Can't stay healthy for qualifying exams [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a graduate student who has been studying obsessively for qualifying exams for the last year. Other than chronic sleep deprivation, everything seemed normal until about two weeks ago when I started to get dizzy spells every time I stood up. And then a few days ago I had bad cramps and actually passed out from the pain? I regained consciousness on the floor. This happened to me a few years ago, but I didn't really worry about it. Now it seems a bit strange and I'm wondering if it has anything to do with my poor diet (I don't really eat meals), chain-smoking, overconsumption of diet coke (at least two liters a day), etc. Or perhaps I just need some fresh air? (and yet I run every week) I really need to be healthy for the exams, but don't know how much longer I can keep this up. Feel like I'm on drugs all the time.

? Dizzy and stressed

P.S. I used to be anorexic, and even though I'll always feel fat, I no longer try to control my weight (am 5.5", 105 lbs).

Answer

Dear Dizzy and stressed,

Putting your health first during exam time can be a challenge, but if you want to score well, take care of yourself now! If you are experiencing such extreme dizziness and discomfort it is of utmost importance to seek out medical care immediately. Now, on to tackling some of the related issues you brought forward in your question.

Eating disorders, such as anorexia, can take enormous tolls on your health, including fatigue, dizziness, and/or fainting, irregular heart rhythms, low blood pressure, and dehydration. While you may have found a healthier place regarding anorexia, it is likely that your symptoms are related to your current eating patterns. These symptoms can have major negative effects on your body, and it is recommended that you take action as soon as possible. You may want to call The National Eating Disorders Association [2] eating disorders information and referrals line at 1.800.931.2237. More information can also be found in Eating disorder resources on the web. [3]

In your situation, it may be highly beneficial to learn how to manage stress in a constructive way. Fortunately, there are many things you can do to decrease your stress and up your wellbeing. Some people exercise, meditate, breathe deeply, pursue a hobby, and/or seek
support from others. Don't forget about your ZZZ's, too! Chronic sleep deprivation (going for extended periods of time with less sleep than your body needs) can cause a variety of physical and psychological problems. You may want to check out The downsides of sleep deprivation [4] for more on this topic.

Finally, you may want to address your smoking habits and soda intake. Excessive soda consumption (such as consuming at least two liters of diet coke per day) can have significant consequences on your health. Soft drinks are acidic, which can wear down tooth enamel and cause tooth decay. Too much caffeine can cause anxiety and sleep loss. For quitting colas, you may want to check out Getting off colas [5]. Cutting out the chain smoking can improve your respiratory and heart health as well.

It may be a long and arduous road to addressing your health concerns, but it will sure be worth it (for your overall well-being and your academics)!

Alice!

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