What To Do When Stress is Affecting Your Studies - By Students For Students
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"Everybody knows what stress is and nobody knows what it is."
-Hans Selye, a Hungarian-Canadian endocrinologist

Concept 1: Understanding stress and knowing its effects
Be aware of how high levels of stress can impact your academics and your health.

Question:
Do you ever feel stressed to the point that it impacts your daily life?

Tips/Response:

- The first thing to recognize is that *everyone experiences stress*, and that it's common for stress levels to become uncomfortably high from time to time. 90 percent of Canadian university students surveyed in 2013 felt overwhelmed by all the things they had to do that year [1]. Know that you are not alone in feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or "behind", but also know that it's important to take steps to monitor and manage these feelings.
- There are *different types and levels of stress*. It isn't necessarily always bad! In fact, some kinds of stress (called *eustress*) can be associated with good things, like the excited stress that you feel before going on vacation. When stress turns negative or stress levels rise too high, it becomes *distress*, which is no longer pleasant or productive. You want to take action to lower stress when you experience distress, but challenging yourself always creates some eustress, so don't feel that you need to be completely stress-free! Manageable stress levels can also help productivity--there's a difference between feeling "I have a lot to do" and being motivated by the stress and feeling "I have too much to do" and feeling overwhelmed. You want to aim for moderate levels of stress that don't impact your life in an unpleasant way (see the Yerkes-Dodson curve in the figure below).
- The mental impact of stress can be severe, which can make it even hard to complete the work that may be stressing you out in the first place. *Stress is known to alter the properties of brain cells and disrupt cognitive processes*. The hippocampus, a key player in memory formation and learning in the brain, is highly sensitive to stress, which means that high stress levels can actually inhibit your ability to process and store information [2]. Reduced ability to form memories makes it very difficult for you to study.

[1] A. Miller, "Canadian students feel stress, anxiety, have suicidal thoughts, survey reveals", *The Globe and Mail*, 2013. [Online].
[2]J. Kim and D. Diamond, "The stressed hippocampus, synaptic plasticity and lost memories", *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, vol. 3, no. 6, pp. 453-462, 2002.
[3]T. Sterley, D. Baimoukhametova, T. Füzesi, A. Zurek, N. Daviu, N. Rasiah, D. Rosenegger and J. Bains, "Social transmission and buffering of synaptic changes after stress", *Nature Neuroscience*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 393-403, 2018.

- The physical effect can be just as bad. *Stress is linked to various illnesses.* For instance, although short term stress boosts the immune system, long term stress begins to inhibit immune system function, meaning you're more likely to get sick and stay sick longer. Stress is also known to worsen mental health and causes bodily changes that can increase your chance of developing various illnesses.
- Engineering is notorious for its arduous classes and workload. Sometimes, you may find that just being around your classmates and the academic environment may make you feel increasingly on edge. There's a reason for this: *stress is contagious*. When you pick up on behavioural signs of stress in the people around you, you begin to feel the same way. Studies on mice have even shown that "transmitted" stress has the same impact on a subject's brain as "authentic stress" [3]. This can make it hard to stop feeling overwhelmed when your friends are feeling the same way, which worsens long-term stress in groups of people.
- It's hard to start taking care of yourself, especially when you're under time pressure from school, work, or life in general. *Stress should be taken seriously.* If stress is not monitored and managed, it can inhibit your ability to do the things that you were stressed about in the first place.

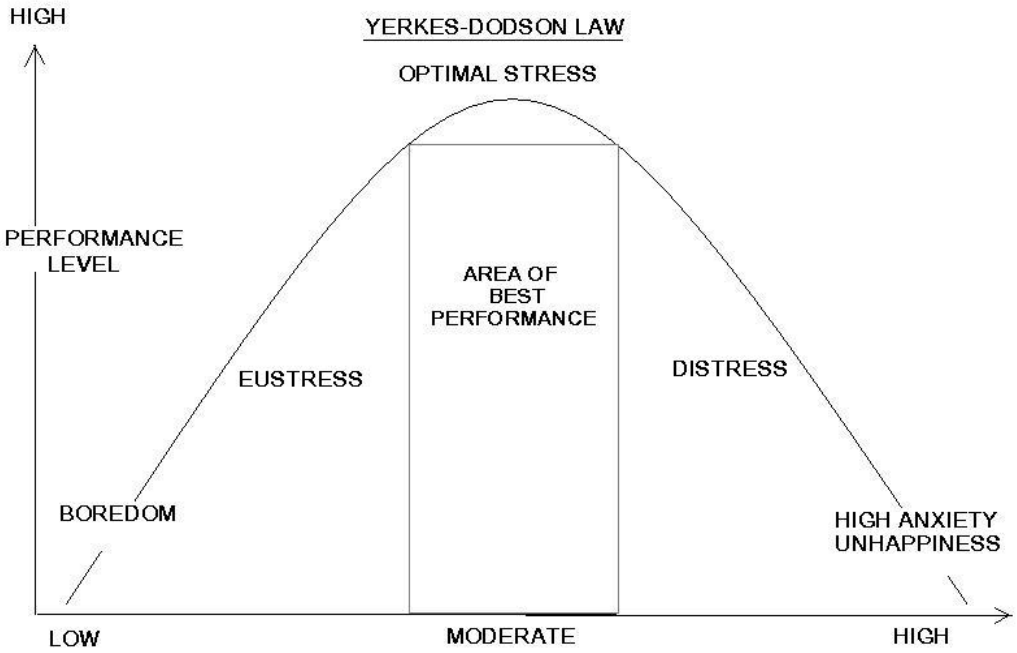

Figure: Yerkes-Dodson Law for Stress vs Performance, retrieved from Keith McGregor, Sarah Maeght and Tom Richmond (2014) Understanding burnout and reducing its impact (Chapter 59,pp.323-336). In, Palmer, C.(Ed.) Sports Monograph. SSTO Pub.

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Concept 2: Recognize when you are experiencing high stress
Stress can have mental, physiological, and emotional effects—learn to recognize stress in all its forms.

Question:
Do you ever feel tense, fatigued, irritable, distracted, or experience malaise for seemingly no reason?

Tips/Response:

- Be aware that *high stress can have mental and emotional effects.* People who are overstressed may feel overwhelmed or experience anxiety, restlessness, lack of motivation or focus, irritability, anger, sadness or depression. Unfortunately, these effects can make you less productive, which can worsen existing stress.
- Stress may not show up as mental stress--*there may be a physical impact*. Physical symptoms of high stress include headaches, muscle tension, muscle pain, chest pain, fatigue, changes in sex drive, nausea and stomach upset, and sleep problems. Different people feel stress differently, so you might not even feel any mental effects at all, and may feel physical malaise during stressful times. Be on the lookout for stress-based health problems!
- Be wary of the tendency to assume that what you're feeling is common and thus not a big deal. *People tend to assume they feel no more stressed than everyone else*, when in fact their stress may be abnormally high. Also, recall that 90% of Canadian students feel overwhelmed. Many will talk about their stress but take no steps to fix it. Although stress is common, its effects are still significant. Take care of yourself, even your peers don't. It will make you happier, healthier, and more productive.
- *Never compromise your health or other basic needs for the sake of schoolwork.* Over time, poor health, lack of physical activity, sleep deprivation, and strained relationships can all become major stressors in their own right. Staying up late one night to finish an assignment may be a smart choice, but doing this repeatedly lowers your ability to concentrate and focus, creating more stress in the long run.
- *Academics are not the only source of stress*, and they are also not the only source of stress with which school services can help you. High stress levels can come from all sorts of different life circumstances. According to one study, 55% of Canadian postsecondary students surveyed were juggling health, relationship, and academic/financial stress at the same time. Know how personal factors affect you.
- Always be proactive about monitoring stress levels, but *be extra careful during commonly stressful times*. For instance, many people find exam times especially difficult. For some people, darker winter weather may lower their mood in general. Financially difficult times like the start of the semester, moving in or out of places, and holiday seasons can also be notably difficult.

Concept 3: Take preventative steps

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You can be proactive about taking care of yourself and managing your stress, before it becomes distress.

Question:
Do you actively monitor your stress levels and take steps to prevent or lower stress?

Tips/Response:

- *Identify your stressors!* Understanding and naming what is causing our stress is the first step in reducing it. One way to identify stressors is to write down all the things that stress you out over the course of a day or week. Then look back at the list and see what sources of stress can be eliminated or reduced. (see the figure below for tips)
- Sometimes *high stress may be preventable with some effort*. Sometimes there's a clear-cut cause that's easy to work on, and the challenge is self-awareness, knowing your current capabilities and needs. It's important to be aware of what factors stress you out, and to work to lessen or eliminate those factors. Unsure how to do this? Ask a learning strategist, your academic advisor, or a counsellor.
- Sometimes *certain circumstances make stress unavoidable, which means you need to be adaptable*. For instance, long-term health problems or financial struggles often are sources of stress that need to be managed long-term and cannot be eliminated. Although you cannot remove stress in these cases, you can work to manage your stress by getting help whenever possible, making time to destress, and registering for accommodations where needed.
- The main difference between eustress and distress is perception. Stress always feels the same to the body, so the only difference is whether you feel prepared or overwhelmed. *Self-efficacy can turn detrimental stress into eustress.* Self-efficacy is the belief that you can accomplish your goals and do what is needed to succeed. Although it may not seem significant, the simple act of researching or asking what you need to do to handle a stressful situation can alleviate some stress even before the situation is actually dealt with.
- Remember that *mental health is as important as physical health*. In the same way that you might take the day off school or go to a doctor or take it easy if you felt sick or got injured, give yourself a break when you feel overly stressed. It's normal for your stress levels and mental state in general to experience minor ups and downs, but the downs always warrant attention. Check in on yourself and stay healthy!

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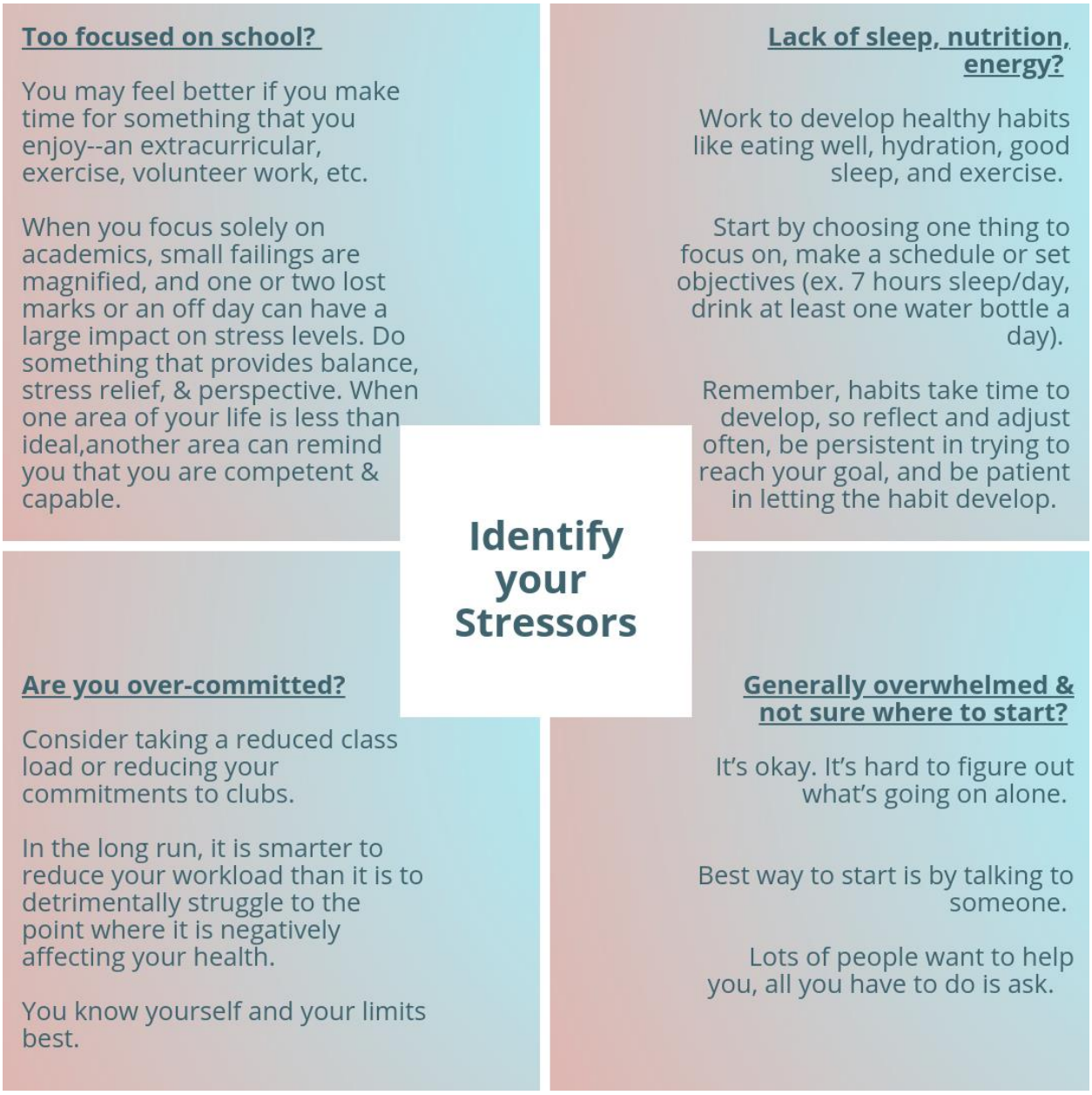

Figure: Skule™ Mental Health and Wellness tips on identifying stressors

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Concept 4: Use your resources
You don't have to manage your stress alone. Make use of the resources that the University, Faculty, and Engineering Society have to support you, including counselling, advising, international transition advising, learning strategists, and Health and Wellness.

Question:
Do you feel like you need guidance or support, but don't know where to go or who to ask?

Tips/Response:

- Often, the hardest part of dealing with a stressful situation is getting started. You should *never hesitate to ask questions*, even if you feel like you should already know the answers. Student resources are there specifically to support you with academic and non-academic questions. Whenever I don't know what to do, I ask someone behind a desk and either I'm in the right place or they tell me where to go. It's confusing and difficult to parse all of the information out there about U of T resources, so ask someone who does it for a living.
- Skule™ Mental Wellness: engineering student-run team dedicated to educating Skule about mental wellness. Who better to understand what you're going through than students themselves! We've written the *Skule™ Mental Health and Wellness Handbook* as a guide for self-care and how to use resources. While we are not professionals, we have used a lot of these resources ourselves. We are happy to talk about our experiences and help you share yours.
- *Academic advisors are your best first stop for information and advice*. They can directly help you regarding your program of study, course selection, and academic accommodation. They can also directly refer you other professionals here on campus. *We have a lot of resources just for the Engineering Faculty*: learning strategists, international transition advisors, embedded counselors. To use them, all you have to do is ask!
- The *U of T Health and Wellness main clinic* is located in the Koffler student services centre (next to BA) on the second floor. You can go there to see a doctor long-term or on a same-day walk-in basis. Health and Wellness doctors can and will see you about extreme stress and mental health issues, and can also refer you to the Health and Wellness Mental Health clinic one floor below. It is possible to get a doctor's note that will allow you to miss some classes, get assignments pushed back, or otherwise get some leniency that will allow you to recover in acute stressful situations.
- The *Health and Wellness Mental Health clinic* houses psychiatrists who will see you on a referral basis and can connect you with counsellors, group therapy, and other campus and external resources. If you frequently deal with stress that impedes your daily life, they may be able to help you.

Concept 5: Seek accommodations if needed

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The University and Faculty are here to support your academic growth, not impede it, so look for ways to work with the school to lower your stress levels.

Question:
Do you feel like your current workload is overwhelming or unmanageable?

Tips/Response:

- *Working with your advisor is often the first step* if you're seeking accommodations or don't know if you should be seeking them. Ask your advisor if your life circumstances, health, or stress levels are impeding your academic abilities. You can come to them with any problem, and they may suggest a type of accommodation that you've never heard of.
- Even without registering with any permanent services, *you can ask for extensions* and many professors will be understanding. Be aware that you are not expected to be a robot--things come up, and you can email professors directly, go to your academic advisor, or file a petition if you need more time on an assignment due to unusual circumstances
- If you're dealing with unusual circumstances that will stop you from getting work done or attending classes/midterms, *file a petition* (there's an online form on the student portal). This can be for many reasons, including physical health, mental health, severe family problems like major illnesses, unavoidable accidents like car collisions, and more. However, documentation is required, so try to get documentation for whatever circumstances you find yourself in. (Ex. I once had a pest problem that had to be dealt with immediately and didn't have time to study for my midterm, so I submitted a petition with an image of my email to the exterminator.)
- *If you seek accommodations for a disability* or other physical or mental health problems that make school harder for you, talk to Accessibility Services. This includes accommodations for shorter term issues like a broken arm or a critical incident stress-based mental health difficulty. If you're unsure, talk to AS about whether registering with them would be beneficial for you. For instance, plenty of people who experience anxiety are more comfortable writing tests in a semi-private room as opposed to a full classroom. If you want to register, talk to the AS front desk & your doctor and try to get your paperwork in ASAP, as processing can take time.
- Full course-loads are not always the best option. Sometimes, it's better to spread your courses out across more than four years, or to *take a partial course-load* during a difficult semester and take the remaining courses during the summer. It is better to take fewer courses and do very well than it is to overload and do poorly

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Concept 6: Adapt, reflect, learn, and forgive yourself
Learn from your experiences and reflect on your stressors to help you adapt to similar circumstances in the future.

Question:
Do you make time to think about how you can better manage your life, academics, and health to lower your stress levels?

Tips/Response:

- *Self-reflection is necessary for self-improvement.* It's easy to get caught up in a tide of deadline battling, but I find it much more calming to have a big picture idea. Life when you are always focusing on the next problem or the next exam can become overwhelming and unsatisfying. Every once in a while, take some time to think at a higher level about your goals, needs, and wishes. Is your course schedule working for you? Are you participating in all the extracurriculars and activities that you want to do? Are you actually staying healthy and taking care of yourself?
- *Talk to other people about what works for them*, but take it with a grain of salt. Everyone has a different stress tolerance and everyone experiences stress in different ways and for different reasons. Remember that in general, most people know what you're going through and would be happy to discuss how they handled it and what they would recommend. It can often be helpful to talk to a range of different people and try out the tactics that you think would be most valuable for you.
- *Find what works for you*. Much like people have different dietary preferences, everyone has their own way to best take care of their health. You may find some of these resources helpful, you may not like any of these. The best stress management is one that helps YOU manage your stress.
- *Keeping a journal can be invaluable*, even just a list of strategies you've tried and people you've talked to, or a daily log of your stress levels (like the one at healthyuoft.ca). It's easy to forget just how hard stressful times can get once you've made it through them, so a written record gives you an objective look back at how you've been feeling.
- *Be patient* in handling stress. We are stressed for long periods of time and that's not going to go away overnight. But like practicing an instrument or a sport, if we keep practicing how we manage stress, we'll be able to better understand how to handle it in any situation.
- *Stress management is not going to look "perfect."* There will be good days and bad days. Rather than perfection, strive for progression. Monitor and manage your stress levels to ensure that they're healthy and not progressing into distress. Slow and steady changes can lead to immense improvement over time!

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