

Maintaining the Balance: A Self-Help Guide for Students

Being a college student can be a difficult balancing act. It is easy to get weighed down with the pressures of academics, social life, and choosing a major and career. If personal problems are piled on top of these pressures, you can feel overwhelmed . . . and lose your balance.

This page was designed to help you:

- identify some of the ways you may cope with problems
- clarify differences between effective and ineffective coping strategies
- recognize signs of distress in yourself and others
- learn ways to help yourself and others deal effectively with problems
- provide information about resources on campus and in the community

Maintaining the Balance

Trust Your Feeling -- Retain Your Perspective -- Support each Other

Some personal problems you might experience as a college student are:

- Loneliness and Isolation
- Parental Divorce
- Financial Pressures
- Death of a Loved One
- Unplanned Pregnancy
- Identity Confusion
- Pressures from Family
- Medical Problems
- Recent or Past Sexual or Physical Assault
- Cultural Oppression
- Discrimination
- Questioning Beliefs or Worldviews

How Do You Cope With Stress?

It's not always possible to avoid personal problems. However, you do have some control over how you deal or cope with them when they occur. In fact, how you cope can make the difference between keeping your balance or losing it completely.

Ineffective Coping Strategies

- **Withdrawing** from other people and isolating yourself is a common reaction to problem situations. It is a way of avoiding being hurt again by hiding from others what you may feel is your own inadequacy. The problem is, it leaves you with no support.
- **Self harm**, in any form

- **Substance abuse**, whether alcohol or other drugs, is another coping strategy commonly used among college students to escape from problems, temporarily alleviating stress by self-medicating. Unfortunately; when you come down or sober up, the problems are still there.
- **Eating disorders**, like anorexia nervosa, bulimia, and compulsive overeating, are used in an attempt to combat uncomfortable feelings. If you have an eating disorder you might be trying to "stuff" your feelings by eating, or "control" stress by controlling your weight through starving or purging. The problem is, the feelings and stress keep returning.
- **Acting aggressively** towards other people, either verbally or physically, is another negative way you might attempt to deal with stressful situations and feelings. Hurting others only creates further problems, like guilt and isolation.
- **Suicidal thoughts**, which may lead to suicide attempts, are another destructive way to cope with personal crisis. If you're thinking of suicide you may have experienced a loss of a relationship, self-esteem, or status, such as failing your classes. You may be feeling hopeless, helpless to change the situation, and isolated. **Suicidal thoughts can reflect a need for foundational changes in one's life.** Seeking support and counseling can offer the necessary perspective and skills to reawaken meaning and purpose in life, though it may seem none exists.

Effective Coping Strategies

The danger in using ineffective coping strategies to deal with stress is that they can become habitual, even addictive or fatal. They can become a new problem, adding their weight to the balancing act. They never really help resolve the original problem. Most of us use both positive and negative coping strategies in our lives.

Four important ways to cope with a personal crisis in a positive way:

1. Being grounded in the **present** moment
2. Explore and accept your **feelings**
3. Identify and clarify your **thoughts**
4. Get **support** by communicating your thoughts and feelings about the problem to someone you trust

Trusting Your Feelings

There are certain feelings common to all of us when we are overwhelmed with stress and pressure in our lives and experience an emotional crisis.

- **Anxiety** is a feeling of nervousness, vulnerability, fear, loss of control, and a loss of self-confidence. It is a response to perceived threat, like having to perform for an exam.
- **Depression** is a feeling of deep sadness. It is often a response to perceived loss or failure and it may include feeling powerless, hopeless, or unworthy.
- **Anger** is a feeling of deep frustration in response to the belief that you're not getting what you want, or that you're being unfairly treated.

Feelings are Normal

Feeling anxious, depressed, or angry at times is understandable, normal, and perhaps even unavoidable given all the pressure of college life. It's a way for your body and mind to tell you there is too much going on, you're juggling too many things, and you're not getting enough support.

Regaining Your Perspective

Using Feelings

Becoming more aware of your feelings is the first step to resolving a problem- . It gives you the option to express your feelings directly and assertively rather than acting them out in aggressive or self-destructive behaviors. Honestly acknowledging your feelings may help you avoid losing your balance completely by warning you to:

- Get support
- Analyze your thinking
- Clarify your needs
- Prepare yourself
- Get needed information
- Set limits
- Make changes if necessary

If you feel overwhelmed by a problem, try reaching out to get support before you explore your feelings or thoughts, or before you act to alleviate the problem. It's hard to maintain perspective when you're all alone.

Becoming Aware

When you experience stress you can probably identify the external event or situation which caused it. You may also be able to identify your feelings in response to the event. You may not, however, be aware of the thoughts you have, or self-statements you make about yourself or the event ("I blew it! This is horrible! I'll never make it now!"). These thoughts have a great impact on how you feel and act.

Sometimes your thoughts may work against you. As a result of past learning and experiences, your interpretation of events or thoughts about yourself become distorted. You are no longer thinking accurately, and your perceptions become quite different from the external reality, or from other's perspectives.

Through your irrational thoughts and negative self-statements, you may unknowingly increase your feelings of being overwhelmed. Let's look at some of the common ways we all distort problems.

Irrational Thinking

- **Jumping to Conclusions** is making a negative assumption even though there are no clear facts supporting the conclusion ("He canceled our date, he must not like me anymore").
- **Personalizing** is assuming external events are automatically being caused by or directed at yourself when in fact they are not ("She's yawning a lot, she must think I'm boring").
- **Selective Attention** is ignoring accomplishments and positive experiences and focusing only on negative events and perceived failures. This colors your perception of all future experiences as you selectively look for only negative results and reactions.
- **Catastrophizing** is exaggerating the significance of an unpleasant event or events ("I got a 'D' on my first exam. I'm so stupid. I'm going to fail chemistry and then I'll never get into medical school").
- **Predicting Doom** is deciding that failure is imminent before the task is even begun ("I'll never find another girlfriend. I'll never pass calculus").
- **Shoulds and Musts** are punitive self-statements. They are based on the faulty belief that you are inherently bad or worthless. Therefore, the only way to motivate yourself or succeed in life is to beat and whip yourself into shape. You do this by placing unrealistic demands on yourself ("I must never disagree with him or he won't like me. I must be liked by everyone I know in order to feel like a worthwhile person. I should never make mistakes. I should never cry").
- **Dualistic Thinking** is perceiving situations and people, including yourself, as either all good or all bad with no room in between. If your performance is less than perfect, you feel you must be a failure.
- **Labeling** is taking one or two instances of your own or other's behavior and over-generalizing by attaching an exaggerated label ("I'm a loser... she's a liar").

If you use these distorted thinking strategies, you will inevitably feel angry, anxious, depressed and overwhelmed. Just as we have learned to think in stress-producing ways, we can also learn to think more rationally and calmly. Once you have identified your distorted thought patterns, you can start to replace them with more logical thinking, and feel more in control!

Using rational thinking and positive self-statements to deal with external stress will help you feel more in control of your emotions, more positive about yourself, and better able to handle situations. You may still feel disappointed, but you won't feel devastated; annoyed but not enraged; nervous but not incapacitated with anxiety. You may or may not be able to change the external situation, but you can always change how much it affects you by regaining your perspective.

Let's look at some rational thinking alternatives...

Rational Thinking

- **Focus on the Present** (don't jump to conclusions) "He canceled our date, but he said he'd call tomorrow so there is no reason to think anything is wrong. I'll use the free time to relax with that book I just bought."

- **Stay With the Facts** (Beware of catastrophizing) "I got a D on my first exam but it doesn't mean I'll fail chemistry. I didn't understand what the professor wanted. I think I'll meet with her so I'll know what to expect on the next exam."
- **Be Realistic and Objective** (Avoid personalizing) "He's yawning, he's probably tired. It doesn't have to mean that he doesn't like me."
- **Be Optimistic** (Try not to predict doom) "I'm lonely now... because she's gone. It's natural to feel this way. And even though I may never find anyone quite like her, I'll find someone new and different when I'm ready."
- **Be kind to yourself** (Don't "Should" yourself) "It's OK for me to disagree with him, it doesn't mean he won't like me. My opinions are valid."
- **Retain your perspective** (Watch out for negative labels) "I may not have won this time, but that doesn't mean I'm a 'loser.'"

You have the right to make mistakes and to express your feelings. Making mistakes is all part of being human.

This Campus Cares - Support Each Other

Local Resources Available

There are many resources available on campus and in the community to help you or someone you know deal effectively with the stresses of college life.

EOU Counseling Center 541-962-3524

Dr. Marianne Weaver and Dr. Tucker Brown are counselors for students. Drop-in hours and appointments are available for your needs.

EOU Student Health Center 541-962-3524

Nurse Practitioners are available for medical visits by appointment only.

EOU Student Services 541-962-3635

CHD, Inc. Mental Health Department 541-962-8800

Center for Human
Development, Inc.
2301 Cove Avenue
La Grande, OR 97850

To ensure public and personal safety, the CHD Crisis Team provides 24-hour quality screening, evaluation, and stabilization to persons in Union County experiencing mental health emergencies.

Shelter from the Storm 541-963-7226 Crisis Line 541-963-9261

Shelter From the Storm is a domestic violence and sexual assault crisis center that offers both immediate and long term assistance to victims/survivors and their families. All services are free of charge. (Located in Island City as of January 2015)

Getting Support

Using support as a positive coping strategy means reaching out to someone you trust for help. This could be anyone: a friend, parent, teacher, counselor, or clergy. Be as honest as possible with this person so he or she can understand the problem from your perspective, and better assist you. Remember, too, that the need for support during times of stress is universal. It's part of what makes us human. It's smart!

Sharing Your Feelings and Thoughts

Explaining your feelings to someone you trust will help you feel less overwhelmed, confused and alone. As you talk you may gain a different perspective. It may become clearer to you what steps you need to take to solve the problem.

Remember, if you feel you're "losing your balance":

- Acknowledge and Trust your Feelings
- Regain your Perspective by Exploring your Thinking
- Reach Out for Support

Try not to react to the problem by using a negative coping strategy. Your feelings of urgency are valid, you're in pain. But use those feelings as a cue to explore your feelings and thoughts about the problem, and to get support. It's hard to think rationally when you're in crisis, let someone else help you do that.

Adapted from University of Florida, 2014. <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Maintaining-the-Balance-A-Self-Help-Guide-for-Students.aspx>

