

Keeping Stress from Evolving into Distress: Managing Student Stress Through Course Design

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Defining Stress, Distress and Their Origins

Stress is an omnipresent feature of most Americans lives (American Psychological Association 2010). The American Psychological Association defines stress as a “pattern of specific and nonspecific responses an organism makes to stimulus events that disturb its equilibrium and tax or exceed its ability to cope” (Gerrig and Zimbardo 2002).

Stress affects all Americans regardless of age, gender, race, socioeconomic status or prior life experience. Typically those who are experiencing stress report feeling “overwhelmed, worried or run-down” (Alvord et al., n.d.). Now more than ever, college students feel stressed in the university setting (Yorke 2004). These feelings are particularly acute among first and second year students who may be away from home for the first time and trying to adjust to college life (Misra and McKean 2000).



Stress can be both beneficial and harmful. Stress is beneficial when it leads to the production of energy boosts that increase alertness and help individuals power through high stress situations such as exams and/or work deadlines. This type of stress is typically referred to as eustress. On the other hand, stress is harmful when it is experienced in excess (Alvord et al., n.d.). This form of stress is referred to as distress. According to the American Psychological Association, distress can lead to adverse health outcomes that affect the immune, cardiovascular, neuroendocrine and central nervous systems (Alvord et al., n.d.). While the *Princeton Review* recently found that Vanderbilt has the happiest students in the country, students in distress remain a concern for those who lead, and interact with, students in Vanderbilt classrooms.

Within the academic setting, causes of student distress may include:

- Test anxiety, a form of performance anxiety where a person experiences high levels of distress or uneasiness before, during, or after an examination. Test anxiety interferes with students’ ability to perform in testing situations
- Perfectionism, the need to be or appear perfect
- Imposter syndrome, a persistent belief or feeling that one is inadequate even in the face of success
- Stereotype threat, a self-confirming belief that one may be evaluated based on a negative stereotype of a group in which they belong
- Generalized anxiety, ongoing anxiety and worry that interferes with day-to-day activities

References

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How Distress Manifests in the College Setting

Vanderbilt Center for Student Wellbeing has identified several behavioral, emotional and psychological signs of student distress. The repeated occurrence of any combination of the following may indicate a student in distress:

Behavioral signs:

- Academic performance concerns, uncharacteristic changes
- Declining grades or reduced class participation
- Incomplete or missing assignments
- Repeated requests for extensions, incompletes, or withdraws
- Increased absenteeism or tardiness
- Disruptive classroom behavior
- Apparent memory loss or difficulty concentrating
- Cheating, rule breaking, or defiance
- Poor organization skills or trouble with note taking
- Bizarre, aggressive or morbid comments or written content
- Expressions of feeling hopeless, helpless, guilty and/or worthless
- Self-injury or other self-destructive behavior

Psychological and emotional signs:

- Chronic fatigue, falling asleep in class
- Symptoms of being easily distracted, "spacey," or a tendency to daydream
- Nervousness or tearfulness
- Marked changes in regular habits or activities
- Significant weight gain or loss
- Signs of intoxication, dilated or constricted pupils, or apparent hangovers
- Poor or declining physical appearance, hygiene, and grooming
- Hyperactivity or rapid, pressured speech
- Extreme boredom, negativism, defensiveness, and secretiveness
- Comments by others about alcohol or drug use
- Erratic behavior, sudden mood swings, inappropriate anger, hostility, and irritability
- Hyper-expansiveness or grandiosity
- Withdrawal from others or loss of pleasure in everyday activities
- Talk of suicide or harm to self or others

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Why Make an Effort to Reduce Distress Among Students?

High levels of stress:

1. Affect students' cognitive capabilities including information processing and memory (Sandi and Pinelo-Nava 2007; Sandi 2004);
2. Inform the mood and mindset that students bring to the classroom (Felstein 2004); and
3. Can lead to student burnout and unnecessary attrition, especially among students of color (Smedley, Myers, and Harrell 1993).

Being proactive about managing student stress is beneficial for instructors and teaching assistants for several reasons:

1. A stressful classroom climate often increases the personal stress level of course instructors and teaching assistants (Jennings and Greenberg 2009).
2. Heightened stress among classroom leaders can reduce teachers' ability to empathize with their students, an especially important issue when teaching in culturally diverse settings (Gault and Sabini 2000).
3. Decreases in teachers' ability to empathize with students may eventually lead to compassion fatigue, a form of burnout that is characterized by extreme mental, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion (Schutz and Zembylas 2009).
4. Compassion fatigue can lead to teacher burnout, or overwhelming feelings of exhaustion, frustration and anger that impairs personal and social functioning and may lead individuals to quit their job (Maslach and Goldberg 1999).

Taking a proactive stance toward student stress provides classroom leaders with a unique opportunity to help students:

1. Engage in self-reflection about the ways that stress affects their daily lives including the feelings they bring to classroom, course assignments and interpersonal exchanges with faculty and teaching staff;
2. Become more personally aware of how to manage stress in order to improve academic performance and position themselves to achieve their professional goals; and
3. Develop healthy practices with respect to time management, general work practices and study skills.

Reducing Distress in the Classroom

When there is an imminent threat of harm of a life-endangering situation, take immediate action to ensure the safety of the student and others. **Call Vanderbilt Police Department emergency line 615-421-1911.**

In non-life threatening situations, special attention to issues of course design has the potential to reduce unhealthy levels of stress. Some options that are available to course instructors are listed below; addition options and examples are available in the full guide at cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/stress.

Syllabus Construction

Assignments

- Stagger due dates for course assignments
- Include low stake assignments that help identify students who may need additional instruction early in the semester
- For course-long assignments, incorporate periodic “check-ins” during office hours or cancel regular classroom sessions to meet with students one-on-one
- Allow students to have one “do over” that provides students with an opportunity to either correct missed test questions or resubmit a revised paper draft for partial credit
- Provide a clearly written explanation of your late assignment and extension policies

Assessment

- Describe and/or model “unsatisfactory”, “sufficient” and “satisfactory” classroom participation for students
- Incorporate multiple methods of assessing student participation in courses where it is a component of students’ final grade (e.g. completing a worksheet of main concepts, themes, etc. and turning in for a grade)

Grading

- Provide students with a grading rubric prior to giving assignments or at the beginning of the semester (View sample rubrics from the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education: <http://course1.winona.edu/shatfield/air/rubrics.htm>)
- Provide grade and feedback for assignments before the next assignment is due
- Incorporate language about the importance of learning from failure and disappointment in the course syllabus and one-on-one conversations
- Post exam answer keys so that students can learn from their mistakes

Campus Resources

- Include links to on-campus and/or online resources that educate students about how to study, write, prepare citations, etc. (e.g. The Writing Studio)
- Alert students to other resources on campus that can aid in stress management

Course Management

- Allow students to select which date(s) they will take on a leadership role in class (i.e. leading discussion, presenting their work, etc.)
- Consult with other faculty members in your department about due dates and assignments they have implemented on a regular basis
- Ask students to communicate days/weeks that are especially packed with assignments in their other classes at the beginning of the semester

Communication Policy

- Clearly articulate communication practices and preferences (i.e. email response policy, etc.)

In-Class Meetings

- Interact with students with an awareness of the effect of one’s body language (i.e. frowning, smiling, etc.) on student behavior and performance
- Use affirming language when students provide correct answers, but more importantly, when they make an effort to contribute in class
- Incorporate ongoing mindfulness practices that provide students with tools to cope with anxiety and stress in the moment

Teaching about Learning

- Schedule periodic workshops that impart skills and information needed to successfully demonstrate learning (i.e. how to construct a thesis statement, how to structure a analytical essay, etc.)
- Post templates of model work on assignments in conjunction with providing students with feedback on their submitted work

Further Resources

Vanderbilt Campus Resources

The Center for Student Wellbeing strives to create a culture that supports the personal development and academic success of students using an integrative, holistic framework. vanderbilt.edu/healthydores; phone 615-322-0480.

Liaisons Educating & Advocating for Psychological Support (LEAPS) is a group of undergraduate students who serve as liaisons between the PCC and the campus and serve as peer educators to promote positive mental health and well being on the Vanderbilt campus. medschool.vanderbilt.edu/pcc/leaps.

Psychological and Counseling Center Faculty and Staff Resources features information on online interactive training for identifying signs of psychological distress and suicide prevention. medschool.vanderbilt.edu/pcc/faculty-staff-information; Phone 615-322-2571.

Students in Distress: A Guide for Faculty and Staff provides tools for how to approach students who may be in distress, make referrals and receive further training. vanderbilt.edu/healthydores/students-in-distress-a-guide-for-vanderbilt-faculty-staff.

Vanderbilt Recovery Support provides support service to assist students who are in recovery from substance use issues and are working towards success in their academic, social, personal and professional lives. vanderbilt.edu/recoverysupport.

National Resources

Anxiety and Depression Association of America promotes the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety, depression, OCD, PTSD and related disorders and works to improve the lives of those who suffer from these diseases through education, practice and research. adaa.org/about-adaa/mission-history.

American College Health Association champions the health of college students and campus communities through advocacy, education and research. acha.org.