Stress, anxiety, and learning to cope [1]

Dear Alice,

I am a graduate student, doing very well in my coursework and research. However, I feel extreme anxiety in doing anything, e.g., starting a problem set, writing a program, etc. I wonder, what are the common causes of anxiety and what I may be suffering from. I would like to be calm and relaxed and not anxious and stressed. I know about meditations, etc., but what I would really like is some psychological insight.

Thanks,
Anxiously Awaiting

Answer

Dear Anxiously Awaiting,

Feeling anxious is a common experience among students. It may take the form of test anxiety or the fear of not being able to meet expectations or perform up to one's abilities. Some common sources of anxiety include schoolwork, relationships, worries about the future, the environment, etc. Simply put, anxiety is one form of the body's response to stress.

Physically, everyone responds to stressors in basically the same, predictable way. Emotionally and behaviorally, though, individuals respond in different ways. These responses to stress depend on a complex set of factors including temperament, health, life experiences, beliefs and ideas, and coping skills. Some of these responses to stress may include anxiety, depression, fear, or crying. To cope with stress, try some of these tips:

- Many students find it useful to meet regularly with other students to talk about schoolwork and the pressures involved — it works as a stress release and a peer support system.
- Eating well-balanced meals, sticking to a schedule of physical activity, and making sure to get enough sleep may not only keep your energy levels up but may help to burn off some of the stress that's building up.
- Cut down on the caffeine. Although the boost of energy you may feel after a cup of coffee or soda may feel like it's helping, the caffeine high may also be contributing to the anxious feeling you're experiencing.
- Write down a list of everything that is stressing you out. Getting it all out on paper (in a blog, Word document, journal, or whatever you prefer) may allow you to realize that although you can’t control everything, it’s not the end of the world.
- Create a schedule of your commitments that allows you to recognize areas where you may want to scale back or times when you could fit in a few moments to relax and de-stress.
- Cut yourself some slack. It’s okay if you can’t do everything on your to-do list. There will likely be other opportunities to do what you want to do.
- As you already mentioned, relaxation techniques such as meditation may help you refocus even when you’ve got a lot on your plate.

Stress management techniques help you to deal effectively with daily stressors and give you tools for handling and responding to the inevitable pressures you face. For more strategies, be sure to check out the related Q&As. If you find that your anxiety level increases so much so that you’re unable to follow your daily routines and keep up with your work, you may want to consider enlisting some professional help. Consider speaking with a professional that you feel comfortable with; such as a health care provider at your school or a mentor, professor, or spiritual counselor.

The first step to overcoming your anxiety is being aware that it exists and exploring its sources. With these tips, hopefully you’ll be on the path to a less anxious college experience.

Alice!
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Published date:
Nov 01, 1994
Last reviewed on:
May 06, 2015
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