re prone to distraction during in-person classes, try sitting in the very front of the room so the only thing in front of you is the instructor.

• Some students find it helpful to read notes immediately after each class to help retain the information, instead of going back to them only when studying.

• Instead of making a study guide just before you begin studying, create it throughout the term or as you read through the materials. This way you can spend your study time actually studying.

• Depending on how you learn best, re-writing notes can help you retain the information. If you’re more of a visual learner, draw and re-draw diagrams or flow-charts. Or, try recording yourself reading notes using a digital recorder or recording app. Then play it back to yourself while you’re on the bus, waiting in line, or walking between classes; even latent learning can lead to retention.

• Spend the most time studying the things you don’t know, rather than the ones you do know.
Lastly, although not a study tip per se, you might consider surrounding yourself with people who put a lot of emphasis on academics, or are driven to excel in any aspect of their life. They can be a great source of motivation.

**Many students experience varying degrees of stress as a test approaches.** In some cases, this stress motivates a student to study and prepare for a test, while in others, the anxiety can actually interfere with performance or lead to avoidance behaviors, like procrastination. **Test anxiety** is defined as a person’s tendency to feel concerned or apprehensive or experience physiological symptoms of stress when knowledge is being appraised, and it is typically associated with feelings of inadequacy.¹ In other words, test anxiety isn’t just your everyday test-related stress; it can be debilitating.

The percentage of a final grade based on quiz or exam scores varies class-to-class. Students struggling with test anxiety may consider the percentage of points based on test scores when selecting their classes each term. Instructors typically post syllabi early or students can request this information ahead of time.

**Resource:**
Anxiety and Depression Association of America – Test Anxiety Information

**As with most other types of stress, many strategies exist for reducing or coping with test anxiety; you just need to find the ones that work best for you.**

Here are some tips and tricks that have worked well for other students based on both research and observations:

- **Reframe the test as “just work.”** Some students find that if they view a test as just another piece of work, it becomes more manageable, even mundane, but not anxiety inducing. Seeing a test as just work can help reduce stress by making the situation feel safer.²

- **Stop self-blaming thoughts.** Negative self-talk and pessimistic thinking are common for people who experience test anxiety. Shift your focus from blaming yourself for not knowing what you don’t know, and instead, focus on the answers you do know.

- **Similarly, practice positive self-talk that focuses on your abilities, rather than the outcome.** For example, instead of saying, “You can earn an A on this test” or “You can remember all of this,”
say to yourself, “I am preparing the best I can” or “Spending two hours tonight studying will make me feel more confident going into this test.”

- Take studying one step at a time. Trying to learn everything at once might lead to feelings of anxiety or lower your confidence. Tackle one concept or one chapter at a time and start studying well in advance. Once you’ve mastered a topic, move on to another one and be sure to acknowledge your progress and reward yourself along the way.

- Practice relaxation exercises while studying. If you feel yourself getting anxious, employ some breathing exercises, stretches, or look out a window until you feel yourself return to a calmer state. This will help you focus on the tasks at hand.²

- Write about your test anxiety. This might sound overly simple, but it can work. Researchers have found that students who spent ten minutes writing expressively about their anxious feelings surrounding a test were then better able to focus on the test, thus improving performance.³ The thought here is that more brainpower can then be dedicated to test taking, instead of being divided between test taking and worrying.

- Maintain self-care. If a test is seen as a threat or something that must be survived, physical needs might fall to the wayside. Maintain healthy eating habits, regular physical activity, and quality sleep patterns. While it may be tempting to pull an all-nighter to study, feeling well-rested can help you feel more prepared.

- Finally, seek help if you don’t feel you can manage this anxiety with strategies of your own. Talk to your academic advisor about services available on campus and consider talking to a counselor about ways other students manage test anxiety.

**Community Resources**

- Student Counseling Services
- Boynton Mental Health Service
- Disability Resource Center

*The previous tips can help you feel more prepared going into a test.*

Once the test is in front of you, you can tackle the questions in many different ways. Try a few of the following strategies to determine which ones work for you:

- At the beginning of the test, try performing a brain dump in which you write down dates, formulas, and acronyms in the margins. This might help you feel less anxious about remembering everything.

- Before you start answering questions, glance through the entire test to gauge the types of items included and point breakdown. Allocate your time based on how long certain questions will take you and how many points certain questions are worth; essays questions or long mathematical problems will likely take more time and be worth more points than multiple choice or short answer questions.
Read every multiple choice answer option before choosing one. Some will be clearly wrong, but one might be more right than another.

Make your best guess on more difficult items, and go back to them after you complete all of the questions. This way, if you run out of time, you will have at least answered all of the questions instead of leaving many of them blank after getting hung up on a difficult one.

Keep track of the time remaining, but don’t focus too much on the countdown. Overly focusing on time could increase feelings of anxiety and lead to concentration issues.

If you’re not sure how to interpret a particular question or what it’s asking, approach the instructor or teaching assistant to gain clarification on what is expected, if possible.

For questions that require calculations or more complex answers, write down your process. Even if you get the final answer wrong, the instructor may award partial credit for using the right formulas or clarifying your thought-process.

If you finish early, take the remaining time to review your answers and don’t be afraid to change them. However, it’s important not to overanalyze things; you’ve done your best.

Declaring a major and making decisions about future career paths can invariably become one of the most stressful college experiences for some students. Many feel pressured by family members, friends, and advisors to make these decisions very early on. As you begin your search, it might help to spend some time brainstorming things you like, enjoy, and are good at—hobbies, interests, favorite classes, or engaging topics—and about environments that you prefer. Would you rather spend your time outside or inside? Around many people or few? Making many personal interactions or not so many? Working with children, young adults, or people of advanced age? Do you enjoy ambiguity or prefer to have a sense of control and predictability? Would you prefer to be in the forefront of an organization or more behind the scenes? Throw all sorts of questions at yourself and write down the insights you make as a result. Many of these preferences may be hints at what type of work you would enjoy in the future.

While in school, take advantage of the many services your college has to offer. For example, talk to your advisor or consider taking a career exploration class.
Your campus may offer assessments or evaluations to help students determine personal preferences, interests, and potential careers.

Another factor to consider when deciding on a major is employability. What does the projected job market look like for your potential career? How likely will you be able to find a job in the geographic location you want and support yourself after you graduate? Will you need to pursue a graduate or advanced degree to break into your desired field?

Many employers or working professionals are happy to conduct informational interviews to help you learn more about an industry. You may seek out opportunities to shadow professionals in different fields. This might further confirm your interest or passion for a particular field, or you may learn that a certain career just isn’t for you. Ideally, you’ll find a major that matches your interests and that leads to a career you’ll love. Hopefully, it will challenge, reward, and engage you. Of course, most people change jobs many times throughout their lives, but it would be great if your college major could give you a good start for the journey.

Community Resources:
Student Counseling Services
iSeek: Minnesota’s Career, Education and Job Resource

**Expectations surrounding academic performance will come from a variety of sources throughout your college career, including your instructors, your advisor, the instructional staff in your program or major, your family and friends, and even yourself.**

Future employers will probably be interested in your academic performance, as well. Expectations can be positive, motivating factors in our lives that can help us realize our full potential. However, sometimes students feel overwhelmed by these expectations, as it’s nearly impossible to meet all of them. If the expectations of others are unrealistic or if they don’t align with a student’s plans and goals, they can create significant stress.

In an ideal world, all instructors would have reasonable expectations of their students and they would also explain these expectations in a clear manner. Of course, as we all know, this sometimes isn’t reality. Don’t be shy about approaching your instructors, as addressing student questions is an expected part of their job. Remember that much of their success is directly tied to the success of their students, and the vast majority of instructors truly want you to learn and succeed.
What external pressures do you experience when it comes to college life?

Video Transcript

Jean: I have two, I would say, two huge external-- it would, one would be family. They ask, as a daughter, they ask a lot of me. Especially as a single daughter, I have to be there for my mother whenever she needs, especially because she doesn't drive. I am her personal chauffeur, hair dresser, and cook. And because I live with my brother, I am also his free babysitter.

John: Well, parents definitely expect you to do well, especially if they're contributing to your education financially.

Julie: My parents weren't as lucky with their education growing up. They didn't get to go to college. So, I'm kind of the first one in my family to be able to go to college and get a degree in something.

Jean: Another one would be work. I am a program coordinator and I am expected to pull at least 20 hours a week. It is a career path that I want to go to after graduation. I also want to prioritize it and make them feel like I'm somebody they can depend on and be responsible.

Grady: Well, the biggest pressure for me is, without a doubt, ROTC.

Matt: I do a lot of different work for my fraternity. So I guess that's kind of an external force because I'm trying to balance that with my school work, with, I mean, my job.

Macena: There's always the social pressure of going out and all your friends go do this and

Hannah: Drink and have fun with everyone. And I guess I'm not that kind of person.

Macena: You need to just remember that you are here for an education and it's not all about your social life.

Courtney: I feel a lot of pressure from my teachers with the demand of homework mostly, and I feel pressure from my family because I really want to do well so that my family can be proud of me.

Hannah: Other external pressures I think are trying to fit in. Trying to dress like everyone else. Trying to be someone that I'm not. And through dealing with that stress and external pressure, I think that I've actually found the person that I want to be. And I think it's important to understand that if you're dealing with that external pressure that it's going to help you along the way.

Some students have trouble adjusting to a change in grading structure from high school.
The amount of effort required to get an A in high school can be very different from that required in college. Grading structure and workload will also vary from course to course, and it may be frustrating to put in the same amount of effort into two courses and earn different grades. However, some stress is the result of
expectations we place on ourselves. Unrealistic expectations create significant stress because they reflect unattainable goals. Unrealistic expectations and unattainable goals can lead to feelings of failure. Have you ever heard—or said—any of the following:

- Anything below an A is a failure.
- I should take the maximum number of credits each term to get my money’s worth and graduate on time.
- I won’t find a job after graduation if I don’t fill my resume with internships, leadership experience, extracurricular activities, and student groups.
- To get into grad school, I need to take the most challenging classes.
- If I don’t find my life partner during college, it might be too late.

Each of these statements has a rather unrealistic tone, which can lead to stress. Are the expectations you hold for yourself realistic? We’re not recommending that students set their goals extremely low, but we are recommending that you try to set rational and reasonable expectations for yourself.

**Perfectionism Test**
Are you a perfectionist? Find out by returning to page 16 of the online lessons or going directly to the Perfectionism Test assessment.

**Resource:**
Second Perfectionist Test

**What are some of the pressures you place on yourself?**

**Video Transcript**

Julie: I can get kind of hard on myself sometimes if I don't always let myself have enough time to study or I know that I'm not grasping something as much as I probably should be able to.

Abhi: Finding internships or extracurricular activities that I'm part of.

Kevin: Getting good grades since I want to go to medical school.

John: Make connections with the faculty, serve in the community, and hopefully be involved in athletics.

Abhi: Not only academics, but fun things like dancing and playing musical instruments and performing and stuff. So practicing for those types of things as well.

Macena: I actually think I'm a lot harder on myself than I, than others are on me.

Andres: Well, I definitely pressure myself to do very good in my classes to get A's, succeed, and also just be a good friend to everyone.
What are some of the pressures you place on yourself? Cont’d...
Samira A.: Since I'm second oldest of seven kids, I place a lot of stress on myself as being a role model for them and picking a career that I'm passionate about and making sure that I'm doing things the best I can.
Matt: I have trouble saying no to people and I really don't like letting people down. The expectation of me not letting people down or like doing my best to help people out kind of weighs me down because I'm like, donating a lot of my time and effort to other people's problems sometimes or burdens or just jobs they need help with.

At one point or another, most students probably feel academically overloaded and experience some or all of the following:
- Long and difficult study hours;
- Unreasonable workloads;
- Spending insufficient time on relaxation, self-care, and fun;
- A fast, pressured work pace;
- Excessive monitoring of personal performance; and
- Unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved with the available time and resources.

This can happen when a student registers for a class that is simply too demanding given other courses and obligations or by taking too many challenging courses in the same term. Perhaps the workload is generally fine, but towards the end of the term, the student finds that several projects and exams are due at once. Finally, it could be that work, social, or family obligations are demanding so much time that the academic responsibilities feel overwhelming.

Most students feel overwhelmed from time to time, but if you find that you feel this way throughout the entire term, it is probably a sign that something needs to change. If you find that your overload is due to excessive academic demands, you might try some of the following ideas:
- If the overload is related to one specific class, talk to the instructor to explain the struggles you're experiencing and ask for guidance and advice. This may be an eye-opening conversation for both of you.
• If you're feeling overloaded because of the rigor of your schedule overall, see your academic advisor. Together, you can take a look at your course track and decide when to take certain classes, perhaps trying to space them out a bit more. Your advisor can also direct you to many helpful campus resources, like tutoring services, the campus writing center, mental health services, stress-management resources, and research help from the library.
• Identify your priorities and organize your time around them. This strategy can be really helpful as the end of the term approaches, when you might have to manage several deadlines at once.
• Don’t forget that it’s important to consider self-care as a priority, too. Be sure to allow time for sleeping, eating, physical activity, and relaxing. This will go a long way in helping you manage your stress.

Take an honest look at your expectations. Is the overload due to a need to earn A's in every class or to perform better than your peers? Academic overload is real, but perceptions and beliefs can play a big role in the stress associated with course work.

Community Resources:
- Writing Center
- SMART Learning Commons
- UMN RecWell Center
- Library Peer Research Consultants

When have you felt overloaded as a student?

Video Transcript
Jean: I worked two jobs. So I worked about 30 hours a week. I was a full-time student at 20 credits. And I was also on board for a student group.
Mariam: I was taking, I think, 17 or 18 credits. But one of the classes that I was taking, I didn't realize I didn't fulfill the prerequisite class, and on top of that, I started a new job.
TaeYoung: I don't why I did that but I took five major classes. It worked around like 19 credits. Taking those amount of credits and classes, I actually had to spend all of life in a building, in the computer building where I'm really sick of. [sic]
Grady: I didn't do very well on my academics. A) because I also joined a fraternity and B) because I was in ROTC. And people found that I was a responsible person so they put more responsibilities onto me in ROTC because they knew they could trust me. So I had to get those things done, in addition to being in a fraternity, which has its own requirements and weekly meetings that we need to go to for a set amount of time.

When have you felt overloaded as a student? Cont’d…
Macena: My first semester of freshman year, I still had the mindset of a high school kid who really didn’t have to try. So I started with 19 credits. And it wasn’t like any Lib Ed classes, it was like chemistry, math, English. I completely overloaded myself and was drowning in homework.
Mariam: It was still stressful, but there was some good things that came out of that semester. And I learned not to overcommit myself.

Certain academic relationships can test your patience and challenge you to rethink your approach to conversations.

At some point, most students will have to stay after class or visit office hours to talk to an instructor. For example, you may need to ask about a grading decision or clarify expectations if they aren’t clear enough. Both might require a delicate approach. Likewise, when working as part of a group on a project or paper, it can be difficult to see things from other group members’ perspectives or agree on individual contributions. Consider these situations good practice for life outside college. For example, you may find you need to approach your boss with questions or feedback and get along with coworkers to effectively fulfill job responsibilities.

Have you ever worked on a project as part of a group?
How did it go? Did all of the members participate equally or see eye-to-eye on the direction of the project? Chances are, not every group project you’re a part of will be 100% functional or effective based on individual differences, communication styles, and coping skills. Group work can lead to a combination of academic and interpersonal stress. To be part of a more effective group, here are a few tips to consider:

- Get organized from the beginning. Pick days and times you can all meet regularly, come up with a realistic schedule, and decide on the best way to keep each other updated with progress; text messages, Google docs, or emails are a few ideas.
- Ensure that expectations are clear throughout. At the end of each meeting, group members should know their responsibilities and when each task is due. This doesn’t mean one person is assigning tasks, but rather everyone is agreeing
on responsibilities, perhaps based on a combination of individual strengths and preferences.

- Each member should try building on others’ ideas instead of dominating the group. Instead of thinking the group always has to go with one person’s idea, go with the best idea regardless of who it came from. Working toward a clearly stated common goal can help keep egos in check.
- If group members disagree on something, remaining objective and focusing on the issue at hand will help keep the conflict from getting personal.

**Resources:**
Collaboration Tool: [Doodle](https://doodle.com)
Collaboration Tool: [Workflowy](https://workflowy.com)
Surviving Group Projects

**Interpersonal stress can result from any type of interaction with others, including partners, friends, coworkers, family members, even strangers, or it can be related to social life in general.**
Sources of interpersonal stress might include a fight with a partner, conflict with family members, tension between group members in a class, or a disagreement with coworkers or other peers.

The people around us are often what make life enriching, interesting, and fulfilling. They can bring us joy, support, a sense of belonging and community, and even love, but they can also be a source of stress. According to a recent large-scale survey of college students, around 22% have experienced a break-up or termination of a personal relationship, 17% have experienced roommate conflict, and 11.6% have experienced parental conflict in the previous year.4

### Do other people ever stress you out?
**Video Transcript**
My bosses might stress me out if um they’re scheduling me, like, they’re over-scheduling me, since they already know, I mean, I’m a college student as well.

Family and family pressures are related to stress. Um, trying to decide on majors. Um, money stuff, finances, I think, is a big pressure on families and I think that stresses me out, especially my freshman year a lot.

Other people do stress me out. It's usually uh, people that are ignorant about, you know, what they're doing or just like to kind of slide by.

There's a lot of, like, social drama that comes with friendships as I'm sure, like, most people have come across.

**Do other people ever stress you out? Cont’d...**
My parents do, um, all the time. Dealing with their demands and um all the responsibilities.
Mom and Dad want, want me to either be a lawyer or a doctor. That's why you come to college and pay for college. And I'm sitting here like, well, you know, what do I want to do? And, and it's, it is stressful to talk, try and meet your demands with, with family demands.

People with different personalities and styles engage in relationships in different ways, view the same situation or conflict differently, and rely on different conflict-resolution strategies.

Using the Big-Five factor structure, personality can be divided into the following categories:

- extraversion
- agreeableness
- conscientiousness
- neuroticism; and
- openness to experience

There is no perfect personality. Each category can have positive and not-so-positive aspects. Similarly, most of us don't fit into just one. Rather, it's common to exhibit characteristics from several types. Research suggests that individuals high in extraversion tend to be sociable, energetic, and assertive. They tend to use problem-focused and support seeking coping more often and less self-blame and avoidance. Individuals high in agreeableness tend to be altruistic and trusting. They are more likely to engage in support seeking behaviors but also more likely to avoid conflict altogether. People high in conscientiousness tend to be organized, reliable, and hard-working; this category is associated with greater use of problem-focused coping strategies and less use of avoidance or distraction as a means of coping. Individuals high on neuroticism are more likely to experience negative emotions like depression, anxiety, or anger and tend to be more impulsive. Neuroticism is typically associated with more passive or emotional coping strategies like escape avoidance, wishful thinking, and self-blame, as well as more hostile or confrontational styles of coping with interpersonal stress. Lastly, individuals high in openness tend to be creative and flexible in their thinking. Research suggests they are more likely to use humor as a coping strategy and are more willing to positively re-appraise a stressful situation.
One helpful exercise in addressing interpersonal stress is to use the Big-Five Factor framework to objectively compare your personality or preferences to the personalities and preferences of those around you. It can be eye-opening to take note of how others differ from you in terms of talkativeness, organization, cooperation, creativity, and irritability. When you look at yourself and others objectively, you are removing the judgment—and potentially some of the frustration—often associated with individual differences.

All relationships rely on effective communication.
Stress management researchers Girdano, Dusek, and Everly note, “Good communication is mandatory. It means being open and honest with your feelings; it means being assertive enough to get your needs met; it means not being so afraid of conflict that you always give in; it means being able to compromise; and, finally, it means knowing how to disagree respectfully and criticize constructively.” 7,p209 In other words, good communication serves as a foundation of good relationships, whether they are professional, social, familial, or intimate in nature.
Why do you think ineffective communication and stress are so connected?

Video Transcript

Why do you think ineffective communication and stress is so connected?

Feeling like you’re not being heard is one of the most aggravating experiences of life. Um, I would certainly feel like a lack of communication and lack of information affects that pressure that I feel when I’m being stressed.

Stress makes you stupid.

Stress can make you, you don’t think as much when you’re stressed out. Um, then you just spit things out, you know? You don’t actually think about what you’re saying and that it’ll harm the other person because you didn’t think about it. Like, how they’re feelings might get hurt because you’re stressed out, because you have so much on your mind that you can’t think rationally.

Right, like, etiquette and social mores kind of go down the drain.

Yeah.

One aspect of effective communication is assertiveness or being able to say what is liked or disliked about someone or something without using degradation.

In Western culture, assertiveness means getting what is wanted, but not at the expense of someone else. Assertiveness is demonstrated in not only what you say, but also how you say it. In fact, body language is a significant part of assertiveness. Some body language basics can help convey assertiveness.

These include:

- standing up straight and tall;
- remaining steady by not shifting your weight from side to side;
- directly facing the person with whom you’re speaking;
- maintaining eye contact;
- speaking clearly and loudly enough to be heard;
- maintaining a steady voice; and
- speaking without hesitation.

Being assertive does not mean that you are selfish or aggressive; aggressive communication is often less effective and can be viewed as demanding, bossy, patronizing, or demeaning. Insisting that others obey your wishes is not the most productive way to relate to others. To avoid coming across as aggressive, avoid:

- standing too close, by maintaining reasonable space between yourself and the other person;
● glaring or pointing at them;
● yelling or shouting; and
● clenching your jaw or fists.

Each of these behaviors can be interpreted as aggressive. Messages delivered in an aggressive manner often get ignored or are misunderstood. Assertive communication is more likely to lead to the desired outcome.

For some, assertiveness does not come naturally, but these skills can be learned. Assertiveness is based upon the assumption that every person has certain basic rights. For example, you have the right to:

● say “no” without feeling guilty;
● put yourself first, sometimes;
● make mistakes;
● change your mind;
● take your time in planning an answer or an action;
● ask for instructions or directions;
● expect respect;
● do less than you possibly can;
● ask for what you want;
● be the final judge of your feelings and accept them as legitimate;
● have your own opinions and convictions;
● express your feelings; and
● feel good about yourself, no matter what.

Unfortunately, we are often taught that acting in accordance with these basic rights is somehow unethical or selfish. On the contrary, being assertive simply means that you are attempting to achieve your needs while maintaining effective interpersonal relationships. An important factor that precedes assertiveness is believing that you are worthy of having your rights met. You need to regard yourself as capable of making good decisions and being worthy of being treated with respect and dignity.

Another piece of effective communication is how things are phrased. Consider how these two statements would make you feel if you heard them:

● You never show up for your shift on time!
● I feel frustrated when you don’t start your shift on time because it often leads me to leave work later and miss the bus.

If your coworker were to use the first statement, you might feel attacked or want to defend yourself. The second statement communicates personal needs and explains why and how your actions are affecting your coworker. I statements are much more effective in initiating a productive conversation.
An **I statement** is a statement that begins with “I” and is formulated in a way that prevents the listener from immediately taking the defensive. When properly constructed, I statements are free of put-downs, blaming, criticizing, judging, shaming, and name-calling. An I statement points out the emotion you’re feeling, the behavior that causes it, and why the behavior makes you feel that way. Try to avoid forming You statements disguised as I statements. For example, “I feel that you are lazy” is not a properly constructed I statement and is more of a judgment or opinion. To create a more effective I statement, use the following template:

“I feel ____ when ____ because ____.”

**I Statement Interaction**
Please return to page 30 of the online lessons or practice completing I-Statements directly through this short I-Statement interaction.

**When we communicate effectively, our needs are more likely to be met.**
Another communication tool is the DESC Model of Assertive Communication. This tool is designed to draw attention to four important parts of effective communication. DESC stands for describe, express, specify, and consequence. To illustrate these four steps, we will use a group project scenario in which one group member isn’t doing her fair share.

First, describe the behavior or situation as objectively as possible. What facts would help the other person understand what you’re talking about? For example, a group member might say, “At the last meeting, each person came with a rough draft of their piece of the project. You told us that you had not prepared yours.”

Second, in detail, express how you feel about the situation. Use I statements and keep your comments limited to your feelings. Here you might say, “As a result, I feel worried about our ability to get this project done on time, considering the upcoming deadline. I feel frustrated when certain parts of the project are behind others.”

Third, clearly specify some options for the desired change. Again, use I language. This might sound like, “I would like for this project to be more collaborative and to be able to rely on each group member equally.”

Last, carefully consider consequences prior to the conversation. What could be a positive outcome if the other person makes the desired change? On the flip side, what will be the outcome or consequence if the situation or behavior does
not change? Here, use if–then and I statements to communicate the consequence. For example, “If we all put equal effort into this project, then each of us can focus our efforts on making our assigned pieces better and will share a higher grade in the end. If you’re unable or unwilling to contribute, I will ask that our grades be based on individual contributions and peer ratings instead of overall work.” Do not state the consequence as a threat; instead, calmly present your intended course of action.

**Much of what we’ve discussed regarding effective communication can be used in any relationship or conversation, but we’ll discuss a few strategies in detail.**

**Another potential source of interpersonal stress is living with someone new.** Whether it’s a stranger or a good friend, here are some questions you can ask each other to get to learn more about expectations and preferences:

- How do you feel about guests dropping by or weekend visitors? How often?
- What time do you go to sleep? What time do you get up? Are you a heavy or light sleeper?
- Do you anticipate spending a lot of time in our shared space?
- How much do you study? When and under what conditions do you like to study?
- What kind of music do you prefer? How loud? Can you use headphones?
- How clean and neat do you want the space? How would you like to divide the shared responsibilities?
- Which items of your property are OK to borrow? Which are off-limits?
- How do you feel about sharing food?
- How do you think we should handle misunderstandings or disagreements?

Going through these questions will no doubt help you learn some interesting things about each other.

Another thing that some students find helpful is to draft an informal *roommate contract*. At the very least, discussing these issues with your roommate will lead to better understanding of each other’s preferences.

**Resource:**
- Roommate Agreement (PDF)
- Roommate Agreement 2 (PDF)
What advice do you have for living with someone new?

**Video Transcript**

Julie: Living with somebody that you literally don't know and you kind of walk into being like, "Hey, I'm going to live with you" is kind of scary, first off, and second off, you don't really know the person that well so you're kind of getting to know the person as you're living with them.

TaeYoung: For someone who's living with a new people [sic], I say just try to be respectful.

John: Try to be accommodating.

Matt: What I've found to be like, kind of like, the best tips that I could offer would be to establish boundaries. Almost immediately, like it doesn't have to be an awkward conversation, but just kind of like, kind of figure out what your roommate is comfortable with and what makes them uncomfortable. I mean, it's, it's just like simple, simple things like, kind of like, when they go to bed, when they get up.

Kevin: If you're concerned about something or you want to let them know about something you don't like about what they're doing, I think it's very important to be, to let them know instead of postponing this communication until the problem gets worst.

Mariam: Watch a movie together or have dinner or lunch or something or if both of you like tea or coffee, you could have a tea-date or a coffee-date. Doing something, I think, outside the living space is...would be really helpful.

Jean: I think a lot of people judge their roommates too early, and they don't get a chance to actually get to know them and that ends up hurting both of you.

Grady: It's very different going from being friends with somebody to living with somebody. Maybe who they are at home is very different than who they are when you talk to them on the street.

Hannah: I think that people want to be friends with their roommates, but sometimes, it just doesn't work out like that. And if you're not friends with your roommate, then there are so many other people on campus that you can be friends with.

Dale: So, I don't know what advice I could give to someone who has a very particular and opinionated roommate, but my advice to particular and opinionated roommates is don't be so particular and opinionated. [smiles]

Julie: They're going through the same thing as you, pretty much. They're, they're trying to get through their college experience and everything, and you can do it together. It can be a teamwork process. But there's a lot of trust and communication that has to come, has to start for that relationship to build.
**In all relationships and interactions, the potential for conflict exists.**

Using conflict management strategies can help you navigate any disagreement more successfully. Perhaps one of the first issues to acknowledge is that there are times when we have a choice to engage in or avoid a conflict. Some issues are worth debating or challenging, while others simply are better left alone. The following six variables could be considered to help you decide whether or not to engage in a conflict.11

- **First, determine your investment in the relationship.** The importance of the working or personal relationship often dictates whether you will engage in a conflict. If you value the person or the relationship, going through the process of conflict resolution is important.

- **Next, consider the importance of the issue.** Even if the relationship is not of great value to you, engaging in conflict is likely necessary if the issue is a belief, value, or regulation that you believe in or feel obligated to enforce. If the relationship and the issue are both important to you, there is an even more compelling reason to carefully weigh the pros and cons of engaging in conflict.

- **Then, assess whether you have the energy for the conflict.** Often the issue is not how much time is available, but how much energy we have for what we need to do. In some cases, conflict can be an emotional or energy-draining experience. Be sure to account for this when making a decision to engage in conflict.

- **Next, make sure you are aware of the potential consequences.** Prior to engaging in a conflict, think about anticipated consequences. For example, there may be a risk for your safety, job loss, or disrupting a relationship. However, conflict resolution can also offer the opportunity for a better interpersonal relationship. Think thoughtfully and realistically about the consequences, both positive and negative, before engaging in or deciding to avoid a conflict. Consider talking through the potential consequences with a third-party.

- **After this, determine if you are ready for the consequences.** After analyzing potential consequences of engaging in a conflict, determine whether or not you are prepared for them. If the relationship and issue are important to you and you’re prepared for the potential outcome, then go for it. If not, determine what the tipping point might be and reassess the conflict at a later time if the issue still exists.
• Similarly, consider the consequences of inaction. Sometimes people must engage in conflict to avoid losing a sense of self or compromising their core values, ideas, beliefs, or morals. You may decide that the consequences of inaction outweigh the discomfort of engaging in conflict.

Since conflict is an inevitable situation in interpersonal relationships, we’ve included some steps that were developed to manage.\(^\text{12}\)

While these steps were developed for group conflict management, they can also be used in personal disputes.\(^\text{13}\) These steps will help you organize your thoughts and actions when involved in conflict:

**Step 1 — Diagnose the situation.** Determine the conflict’s content and history. Evaluate personalities and positions. Think about these issues carefully; you’ll be more prepared to handle the conflict constructively. Remember, it is difficult to reach a solution if you can’t first agree on what the conflict is about. You must also understand the other’s intended outcome. This step can take significant amounts of time.

**Step 2 — Involve all parties.** Be a skillful questioner by asking open-ended questions. These begin with what, how, when, where, and who. Use processes that solicit discussion, opinions, information, and priorities from all relevant people. Efforts made to understand the other party’s perspective through dialogue can break down stereotypes, highlight things you share, and initiate the process of negotiation.

**Step 3 — Collect all information.** Objectively gather information and facts about the situation. Remember, people’s feelings are just as real to them as facts. What is the other party’s goal? How do they view the conflict? What do they hope to achieve? Keep in mind, however, a resolution cannot be reached through understanding alone.

**Step 4 — Be a good listener.** It’s hard to manage conflict effectively if you don’t carefully listen to the concerns of each party. Listening is so much more than simply hearing. It also involves the way we stand, sit, or focus, and eye contact. Consider the following: if you were speaking to a friend about a recent problem and she began looking at her cellphone while you were talking, how would you feel? She might hear what you’re saying, but she likely isn’t listening. A good
listener sits slightly forward toward the speaker, maintains eye contact, and affirms, reflects, and summarizes what the speaker says. Good listeners do not interrupt or react inappropriately. When interacting with a good listener, a speaker should feel more comfortable exploring difficult issues.

**Step 5 — Reinforce agreements.** Whether they know it or not, people who disagree often share some common goals and values. Work to identify common concerns and reinforce the agreements. Write these agreements down as a reminder to everyone involved that overlap in opinions and goals exists.

**Step 6— Negotiate disagreements.** Disagreements are not negotiated until everyone understands the facts and feelings that caused the conflict. Review steps 1 through 5 for each issue. List important disagreements beginning with the smallest issue and work toward the largest. A negotiation is a discussion intended to produce a settlement or agreement. To accomplish this, some give-and-take or compromise must take place. Individuals may need to adjust demands to reach a resolution for the sake of ending the conflict.14

**Step 7 – Solidify agreements.** Identify agreed upon solutions and offer compromises for unresolved issues. If a compromise cannot be reached, table the issue and move to the next one. Review any proposed agreements carefully so you are sure that everyone understands them.

**Community Resource:**
Office for Conflict Resolution

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**How do you resolve stressful situations?**

**Video Transcript**

When dealing with conflicts or dealing with in person directly and this should be, should definitely look outside of your own perspective. Take yourself outside of your shoes.
I kind of just ignore it, you know? Let things cool down.
Assess the situation and just take it from there, I guess and talk it out, work it out.
Remove your own emotions from it, more or less. And argue more with the points of the other person instead of it being a personal attack. And that way you can walk away maybe with some sort of a new agreement but less animosity between the two.
I confront it, like, face to face. I don't like to just hold back and go to somebody else about it.
Today, with technology and texting there's a real urge to just do everything over texting and I find even my friends who are college students sometimes break up over text.
I think that's horrible.
How do you resolve stressful situations? Cont’d…
Video Transcript
It’s horrible. And like, you need that closure of a face-to-face communication. And even if it ends in a fight, which it shouldn’t, like, I think it’s important to just remember that face-to-face communication and keeping your voice down and working through things and having a plan when you talk about things with people is very important.
Eye contact. Definitely is a major one. If you’re, you know, looking off in the distance, I don’t feel like you can be listening to the person that you’re talking to at all. Um, I, I think also with the eye contact, body position of being open to the person that you’re talking to and more receptive to their ideas. When you can’t resolve a conflict then it just adds more stress to your life because it just adds another thing that you have to balance in your life.

Some interpersonal conflict stems from differences in personalities, preferences, and styles.

For example, someone who is not a morning person might butt heads with a roommate who is. How the two communicate about this difference will also be determined by individual styles and personalities.
Conflict can also greatly depend on our expectations of how someone should behave or what they should care about. If you feel frustrated with someone or a situation, ask yourself whether this frustration could be a result of a should you’re imposing. For example, if Stefan feels himself getting frustrated with a coworker who consistently works fewer hours than he does, could it be because he feels this coworker should be working more or that everyone should work equal hours? Or could it be because Stefan himself works too many hours? Shoulds can also result from cultural differences, regional differences within a country, and expectations based on societal pressures and social norms.
Other shoulds that some students feel is that they should be in an intimate relationship or find their long-term partners during college. This pressure could actually lead some students to enter or stay in relationships that aren’t healthy. No one should feel pressured to start or stay in any type of relationship; long-term monogamous relationships work for some people in
college and not for others. People can choose to start relationships at any point in life, whether they’re 18 or 60. The opportunity for a relationship might present itself when the timing just isn’t right for the individuals involved, but perhaps the timing will be right later or with another person.

Another should that some students place on themselves is that they should be having sex. This pressure might be a result of a common belief that most college students are having sex or having sex with multiple partners. In fact, 80% of students reported that they had only one or zero sexual partners within the past 12 months. Of those that had been sexually active, 83% reported that their most recent sexual partner was either a fiancé(e), spouse, or an exclusive dating partner.4 In other words, despite what students might think is happening on their campus, the actual number of students having sex and with multiple partners might be lower than they think.

People who choose to be in an intimate relationship might experience stress within that relationship related to expectations, level of intimacy, and unhealthy behaviors.

Feeling pressured to engage in sexual activity can be stressful whether it’s a societal pressure or pressure directly from a partner. Partner-to-partner sexual pressure or coercion might be as overt as threatening physical violence or as subtle as emotional manipulation or making a partner feel bad if they aren’t engaging in certain sexual behaviors. Research has shown that around 70% of both men and women report having experienced at least one incident of sexual pressure since the age of 16 and about 33% of men and women report that they have used such tactics.15 Talking to partners—both short-term and long-term, in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships—about expectations regarding sex can prevent dealing with unintended outcomes and conflict down the road.

Communicating with a partner about boundaries and safer sex is essential, be that in a committed relationship or casual hook-up. It is equally important to discuss the use of a barrier method—such as a condom or dental dam—in both a casual encounter and a long-term relationship. While sexual relationships can bring pleasure, they can also bring stress. For some, casual sexual encounters can bring the stress of uncertainty, insecurity, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infection scares or realities. Committed, monogamous relationships
can bring these same stressors and can be tested in other ways, as well. It’s always important to remain mindful of and communicate your values and beliefs with partners on an ongoing basis.

**Whether you’re feeling pressured to engage in sexual activity or your needs or expectations aren’t being met in the relationship, effectively communicating your concerns is important.**

For some these conversations come easy, but for others it can be a difficult topic to address. Consider the following tips when having these conversations:

- Use *I* statements like, “*I feel...*” Or “*I believe...*”
- Focus on the behavior rather than on the person. People can change their behaviors but not necessarily who they are.
- Make observations not judgments.
- Share ideas or offer alternatives rather than giving advice.
- Frame feedback in a way that emphasizes the value for the recipient.

Most importantly, remember that no one deserves to be made to feel hurt, sad, or unloved—*you* or your partners. If you feel a relationship is unhealthy, consider talking to someone at a campus or non-profit health clinic or a trusted friend.

**Community Resource:**

[SHADE](#)

**Resource:**

[Sexuality Matters Course](#)
While some interpersonal stress is a result of perceptions and expectations, sometimes it is a result of very real, harmful situations, as is the case with unhealthy or abusive relationships.

Characteristics of an unhealthy relationship include:
- Ineffective communication like the silent treatment or holding grudges;
- Lack of trust sometimes displayed by making a partner feel guilty for hanging out with other people;
- Jealousy;
- Putting one person's desires above the other person;
- Disrespecting previously made agreements; and,
Not spending time apart.

What makes a relationship abusive? Abusive relationships are centered on power and control and are characterized by:
- Intimidation;
- Isolation by controlling or limiting one partner’s access to family and friends;
- Minimizing, denying, and blaming;
- Using coercion and threats;
- Threatening to disclose private information or information about gender identity or sexual orientation;
- Using privilege like forcing gender roles in the relationship;
- Emotional, financial, physical, sexual, or digital abuse; and,
- If applicable, denying access to children or bringing children into the conflict.

If you are concerned you or a friend might be in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, people are available to help you through the process of identifying the signs; you shouldn’t go through it alone. To find support and resources, check with your school’s counseling center, student health service, or sexual assault and domestic violence center.

**Community Resource**

- Student Counseling Services
- Boynton Mental Health
- Aurora Center
- The Duluth Model of Power and Control (Power Wheels)

**So, what is a healthy relationship?**

It is one that is hallmarked by respect and equality. Characteristics of healthy relationships include:
- Respect;
- Trust and support;
- Honesty and accountability;
- Negotiation and fairness;
- Shared responsibility;
- Economic partnership;
- Non-threatening behavior; and,
- If applicable, responsible parenting.

In a healthy relationship, both of you:
- Are comfortable communicating with each other. You can honestly express your feelings, needs, and boundaries, and actively listen.
- Value what the other says and encourage each other to pursue personal
goals. You affirm the other’s feelings and don’t judge.

- Deal with conflict in a fair and non-threatening way without the use of name-calling or put-downs. You use negotiation and compromise when appropriate, admit when you’re wrong, and agree to disagree with respect.
- Understand that you are individuals first, and a couple second. Self-esteem can be enhanced by your relationship, but is not dependent on it.
- Are supportive of spending time apart and enjoying personal activities and friends.
- Trust each other and don’t get jealous.
- Respect each other’s privacy as well as autonomy over finances and digital information. You keep things the other person has told you in confidence between the two of you.
- Have equal division of labor when it comes to tasks or shared responsibilities.
- Respect each other’s desires and boundaries regarding sexual activity. All sexual activity is consensual.

No relationship is 100% healthy and will likely go through phases or ebb and flow as time goes on. A healthy relationship can provide stress-buffering benefits including support through some stressful situations. If a relationship is mostly a source of stress, it is important to re-evaluate the value of maintaining that relationship and perhaps consider cutting ties with that person if things do not change.

Academic and interpersonal stress are inevitable parts of the college experience. Hopefully we have given you some tools to more effectively manage stressful situations and relationships. Many of these strategies will come in handy both during and after college.

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