

We all feel worried or stressed some of the time. Stress is a normal response triggered by everyday life events. A certain level of stress is beneficial – it assists you to avoid dangerous situations, can be motivating, helps resolve problems, and helps us perform at our best.

Once a danger has passed, a problem has been solved, an assignment has been done, or an exam has been sat then usually your stress response settles back down to your manageable level. Stressors are cumulative however. Too many stressors at once or a major life event may trigger a response that begins to cause distress.

Feelings of stress can develop into anxious feelings that can become intense and overwhelming and begin to interfere with your everyday function. Your thoughts begin to race, your heart rate and breathing increase, and you are unable to concentrate, solve problems, or make decisions.

### ***If you often feel...***

- Overwhelmed or panicked
- Tense, nervous or on edge
- Irritable or short tempered
- Worried about physical symptoms
- Fearful when having to face certain objects, situations, or events

### ***If you often think...***

- Negative thoughts about yourself, or others
- “I’m going crazy”
- “People must think I’m mad”
- Constant worries and racing thoughts

### ***If you have stopped...***

- Facing certain objects, situations or events
- Attending university or seeing friends
- Being able to make decisions
- Being able to concentrate, or retain information

### ***If you are often...***

- Having trouble sleeping
- Being startled easily
- Dizzy, lightheaded or faint
- Experiencing muscle tension and pain
- Experiencing increased heart rate and shortness of breath

### ***...seek help.***

Talking through your thoughts and feelings can help bring clarity and understanding to what is going on for you, and help identify skills and actions that can help you resume living life to the fullest.

## **Dealing with stress and anxiety**

**Accept stress as part of life.** Stress can’t always be escaped, but it can be managed. Stress will be around when you leave university too, so see this as an opportunity to learn ways of dealing with it better.

**Be aware of your stress triggers.** Everybody has particular things that trigger their stress response – it may be writing assignments, giving presentations, being in social situations, talking on the phone, or being asked to do too many tasks at once. Knowing your triggers helps you to be able to prepare for these situations and implement strategies while you are in the midst of them!

**Know your stress response.** Are the first signs of your stress response that you begin to chew your nails, feel a pain in the chest, get a headache, lose concentration, or get irritable with yourself or others? Knowing what your stress response “looks like” is important so that you can implement strategies to manage it.

**Schedule in ‘relaxation’.** Know what helps you relax – is it music, a nice bath, playing with your pet, or pampering your body? Relaxation techniques reduce many of the physical symptoms of the stress response, such as increased heart rate and muscle tension, so these are important tools. The more you practice relaxation the more your body is prepared for upcoming stressors.

**Learn mindfulness.** This is the practice of focusing attention and awareness on the present, and away from your thoughts; it gives your mind and body a break particularly when you are stressed or anxious. See the Relaxation, mindfulness and meditation information sheet.

**Avoid excess caffeine, cigarettes, alcohol and/or drugs.** These all seem like they are helping in the beginning, but often they end up contributing to your stress (physically and mentally). Particularly avoid these if you are someone who struggles with your level of control of any of these substances.

**Eat well.** When people get stressed they often go to what is easy, or quick – or we may even stop eating all together. “Junk food” fuels the stress response. Turn to foods such as proteins, nuts and vegetables for healthy quick snacks that are good for your body and brain.

**Exercise.** Whatever exercise looks like for you, do it regularly. If you don't normally exercise, then start with a walk, and increase the pace each time you go out. Try a sport. Try exercising with a friend. Exercise increases feel good chemicals and reduces stress chemicals. In fact, exercise is the best stress reduction technique around - if you exercise for no other reason, then do it for this!

**Get enough sleep.** Eight hours a night is recommended. Sleeping can be especially difficult during times of stress. Try to maintain a good sleep routine, and use exercise and relaxation in the evening to help you. If all else fails at least try to get some rest. See your doctor if sleep issues persist.

**Focus on what you can control.** You can spend a lot of time worrying about things outside of your control. You can't control what other people think or feel, you can't control the past or future, and you can't control what someone at Uni, at work, or at home will do. You can influence people in your direct sphere but you can't control them. Focus on what you can control, which is your own response to the people and things around you.

**Manage your time and get organised.** Make 'to-do' lists and prioritise tasks. Look at putting off or delegating unimportant tasks. Write a plan or

schedule for your day, week, and semester. Learn to say 'No' when necessary.

**Deal with your worries.** Set aside some “worry time” each day. Is what you are worrying about a current problem or a hypothetical situation? Can you do something about this? If no, practice letting go of the worry and changing your focus of attention. If yes, is it something you need to deal with right now? If not then write down your worry and put it aside for your “worry time”. Use this time to problem solve - identify clearly the problem that's worrying you, seek more information, think about options, pick which option is best for you, and set yourself actions.

**Remember your goals.** Think about your longer term goals, and what you want to get out of what you are doing right now. Although it feels tough right now this is only a small part of the journey. What can you do right now that is in line with your values and heading in the direction of your goals?

**Remind yourself that stressful times are usually finite.** They do come to an end. Sometimes we know when this is going to happen, sometimes we don't. Know that whatever happens, you can cope with it.

**Gratitude can help.** Start a gratitude journal by writing down what things from the day, or week, that you have been grateful for. The stress response can filter out a lot of the things that are going well in your life - this exercise can help to remind you of those things.

**Notice your thoughts and challenge them.** Ask yourself, is this anxiety talking? Are these thoughts rational? Cognitive distortions or thinking errors can intensify when stressed or anxious. One such thinking error is “catastrophising”, where you think that things are far worse (or will be) than they are. Look at the evidence and challenge these thoughts with a more rational view point. Have a list of positive thoughts and affirmations handy for when you notice such moments!

**Defuse from your thinking.** Learn to be less influenced by your thoughts. Your thoughts are just words and pictures in your mind – you don't have to believe them or base your actions on them all the

time. Be selective about when you choose to “tune in” to your thoughts, and when you choose to “tune out”!

**Talk.** Let friends and family know how you’re feeling. They may have helpful ideas or can be the rational voice when anxiety is talking!

**And lastly...** Remember that things often seem worse when you are stressed or anxious. Try not to make any major life decisions when you are feeling overwhelmed (even though it may seem tempting to run away and join the circus). As this quote says - “We don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are” – Anīs Nin.

If your stress or anxiety persists, seek professional help.

If you are concerned about a friend or family member, look for signs of anxiety, talk with them about what’s going on, listen to their experience, and seek help together.

For advice and support, contact JCU Student Equity and Wellbeing. Alternatively, contact your GP or doctor, or other mental health professional. Support is available 24 hours a day from Lifeline (Phone 13 11 44) and Headspace (if you are under 25, Phone 1800 650 890).

## Further information and support

- Headspace Anxiety Information Sheet  
<https://headspace.org.au/young-people/what-is-anxiety-and-the-effects-on-mental-health/>
- Beyond Blue ‘Do you think you know anxiety?’  
<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety>
- Lifeline ‘Overcoming Stress’  
<https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/stress>
- Headspace ‘Understanding anxiety – for young people’  
<https://headspace.org.au/young-people/understanding-anxiety-for-young-people/>
- Headspace online and telephone support  
<https://www.eheadspace.org.au/>

## Student Equity and Wellbeing

James Cook University

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