Chapter 12

How to Handle Pressures Well

What is the difference between stress and strain?

Do you believe the way for your life to get better is for other people to change?

How can some stress can be good for you?

Can you be both optimistic and pessimistic?

What is the “good child” handicap?

How can you decrease your negative experiences and increase your positive experiences?
How to Handle Pressure and Strain

Some people deal with pressure better than others. You probably have several friends or acquaintances who are very durable and resilient. They cope well with life’s difficulties. You probably also know several people who can turn an ordinary day into a tragedy.

This chapter will show how to hold up well under the many pressures that can build up when you have to attend classes and study while you handle other important responsibilities, work, and raise a family. Before we look at practical ways to increase your resiliency, however, we need to clarify some misunderstandings about stress.

Stress has received a bad name in recent years. Many people think stress is bad. It isn’t. Too much stress may be bad for you, but a certain amount is necessary for health and well-being.

Dr. Selye Made a Mistake

Much of the misunderstanding about stress traces back to Dr. Hans Selye, the physician who created the concept biological stress in 1936. After decades of writing and speaking about stress, however, he apologized in his memoirs for using the wrong term. He explained that when he came from Europe to attend medical school he did not understand either the English language or physics very well. He said his research was about strain, not stress. He said he should have named his concept the strain syndrome.

There Is No “Stress” In Any Situation Until a Person Experiences Strain They Don’t Like

In physics a stressor is an external force attempting to deform an object. The effect on an object is measured as strain. What is a mild strain for one person can be extreme stress for another person in the same situation.

Many People Blame the Situation for Their Reaction To It

It is not unusual to hear people claim that they have stressful jobs, stresses at home, or stresses as college students. That is a misperception. They are confusing the situation with their reaction to it. It isn’t the circumstance itself, it is your reaction to it that counts. What is distressing for one person is an easy workout for another.
An instructor that one student complains about for being extremely tough is appreciated by another for setting high standards.

**Stressful Situations Can Be Beneficial**

Dr. Selye coined the term eustress ("good stress") to emphasize that everyone needs a certain level of stress. When we work at handling the strains we face, we gradually get stronger. Athletes build up their physical strength with frequent workouts. Professional training programs build competence by straining people to their limits. Emotionally stressful experiences can motivate people to learn new coping skills. Some mothers, for example, handle the addition of a fourth child to their family more easily than they handled having their first child.

**Stress Resistant Personalities**

Two people in an identical situation will have different reactions to it. Some mothers enjoy talking about their amusing experiences raising a family. Other mothers are so distressed trying to raise their families they need tranquilizers, counseling, and emotional support.

The situation a person is in is not the problem. *It is how a person deals with a situation* that explains why some people become sick while others become strong in identical circumstances. The following list summarizes the research findings about persons less likely to develop stress related illness. As you read the list check to see how well it describes you:

- rarely feel upset during events in routine activities;
- feel capable of taking effective action about upsetting events;
- draw action choices from a wide range of inner and external resources;
- experience family and friends as caring and supportive;
- manage self-change well; and
- convert negative experiences into beneficial learning.
- become stronger, better and wiser every year.
Recognize the Signs of Not Coping Well

Indicators that the pressures are getting to be too much include: sleepless nights, increased alcohol consumption, losing your temper over a minor incident, migraine headaches, frequent colds and illnesses, auto accidents, ulcers flaring up, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular problems, losing track of time, falling asleep in class, and forgetting to bring a paper you stayed up late at night to finish.

How to Cope Effectively With Lots of Pressures

For most adult students, the challenge is not having to deal with one major difficulty, the challenge is how to hold up week after week handling a whole lot of little things.

It is important to avoid feeling helpless and at the mercy of external forces. Here is a practical plan of action for decreasing emotional strain while increasing your hardiness and resiliency.

Decrease the Pressures

1. Make a list of everything you experience as negative, upsetting, or stressful.

Sometimes the only way to be more positive is let yourself be negative. When you make a list of everything you feel pressured about, you are not a negative person, you are an emotionally healthy person taking the first step toward coping well. Recognizing all the forces working against you is the first step for preparing to deal with them.

2. Express your feelings about your list.

It is not unusual to experience some physical and emotional upsets when you start college for the first time. Forgetfulness, stomach and intestinal problems, and sleeping difficulties are normal reactions to stress. These symptoms are usually temporary and should diminish quickly if you find outlets for your feelings.

3. Go through your list, item by item, asking questions:
   - Can I do something about this? How direct is my contact?
What if I ignored this or avoided contact?  
Can I change the situation in some way? Who could help me?  
What if I changed my reaction to it?

The aim is to find ways to minimize the impact of the entire list. It isn’t usually one big thing that does a person in, it is the accumulation of many little things. With this plan you diminish the effects of too many strains, avoid feeling helpless, and increase feelings of control.

Although I’m a pretty relaxed person most of the time, I did learn to recognize when stress was building up. I finally figured out that from time to time I would develop this overwhelming urge to clean the house, which meant that I was feeling too much pressure. I knew that things were really bad when the urge to clean the house changed and became specific—I wanted to clean the refrigerator! — MK

**Increase Positive and Revitalizing Experiences**

1. **Make a list of things you experience as positive in your life.**  
Ask yourself what activities make you feel happy and relaxed. What makes you feel good? Reflect on pleasant experiences.

2. **Ask questions about how to repeat, increase, or have new positive experiences.**  
   - Am I ignoring or taking for granted some positive aspects?  
   - What do I enjoy doing? What do I get enthusiastic about?  
   - What would I like to do that I keep putting off?  
   - Who do I enjoy sharing good experiences with?

3. **Do several things that make you feel good and are good for you.**  
It is important to be self-nourishing even though it may look like selfishness. Psychologically healthy people are both selfish and unselfish. They act in ways that are good for their well-being while still being helpful to others.
Revitalizing Activities

Laugh and Play With Friends
Successful students do not study all the time. Do anything you can to prevent your college life from getting too serious, too burdensome, and too heavy. Make a conscious effort to get into activities where you can laugh or play hard and completely forget your responsibilities at school, home, and work.

Stay Physically Active
Do something, anything, several times each week that works your muscles. This might be bike riding, gardening, jogging, racquetball, tennis, swimming, or fast walking. It may be a yoga class. In any case, activities that work your muscles keep you healthy and help you sleep better, which in turn will help with your schoolwork. If you are not doing much of this now, take another look at the recreation facilities on campus.

Take Naps, Meditate, or Listen to Music
Naps are a wonderful way to relax and revitalize yourself. If you have a car at school, try taking naps in your car. Take a short nap early in the evening instead of watching television before studying. Take naps on weekends if you wish.

Research into meditation shows that it has many beneficial effects. Find a place where you can sit and do nothing for a few minutes each day. Don’t use the time to solve problems. Focus your attention on a beautiful scene. Recall one of your most enjoyable vacations. Take easy, relaxing breaths. Most counseling centers have useful books, CDs and DVDs on how to increase relaxation and reduce stress.

Another option is to sit and listen to classical music while doing nothing else. Sit back and totally lose yourself in the music. The word “music” means something that enhances musing. So do it.... Muse....
Overcoming the “Good Child” Handicap

Your self-esteem influences how well you do in college and in life. Many people were trained by their parents to never brag or praise themselves. As a result, they never develop a healthy level of self-esteem. It takes courage to defy old parental prohibitions, but it must be done to achieve and enjoy success.

Without strong self-esteem you will probably find it difficult to even imagine getting a high grade point average. Your expectations and actions are controlled by worries about what others might think. You are afraid that if you got top grades others would think that you think you are superior to them.

Self-esteem is your opinion of yourself. Strong self-esteem is like a thick emotional skin. It acts as a buffer to shrug off hurtful criticisms. When someone is critical, your self-esteem lets you decide that you like your opinion of yourself better than theirs. Self-esteem lets you appreciate compliments. It determines how much you learn after something goes wrong.

➤ NOTE: Self-esteem is strengthened by positive self-talk.

Make a list of all the things you like and appreciate about yourself.

The actions outlined in this chapter will decrease feelings of pressure, increase revitalizing experiences, and increase your ability to do well in your courses. It is a simple, effective plan that will increase your hardiness and resiliency.

If you were raised to be a “good girl” or a “good boy,” told to never be prideful, never be negative, and never act in selfish ways, the coping plan will be difficult. Your parents had good intentions. But trying to go through life acting like a good five-year-old is a handicap in a constantly changing world.

Mentally healthy people can list what they are unhappy about, can make requests of others, and include themselves on their list of people they do nice things for. Here are some things to consider doing for yourself:
Becoming Stronger and More Hardy

✦ The ability to handle sustained pressure over a long period of time can be learned. An effective plan of action includes reducing negative, distressing experiences while increasing positive, revitalizing experiences.

✦ By seeing that a stressful experience is an experience of strain that you don’t like, you avoid feeling victimized. You can use strain like a workout at a fitness center. Consciously engage each strain, then pause briefly before engaging the next one. Just as bike riding, jogging, or swimming leads to getting physically stronger, using emotional strains as workouts leads to becoming mentally and emotionally stronger.

✦ Remember, it isn’t the situation, it is your response to it that counts. What is distressing for one person is not stressful for another. When you take steps to cope with pressures and negative experiences, you will experience less stress and strain. Martha Washington once observed:

I am still determined to be cheerful and happy in whatever situation I may be, for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our dispositions and not upon our circumstances.

Action Review Checklist: Handling Pressures Well

◊ I have listed all the things I experience as negative, and developed plans for reducing, changing, avoiding, or minimizing them.

◊ I have listed what is positive and revitalizing for me and have a plan for increasing my pleasant, revitalizing experiences.

◊ I am able to consciously like and appreciate myself.

◊ I understand the feeling of distress is emotional strain and that strain can lead to getting stronger and better.

◊ I am getting better and better at handling pressure.
Learning Team and Support Group Activities

1. Talk about the pressures you each feel. Ask each other “How do you manage?” Find out what you each do that is enjoyable, positive, and revitalizing.

2. Discuss your reactions to reading that an important step toward thriving under pressure is to list everything you feel negative about. Was it difficult to express negative feelings?

3. Talk about how you might have been raised to be a “good child” who never complains, is not selfish, and has low self-esteem.

4. Discuss how easy or difficult it is to engage in activities that may seem selfish. How have others reacted when you’ve acted in selfish ways? Discuss your feelings about developing strong self-esteem.

5. Did a disruptive change such as job loss or divorce lead to your enrolling in college? If so, how well have you dealt with your feelings about this matter?