

# Coping Strategies for STRESS

What is stress and why do we have to suffer with it???

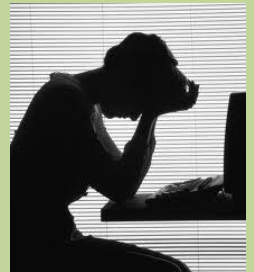


Stress can be defined as “a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way.”<sup>1</sup> So, the response is normal but you may not always understand how or why you feel the way you do or know how to control it. The amount of stressors in life increase both as we get older and when we are put into situations that may require us to cope with things we are not used to. For example, IMSA!

At your previous school you may have been surrounded by people you knew, in a building you understood how to navigate, living at home with your family who had learned to live with you, in a community you had grown used to over time. Or, you may have had a few close friends and made it through your freshman year, dealt with you

family even though they were difficult, and found ways to cope with the basic stressors of your everyday life. At IMSA, you most likely have encountered many new situations and you may feel like you are being pushed harder than ever before while all your friends and wing-mates are doing just fine. So what's wrong with you???

Before you start diagnosing yourself, let's try to understand why stress can be harmful. To try to understand the effects of chronic stress, let's look at some recent studies that focus on the effects of long-term stress on the brain:



*The renowned brain researcher, Robert M. Sapolsky, Professor of Neurology and Neurological Sciences at Stanford University, has shown that sustained stress can damage the hippocampus, the part of the limbic brain which is central to **learning** and **memory**.*<sup>2</sup>

So, while long-term stress may be harmful, acute stress can actually help with performance on tasks and your ability to learn and retain knowledge. Now that we know it's the long-term, prolonged stress response we want to avoid, let's think about stress management.

Everyone reacts to stress differently and some people may have an easier time coping than others (or, at least, they look like they do). The trick is to find out what YOU need to be ok. Remember, a little stress is ok and might even help you to work harder, push yourself, and get things done when you need to make a deadline. What doesn't work is pushing your mind and your body to the limit and having them start to break down or not function at all. When put in stressful situations, we may push aside our basic needs to squeeze every possible minute out of a day. Problem is, without a healthy body, your mind will not be able to function at full capacity. So don't forget about that pesky thing that carts your brain around all day – take care of it! Need some ideas how? Check this out:



- Remember to eat – even if you can't make it to meals, keep snacks around that will give you a balance of nutrients and keep you body energized
- Remember to sleep – (**BUT I HAVE TO STUDY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**) Yes, yes but if you

don't give your mind time to rest and process what you are learning it will not function as well as it could (power naps people!)

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress\\_signs.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm) Authors: Melinda Smith, M.A., Robert Segal, M.A., and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. Last updated: July 2012.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.fi.edu/learn/brain/stress.html#stressmemory> © 2004 - The Franklin Institute Online

- Remember to take a break – take 5 minutes of every hour of your study time to do something you enjoy (music, singing, drawing, talking to a friend, walking outside)
- Remember to break things down into smaller pieces – if you feel overwhelmed by a task, try to break it down into smaller actions that you can accomplish and feel good about



Though it may feel impossible to think about caring for yourself when you are stressed, if you can start getting into these habits now it will benefit you in the long run. Part of growing up and becoming ‘successful’ is learning how to manage stress while keeping an eye on the bigger picture. You may feel like you are in the worst possible situation you’ve ever experienced and you can’t see a way out or through it but if you or those around you can keep some perspective you may be able to better manage. Check out this great [article](#) on the subject written by an IMSA student.

Finally, when in doubt – get help! You have a lot of adults in your life who have been through a lot of life stressors. You may just need someone to hear you out and give you the chance to ‘vent’. That *can* be helpful but for some, it may not feel like enough. Ask friends and adults in your life that you trust what they do to de-stress. Upperclassmen and RC’s have been through the pains of high stress environments so look to them as role models for how to handle the hard times.

And don’t forget about us counselors! We see lots of students who struggle to deal with lots of aspects of the IMSA experience so please don’t hesitate to seek us out for support and guidance. And, last but not least, don’t forget to breatheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee. Try [this](#) if you need some practice.

