

# Study Skills

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Revised January 2009

## Introduction

### What makes a good learner?

A good learner is an individual who uses a set of strategies efficiently and appropriately. The emphasis is on not intelligence or hard work, but on the use of strategies.

### What is a strategy?

A strategy has three components:

- defining a goal,
- creating a plan and using that plan to reach a goal, and
- reaching the goal in an optimal manner.

### What are some strategies?

There are numerous strategies that one can use to achieve a goal. Throughout this manual we will discuss several. However, three global strategies are:

#### Controlling your learning through choice

Often we approach a task in an intuitive fashion based on past experiences. Frequently we leave studying until the last minute. Although this may have worked in the past, you may find this strategy is no longer useful. It is important to begin taking a more active approach to learning through assessment and planning.

Take a second, and complete a **self-evaluation of your study skills**. Write down on a piece of paper the following:

- those aspects of your studying that you are happy with, and
- those aspects of your studying that you may want to work on.

Now write down a list of some short-term and long-term goals you may want to work on as they relate to your studying. For example, a short-term goal might be studying three hours per week on an English course; a long-term goal might be getting over 80% on your final mark in that English course.

#### Monitor your progress

How will you know if you have successfully learned what you intended to learn? You may find it necessary to devise a system to assist you in checking your performance -- beyond the results of your first exam.

**Becoming a planful learner**

It is important to plan your learning environment -- when and where you will work. The emphasis is, of course, on you. You, and no one else, knows what is important for yourself and what works for you.

### Time Management and Organization

We all have problems with managing and organizing our time -- you are not alone. At this point in time, ask yourself:

- Where do I study?
- When do I study?
- How much do I study?
- How often do I study?

#### Where: The studying environment

We study best in certain environments. Not surprisingly, those environments have few distractions. Sometimes we think that we shouldn't be bothered by distractions. Sometimes we think that we should be able to study anywhere, at any time, under any circumstance.

And if we can't study very well when there are a lot of distractions, we sometimes blame ourselves. We say, "I am distracted easily", "I have poor concentration", or "I should be able to ignore noise in the background".

Instead of blaming yourself, why not take a good look at the environment you study in. Remember that you must **create your studying environment** and reduce distractions that get in the way of your studying. Two ways to reduce distractions are to: **remove the distraction** or **remove yourself from the distraction**.

Hopefully, what you end up with is one studying area with few distractions -- or several good areas.

#### When: Monitoring and planning your studying

Take some time and create two schedules. One schedule will be called your **Term Schedule**, the other is your **Weekly Schedule**. Some examples are on the next two pages.

### Term Schedule

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Mon								
Tues								
Wed								
Thur								
Fri								
Sat								
Sun								

### Weekly Schedule

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00							
2:00							
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							

**Term Schedule** On your Term Schedule fill in all upcoming exams, essays, and lab reports that will be due this term. This allows you keep in mind what is coming up and allows you to set aside appropriate time for these events. **Put it in a noticeable place**, such as on your refrigerator, or on your bedroom door.

**Weekly Schedule** For your Weekly Schedule fill in all regular or fixed activities -- classes, meals, meetings, social activities. What's left over can be your time to study. Photocopy this basic schedule so you have enough copies to plan each week.

### How much and how often?

We have looked at where you study and when you can study, now let's consider how much and how often.

You want to schedule two types of studying time: **general study time**, and **task specific time**.

#### General study time

General studying time is the time you set aside to keep up-to-date in your course work (reading chapters or articles). You want to estimate how much time is needed for each course to keep up-to-date.

A general rule-of-thumb is 1 to 3 hours of studying for each hour of class time. However, this is totally at your discretion. You may have courses that are more heavier than others -- and you may want to spend more time on those courses. However, **keep in mind** that if you have five courses you do not want to spend 90% of your time on only two courses.

#### Task specific time

Task specific time is when you want to work specifically on one project. For example, essays or lab reports. Schedule assignments in advance -- due on Thursday, start it on Friday.

### Tips on scheduling

- Be flexible** You want to be flexible. Allow for your schedule to change, especially when you are trying to figure out the best schedule for yourself. You will probably need to **revise** your schedule often. It's not an **all or nothing** event. If your schedule is not working, don't throw it out, revise it.
- Be reasonable** Be reasonable, don't fill in every block of time. Allow for some social time. Allow for extra time and unscheduled events. Start with what you are already doing, and make little adjustments, slowly over time, until you are satisfied with your schedule. Expect it to take several weeks or several months before you are completely happy.
- Have a start time** Half the battle is starting. Have a start time. Think of it as an appointment and keep to it.

### General study tips

- As you move forward in your education, you will be expected to learn more, learn faster, and teach yourself. **Most learning is out of class.**
- When determining when to study, you should break it up. **Distributed practice is better than mass practice.** You will learn better and remember more in three one-hour sessions than one three-hour session.
- We learn through repetition and rehearsal. We learn by doing something over and over again. We learn by doing something over and over again.
- You can expect to maintain concentrated attention for only about 1/2 hour to an hour. Therefore, you may want to block your studying time into 1/2 hour or 1 hour time periods.
- Determine what your best studying times are and schedule your least liked course for that time.
- If you can meet your schedule 50 to 75 percent of the time you are doing great!

## Studying from Textbooks

### Reading is an effective method of learning

Reading is one of the most effective methods of learning. Reading or studying a textbook can be more flexible than a lecture. Lectures are fixed and irreversible; they can't be backed up so you can re-hear something you missed.

### Reading can be individualized

Reading a textbook can be more individualized. However, we have a tendency to read a textbook **as if it is a lecture**. That is we start at page 1 and read to page 300. This technique, however, may not be highly productive. Often we get to page 300 and realize that we haven't retained much information or that we can not tease apart which information is most important from that which is not important.

### The SQ3R method

The SQ3R method is technique developed almost 50 years ago. SQ3R stands for Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. This method is designed to help you:

- **Select what is important**
- **Understand those ideas quickly**
- **Remember what you have read**
- **Review effectively for tests**

### Survey

By surveying the contents of a textbook you receive a general understanding of the purpose of the book. That is, what topics are considered to be important.

- Survey **the whole book**. Read the preface and the table of contents. Then leaf through the book to get acquainted with its **organization** and style. Note if book has an **index** and how it is organized. Check for an **appendix** and know what **kinds of information** it offers.

- Survey **each chapter**. Read the **introduction, headings and subheadings**, and **summary** of each chapter. Then **skim** the rest of the contents.

### Question

Questioning forces you to read **actively**. In this way you participate in learning and treat it like a conversation. When you question you ask why, when, who, where, and what. For example, "The SQ3R method contains the technique questioning. Why is this important? How would it help me learn better? When would I use it?"

Try to turn headings or subheadings into questions. Try to **link** what you already know with what you are questioning. For example, what have you experienced or learned in the past that would suggest that questioning might work as a study technique.

### Read

Having developed some familiarity with the material, now read to find the answers to your questions. However, read only one section or topic at a time, then **stop**.

Look for the **main idea** and important details. Underline or highlight **only** the most important points. Highlighting should only be done **after** you have read a section. Read each section before you decide what to underline.

If you are taking notes, do so only **after** covering a complete section. Take notes in point-form and in **your own words**.

### Recite

Check your understanding of the material in the section you have just read by reciting in your head or out loud. That is, **try to answer your questions** by reciting. Or imagine that you are trying to explain to someone else what you have just learned.

Make a note of your **weak areas** that will require re-reading or further studying.

After you have completed one section, turn the next topic heading into a question. Again look for answers to your questions as you read, and you should recite before moving on.

**Review**

Review what you have just learned prior to tackling any new material, as well at the end of your study period. Always review at the end of a chapter. As well, monthly reviews should be **scheduled** to cover the textbook several times prior to final examinations. Try to have someone ask you questions about the textbook to check how much you know. Use the glossary or definitions to check your understanding of material.

**Summary**

**Surveying** prepares you to read effectively by giving you an overview of what you will be learning. **Questioning** maintains your concentration on the subject and it allows you to **Read** in short bites. **Recitation** of what you've read allows you to actively participate and check on your understanding of what you have just read. Finally, **Review** of your study material ties together what you have learned and increases your understanding.

**Remember:**

- **Survey** textbook
- **Survey** chapter
- **Question** a topic heading of a chapter section
- **Read** to answer question
- **Recite** after reading to answer question and **summarize** main ideas. Make notes.
- **Repeat** steps 3, 4, and 5 for the next topic heading until the end of the chapter.
- **Review** notes and check memory by **reciting**.

**Or, put another way:**

- Look for a question to ask
- Ask the question
- Get information to answer the question
- Say the answer to the question
- Say the answer over and over again

### Making the Most out of Lectures

It is important that you think of what you can do **before**, **during**, and **after** a lecture in order to in achieve the most out of lectures.

#### Before (preparation)

Some good tips for preparation are:

- Obtain a class outline
- Read the assigned material before class
- Review previous lecture notes before each class
- Arrive on time for a lecture

Imagine that you are a reporter and your assignment is to interview an expert in some field. You would probably do some research and prepare for the interview. For example, you may have to first become knowledgeable, or at least comfortable, with the language -- or terminology -- of that person's area of interest.

Reviewing your notes provides a context in which to place lecture material. Often lecturers open their talk with "to pick up from last time". By preparing you will be able to understand what was talked about in the last lecture. Furthermore, by reviewing your text or assigned material, you will be able to avoid taking unnecessary notes.

The important point is to at least do **some** preparation. You may find it helpful to schedule in a brief period of review time for each class in your weekly calender.

#### During a lecture

During the lecture, you want to:

- Listen actively,
- ask questions for clarification, and
- take notes.

**Active listening**

You can listen faster than a person can talk. You want to be critical when listening and be able to decide whether what the lecturer is saying is of primary importance or only marginally important. You are in a better position to make these decisions when you have prepared.

**Asking questions for clarification**

Even if you are prepared and are listening actively, there will be many times when certain points are not clear. Asking questions allows for clarification. Most areas of knowledge contain certain assumptions that are not always obvious. Asking questions teases out these assumptions.

You may want to make a note of your questions and ask them at the end of the lecture. If you do not ask questions, most lecturers will assume that you have understood the content presented in the lecture. If you are not able to ask questions during a lecture, make it a point of getting answers from the instructor at another time that is more convenient.

**Note-taking**

First and foremost, take notes. **If you don't have a paper memory, you have no memory.** Taking notes helps you to concentrate. However, you are not taking dictation and you don't want to write down everything the lecturer has said. Students who do well on exams are usually able to pick out the exam questions.

**Some tips for taking notes:**

- Use loose-leaf paper. This allows you to insert extra material at a later point.
- Leave a wide margin on the left side of the paper. You will use this margin to summarize the lecture when reviewing your notes.
- Use the right-hand space to take pertinent notes during the lecture.
- Include the name of the course, the date, and a page number at the top of each page used during the lecture.

- Identify the topic of the lecture and use it as a heading for the lecture. You may have to wait until the end of the lecture to determine what the topic was.
- Use point-form.
- Include only material **not** in the text.
- Leave a blank space if you miss something and fill it in later,
- Insert your own comments into your notes. Place square brackets [...] around your comments. This allows you to tell the difference between what the instructor said and your own comments.
- Listen for important points shown by **repetition**, **change of pace or tone**, or **leading statements** ("the main point is..."). Indicate important points by using asterisks (\*), exclamation points (!), or by underlining.

**After the lecture**

Immediately after the lecture you want to **revise** and **summarize** your notes. Revise your notes by filling in the blank spaces from memory, text, or a friend's notes. Summarize your notes in the left hand margin by using cuewords of subtopics covered in lecture (i.e., Three Theories of Aggression). The cuewords provide a good learning check and review for exams. Ideally, you want to **reduce** and **reorganize** your notes as soon as you can after the lecture.

If you want to know if you understood the lecture try to teach or explain the lecture to someone else. Or ask yourself questions about the lecture.

You want to add comments, questions for next class, and areas requiring further clarification at the bottom of the page and **follow up quickly** on unclear points.

## Exam Preparation and Writing Exams

### Exam preparation

Your best preparation for an exam is regular day-to-day study. This can be realistically achieved through scheduling. During the year, schedule **frequent** review sessions. These reviews (every 2 to 4 weeks) will make the final pre-exam review easier. The emphasis is on recalling learned information not relearning forgotten information.

### Steps in exam preparation

Exam preparation can be divided into three rules: (1) be informed about the test, (2) be strategic, and (3) review.

#### Be informed about the test

It is important to not only know the material that has been covered in a course but also how that material will be assessed. As a guide toward gaining information about an exam, try to answer the following questions:

- When, where, and how long is the test?
- What test format will be used?
- What topic areas will be covered? Will they be from lectures, readings, labs, or seminars?
- What special interests of the instructor might influence the content of the exam?
- Are there any old exams or model questions available for practice?
- What resources are available for help during the review process -- instructors, teaching assistants, other students, help centre?
- What percentage of the final mark is this test worth?
- What mark do you realistically aim for?

Obtaining information about the exam will help you prepare for the exam and **predict** the questions that may be asked on the exam.

### **Be strategic**

It is critical to plan a strategy for exam review. This strategy is dependent on the amount of information you have or have not already learned. Some students may prefer to work on sample questions to test their knowledge; others may require make-up work to learn basic principles and acquire missing information. Either way, try to:

- **Set targets.** Choose target dates in terms of content to be completed by a certain date. Setting a realistic plan may help motivate yourself and provide measurable progress.
- **Decide where to work.** Avoid settings with obvious distractions and frequent interruptions.
- **Plan the order in which you will go through the content.** This may be dependent on the information about the test that you have acquired. You may wish to weight some sections as more than important than others.
- If you do not have time to study everything, then it is better to **know a section well than everything poorly.** Focus on sections that you think will yield the greatest return.
- **Determine how you will evaluate the quality of your review.** Do you have ways to assess and evaluate your progress?
- **Study with others.** Studying with others can be effective if there is a clear plan or agenda.

### **Review**

Reviewing for an exam contains two activities: (1) information gathering and (2) information using.

### Information gathering

Information gathering involves reading through course material such as lecture notes, lab notes, old exams, and course texts. Ideally you have already summarized this information through the techniques that were discussed in the sections on **Studying from Textbooks** and **Making the Most of Lectures**.

As you review, survey your lecture notes and texts and **note** the critical topics. Indicate each topic on separate index cards and **list** the key points for that topic with specific page references for notes and texts. You may also find it useful to keep a separate "dictionary" of unfamiliar technical terms or definitions.

### Information using

Information using allows you to test your understanding of the material. It is important to apply this knowledge in several ways, and **rehearse the test situation**. Some ways in which to test your knowledge are:

- When you think you know the material, **write or recite key information from memory**. You can test your memory by referring to your index cards. See if you can recite the key concepts under a particular topic and provide examples of those concepts. Re-read notes or text only to fill in forgotten information.
- **Generate new examples** to illustrate critical concepts.
- **Predict questions** that could appear on an exam.
- If an old exam is available, **rehearse** the exam by using it as a trial run. However, don't leave this until the last night before the exam.
- If you are being tested through problems, as in science or math, **spend a lot of time working doing problems**.
- If you are being tested through essays, **rehearse the exam by writing short essays**. A common mistake is to only read for an exam when the exam requires essay writing.

- Definitions should be learned by heart or make up **mnemonics** (memory tricks) for difficult-to-remember information.

### **A note on final exams**

Final exams present unique demands and generally require concentrated studying over a limited amount of time. Make sure you space your studying so that you do not overstudy for the first one or two exams and then "burn out" for the remaining exams.

### **Writing exams**

There are many types of exam-question formats: multiple choice, essay, problem solving, short answer, true/false, fill in the blanks. Each format requires different strategies. We will discuss three common formats:

- multiple-choice
- problem-solving
- essay format

### **Multiple-choice**

Some students prefer multiple-choice because the question may stimulate recall of important concepts. Others, however, are fearful of multiple-choice and see questions as needlessly tricky. Students often "go wrong" on multiple-choice exams through preparation problems (**not enough information to answer question**) and/or in exam errors (**difficulty in applying information in exam**).

Some **preparation errors** are:

- **Too little time spent on review.** Sometimes other activities take priority and reduce quantity of review.
- **Incomplete or inaccurate information.** Sometimes poor notes may lead to misperceptions and impede future learning. This may also result in an incomplete understanding of critical concepts.

- **Ineffective review techniques.** Simply re-reading lecture notes and highlighted text is ineffective without the use of more active learning strategies.
- **Inappropriate learning.** At times students may learn material by rote without an understanding of the ideas. Although some answers require rote learning, many require going beyond the information you are given.

Some **exam errors** are:

- **Anxiety and stress** may interfere with concentration and thought processes.
- Attempting to **speed** through an exam and not allow for adequate time to think carefully.
- Mistakes in **reading or interpretation** of the question.
- **Inefficient test-taking strategies** (overall approach to answering questions) may lead to poor exam results.

Clearly, preparation problems can not be addressed during an exam. Instead these problems must be evaluated at the learning or review stage. Exam errors, however, can be partially fixed through processing the questions in a systematic fashion.

### Answering multiple-choice questions

1. **Cover** up the answers.
2. **Read** the question.
3. **Process** the question by:
  - (a) **underlining** key words,
  - (b) **naming** the concept that the question comes from, and
  - (c) **translating** the question into your own words.

4. **Predict** a possible answer.
5. Uncover the answers and **check the format** of the question. In some questions, you are offered combination answers, such as: a) and b); all of the above; or none of the above.
6. **Process** each of the answers as if they were true-false questions. Some traps to avoid:
  - (a) the use of **jargon** to catch students who choose an answer because it sounds impressive,
  - (b) the use of **familiar phrases** from course that do not, however, answer the question, and
  - (c) the use of an answer that follows **common sense** and is part of everyone's general knowledge, but is, in fact, wrong.
7. **Identify** the correct response. Some backup strategies, if you cannot identify the correct responses are:
  - (a) **re-read** the question,
  - (b) **eliminate** wrong answers,
  - (c) and my personal favourite, **guess**.

### **Problem-solving exams**

In problem-solving exams you are asked to make logical decisions that lead to a correct answer. Some strategies are:

- **Budget time to marks** to avoid getting "hung-up" on questions that are not worth much.
- **Read over all the problems first.** First, this allows you to decide which questions are easier for you and, second, allows for harder questions to incubate in your mind. **Note:** If pre-reading an exam makes you nervous then do not use this strategy.

- **Start with easier questions.** By starting with the easier questions, you maximize the time-mark ratio and build your confidence.
- **Reduce "dumb" errors** by practising writing neatly and one step at a time. Also, note when and in what type of problems you most frequently make "dumb" errors so you can be alert for these problems on an exam.

### Essay exams

Essay questions require that you demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of course material. However, you are also being evaluated on your ability to answer a question with succinctness and clarity. Some common criticisms of students' answers to essay questions are:

- **Failure to analyze** the question carefully enough to decide on the key issues -- or not answering the question that was asked.
- **Failure to provide an overall theme** to the answer -- or not offering guiding information to the reader.
- Failure to attend to how each piece of information fits with the introduction so that the final product **lacks organization and relevancy**.
- **Failure to use language specific** to the discipline.
- **Failure to provide illustrative examples.** The use of examples confirms knowledge of a concept.

In general these problems are often due to a lack of deliberate planning. In essay exams it is important to:

- **survey** the questions by reading through the whole exam,
- make a reasoned **choice** of which questions to answer, and
- **plan** a time frame for your answers. Planning and allocating your time is essential in essay exams.

You may find it useful to allocate time based on the marks each question is worth. Try to stick to your schedule.

### Following directions

There are key words in essay questions that act as instructions for you to follow. They are words such as list, illustrate, compare, outline, state, discuss, and so on. At times you may be tempted to "write around" a subject and offer information that is not necessarily relevant to the question. This, however, is a waste of your time. Markers typically are looking for specific answers to the questions and will ignore (or penalize) irrelevant information.

Although a variety of key words can be used, the three most commonly used terms in essay questions are:

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Compare and contrast</b>     | This form of question asks you to provide both similarities and differences between two subjects. A common mistake in this type of question is to provide lists of information on the two subjects without any discussion.               |
| <b>Analyze the significance</b> | This question typically asks for something <b>beyond</b> a descriptive inventory of a concept. It is important to point out the impact and influence of the concept.   |
| <b>Critically examine</b>       | This question directs your answer toward providing hard evidence for key points that are made. You are required to provide facts, evaluate real causes, events, and consequences, as well as generating hypotheses of possible outcomes. |

### Organizing your answers

The difference between a good essay answer and a poor answer is often organization. Providing an outline for your answer assists in organization and coherency. Decide what points you would like to make and sketch these out in outline form. If a long essay answer is required, you should plan an introduction, body, and conclusion.

### Writing your answers

When writing your answers make sure that you choose your wording carefully. Say what you mean **explicitly**. Give illustrations or examples, if appropriate. Make sure you write legibly and use good grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

**Test anxiety**

Feeling tense or anxious prior to an exam is common. Anxiety can have both positive and negative influences. Some anxiety before an exam can lead to improved concentration and performance. However, prolonged or excessive anxiety may lead to upset stomachs, headaches, and rapid heartbeat. Excessive anxiety or stress will reduce overall concentration and interfere with the task at hand. In extreme cases, a student may go "blank" and is unable to complete or even begin the exam.

**Controlling anxiety**

If you find it difficult to concentrate during an exam and are distracted by doubts about your performance then you may wish to think about ways of controlling exam anxiety. You may find it helpful to practice some conscious strategies that reduce troublesome exam anxiety. It is best to plan ahead than to be surprised during an exam.

**Some strategies****Before the test**

- Rehearse for the test in a variety of ways. One of the best methods of reducing anxiety is preparation. By rehearsing the test, you will become more familiar with the type of questions that might be asked.

**On the day of the test**

- Be as well rested as possible. A sound night's sleep is essential for good test performance.
- Know exactly where the exam room is, what time the exam begins, and what to expect of the exam setting.
- Arrive at the exam room in good time. Be early, but not so early that you will have to wait around for a long time. Try to avoid discussing the exam with other students -- this may cause you to panic if you suspect they more than you.

**During the exam**

- Take some deep breaths as you go into the exam room, choose your seat, and look through the paper.
- Monitor yourself for signs of physical tension. **Stretch some muscles** if you feel tense.
- Use imagery to calm yourself. Close your eyes and "see" yourself writing the exam, doing well, and being relaxed.
- **Focus on positive thoughts.** We can achieve personal control over anxiety through self-talk. The following four techniques are helpful in reducing anxiety during an exam.
  - (1) **Keep your attention on the present** and avoid thinking about past mistakes or future plans. Ask yourself, "What's involved here?" and "What's the next step?"
  - (2) **Concentrate on your own approach to answering questions.** Do not get involved in what other students are doing or comparing your effort to theirs. Ask yourself, "What do I know about this topic?" and "What is the question asking?"
  - (3) **Keep moving through the question.** Try not to judge your effort by criticizing the way you are handling the question. Say to yourself, "Now I'll see what I can do with this question" and "What does the next question look like?"
  - (4) **Control your negative responses to test items.** Try to avoid generalizing about the test experience by thinking negative thoughts, such as "I must be dumb" or "I don't do well on tests". Instead ask yourself, "What did we learn about this in lectures?" and "I don't have to get all the items correct."
- Don't be afraid to stop and **take a break** during a test, especially if you do that during regular studying.
- Plan a treat after the test to give yourself something to look forward to after completing the test.

**A final note**

If you find that these techniques are not helpful in reducing your anxiety during an exam then you may want to discuss these issues with a counsellor. More powerful anxiety and stress reduction techniques require time to learn and practice. You will find some general guidelines for stress management in the next section.

## Coping with Stress

### How Much Stress is in Your Life?

Unpleasant situations, such as pressure from work or school, problems with relationships, or financial difficulties, can produce stress. However, pleasant situations, such as going away to school, vacations, a new job, or getting married, can also cause stress. Stress is inevitable with any **change**.

To determine your stress score, check off those events listed below that you have experienced *in the last year*. Then add up the numbers beside the items that you have checked off to get your total score.

Death of a spouse	100	_____
Divorce	73	_____
Marital separation	65	_____
Jail term	63	_____
Death of a close family member	63	_____
Personal injury or illness	53	_____
Marriage	50	_____
Fired from work	47	_____
Marital reconciliation	45	_____
Retirement from work	45	_____
Change in health of family member	44	_____
Pregnancy	40	_____
Sexual difficulties	39	_____
Gaining a new family member	39	_____
Business readjustment	39	_____
Change in financial status	38	_____
Death of a close friend	37	_____
Change to a different line of work	36	_____
Change in spousal arguments	35	_____
Bank loan greater than \$10,000	31	_____
Foreclosure on mortgage or loan	30	_____
Change in responsibilities at work	29	_____
Son or daughter leaving home	29	_____
Trouble with in-laws	29	_____
Outstanding personal achievement	28	_____
Spouse begins or stops work	26	_____
Beginning or stopping school	26	_____
Change in living conditions	26	_____
Change of personal habits	24	_____
Trouble with your employer	23	_____
Change in working hours or conditions	20	_____
Change in residence	20	_____
Change in schools	20	_____
Change in recreation activities	19	_____
Change in church activities	19	_____

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Change in social activities	18	_____
Bank loan less than \$10,000	17	_____
Change in sleeping habits	16	_____
Change in number of family gatherings	15	_____
Change in eating habits	15	_____
Vacation	13	_____
Christmas	12	_____
Minor violations of the law	11	_____
	Total Score	_____

Research has demonstrated that people with scores above 300 may be at high risk for health problems due to stress. Those with scores between 150 to 300 have a moderate risk for health problems due to stress and those with scores below 150 are at low risk.

Which category do you fit in?

### Is There "Good" Stress and "Bad" Stress?

Although stress is natural, stress can create health problems when those events that cause stress are:

- intense,
- repeated,
- unpredictable, or
- uncontrollable.

Most damaging are those events that we **perceive** as a **threat** and that we feel we lack the **competence** or ability to do something about.

### What are the Effects of Stress?

Stress triggers bodily reactions, upsetting thoughts and emotions, and ineffective behaviour.

**Bodily reactions** can be shallow breathing, pounding heart, muscle tension, digestive problems, sleep disturbances, fatigue, or illness.

**Upsetting thoughts and emotions** can be anger, fear, preoccupations, self-doubt, negative self-talk, and worry.

**Ineffective behaviour** can be escape, avoidance, indecision, aggression, and poor judgment.

Each of these reactions tend to make others worse and can become a vicious circle.

### Bodily Reactions

Much of the immediate discomfort associated with stress is caused by the body's fight or flight emotional response. The body energizes in the presence of an emotional or physical threat. You can turn off or modify this emotional response by practising self-relaxation.

Self-relaxation is often useful in reducing the ill effects of stress. This technique has also been shown to have positive effects on the immune system. The immune system helps to prevent the occurrence of disease. In the following section are some basic rules you should follow when practising relaxation.

### Basic Steps for Relaxation

- Find a regular time to relax. Think of relaxation as taking time out for yourself. Two sessions a day are recommended. Allow at least 10 minutes for each session and let them go longer if you are enjoying yourself.
- The best time for most people to practice relaxation is in the morning before breakfast and in the evening before dinner. This schedule lets you start the day refreshed and allows you to get rid of tension after work or school.

- Find a place that is free of interruptions and distractions. Unplug the phone. Turn off the stereo and television.
  - Seat yourself in a comfortable position. Do not try a position that you most often sleep in. You do not want to take a nap. Also avoid the bed as a place to relax. You may associate lying in bed with relaxation and this can foster mild insomnia or sleeplessness.
  - Put your hands in your lap or at your sides -- whatever is most comfortable. Sit up straight and arrange your legs in a manner that you will be able to maintain for an extended length of time. If you are able to assume the same position every time you relax, then your body will be able to learn to relax more quickly.
  - Concentrate on a very simple fixed pattern of thought or action. Most people focus on their breathing. A simple procedure is to imagine that as you breathe in, you are inhaling relaxation. As you breathe out, imagine that you are letting relaxation flow throughout your body. With every breath, imagine that you are sinking deeper -- that your body is becoming more heavy -- and that you are feeling more warm and comfortable.
  - Once you are feeling comfortable, focus on the muscles in your body. An easy strategy is to associate every major area of your body with a number. For example,
    - "1" is your head and shoulders,
    - "2" is your chest and arms,
    - "3" is your back and hips, and
    - "4" is your legs and feet.
- Say quietly to yourself "1", and concentrate on relaxing your head and shoulders. After a couple of minutes, say "2" and move to your chest and arms. Continue this procedure until you have relaxed all the muscles in your body.
- After a week or so of practising, you should find it easy to reach a state of relaxation quickly.

### Upsetting Thoughts and Emotions

Stress can be greatly influenced by the view we take on events. Physical symptoms and a tendency to make poor decisions are increased by negative thoughts or negative self-talk. Sometimes what you say to yourself can make a difference.

Learn to identify and monitor negative self statements. Then use coping or positive statements to block or balance negative self-talk in a stressful situation.

For example, some negative self statements could be *"I can't do this ... I sound stupid ... I'm boring everyone."* In order to counteract these negative thoughts, some positive self statements might be *"There's no hurry; take it step by step ... Nobody's perfect ... I will do the best that I can."*

This is not to deny that negative statements sometimes reflect the way we are feeling. It is important, however, to recognize whether negative statements are based on fact or on other reasons, such as our fear of how we will be perceived by others.

A good exercise is to look at the thoughts (or mental messages) you have when you really enjoy something and the thoughts you have when you are studying. When you enjoy something you are probably less concerned about mistakes, it is easier to focus on the activity, and you are not so concerned about the outcome. If you are under stress, however, when you study you will more than likely be very upset when you make mistakes, spend time thinking about what will happen **if** you don't do well, and dwell on the negative outcome. This often leads to ineffective behaviour and procrastination.

### Ineffective Behaviour

Stress is often made worse by our response to it. The following suggestions may help you deal with your stress.

**Slow Down.** Stress can be self-generated. Try to do things at a slower pace. Tell yourself what counts is not if I get there first, but that I get there at all. Or, my goal is distance not speed.

**Strike a Balance.** There are many aspects of a satisfying life -- work, family, friends, hobbies, recreation, and community activities. Damaging stress may occur when we let one aspect get blown out of proportion -- particularly work or school.

Think of your goals in life. Is it quality or quantity? Try to strike a balance between challenging stress and relaxation. Remember when you are doing nothing, you are doing something important for yourself. Try to take time out for yourself.

**Recognize and Accept Your Limits.** Most of us set unrealistic and perfectionistic goals. No one can be perfect. If you expect perfection from yourself, you may begin to feel inadequate no matter how well you have performed. It is important to set gradual, achievable goals for yourself. Set realistic limits on what you may try to do on any given day. Learn to say no to added demands and responsibilities. Try to **promise less** and **deliver more** instead of promising too much and always falling short.

### **Procrastination**

For students, perhaps the most ineffective behaviour is procrastination. Procrastination is defined as "putting off something to a future time" or as "not doing work until the last moment". If we know that we are procrastinating, and we know that we shouldn't, then why do we do it?

Most of us have valid doubts about how well we are doing. Sometimes these thoughts can lead to a vicious circle. For example:

- When we are given a large amount of work, the first thought is "I can't get it all done."
- This thought challenges how you see yourself (from "smart" to "not as smart as I thought") and you worry.
- Therefore, every time you think about doing work or even look at your books this thought may pop in to your mind.
- Since this thought causes you to worry you may find ways to avoid not work, per se, but the occurrence of that negative thought.
- Often we do something that distracts us and offers us temporary relief.
- This causes more worrying and more procrastination and our negative thoughts are often confirmed by poor results on an exam (this cycle is maintained by negative reinforcement).

**Remedies for Procrastination**

- Make yourself a deal that you can engage in a procrastinating only after you have studied for at least a brief period of time.
- Select a task to start that is not too demanding.
- Divide a big task into several chunks (15-minutes); this can reduce difficulty in starting a task.
- Suspend your criticism of how well you are doing in order to get through a task at least once. You may find it helpful to write down positive statements and use them when you are studying.
- Reduce isolation by cooperating with a friend on an assignment.
- Substitute the message "I should" with "I'd like to".

### **Summary**

The purpose of this manual was to give you a general overview of study skills and, by all means, you should continue in your search for more efficient and useful skills.

Learning how to study takes time -- but it is time well spent. Most high schools, community colleges, and universities provide courses in study techniques and now recognize that learning about how to learn is an invaluable skill. Check with your guidance counsellor or enquire at your student counselling centre about whether your school offers courses in study skills.