

# Stress Management

If you're feeling stressed, it's helpful to know that stress and worry are *normal*. Everyone experiences stress to some degree and a lot of students worry about doing well in school.

Stress is also natural. If kept to a manageable level, it can actually be healthy. It can help you perform better in sporting events, speeches or oral reports, and it helps you prepare to meet a challenge—like an important exam.

However, if you worry *too much* about schoolwork, tests, or personal stuff, it can definitely interfere with your performance. Stress can quickly become overwhelming—**but you can learn to keep it in check.**

## Let's take a look at what stress is:

Technically, stress is any demand placed on you that requires an adaptive or coping response. You can experience stress from your environment, your body, and even your own thoughts.

Stress is a *real thing*, not just a "feeling." However, what most people call "stress" is really what they feel in response to stress, namely "strain." Stress is an objective condition; strain is the inner feeling that goes with it.

Your body responds to stress physically, mentally, and emotionally. There are many ways to describe the inner feelings that we feel when stressors hit; fear, anger, worry, anxiety, nervousness, concern, the jitters—these are all words people use to describe strain.

It's often accompanied by physical reactions in your body. When stress is mild, you might only experience butterflies in your stomach or a slightly elevated heart rate – like when you're running a bit late or are giving a speech.

When you are extremely nervous or worried, you can have physical reactions like sweating, cold hands, difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping at night, and diarrhea. Your muscles can be tense, your stomach can feel like it's in your throat, and your breathing can become more rapid and shallow.

Here's why:

When stressors hit, a human body will go through what is known as the "General Adaptation Syndrome"

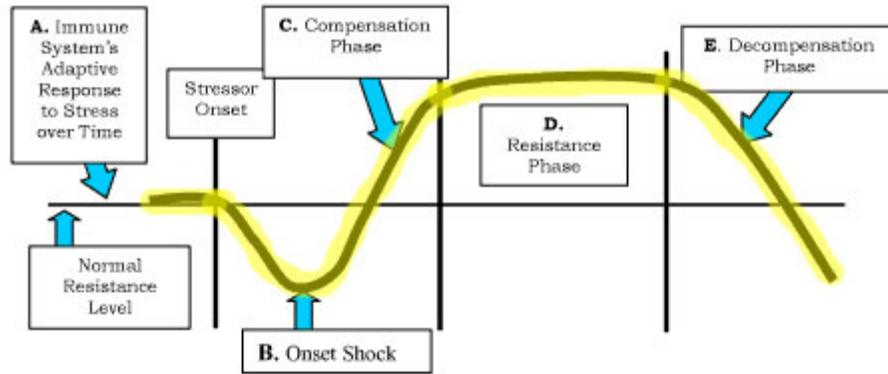


Figure 1. General Adaptation Syndrome (G.A.S.), Hans Selye, *Stress Without Distress*, HarperCollins Publishers (1974)

The sweeping curve highlighted in yellow above (A.) illustrates the human body's reaction to a stressor over time. The dips in the curve represent your immune system losing strength. The sharp dip at the beginning (B.) shows the reduction in coping capacity shortly after the onset of the stressor (Onset Shock).

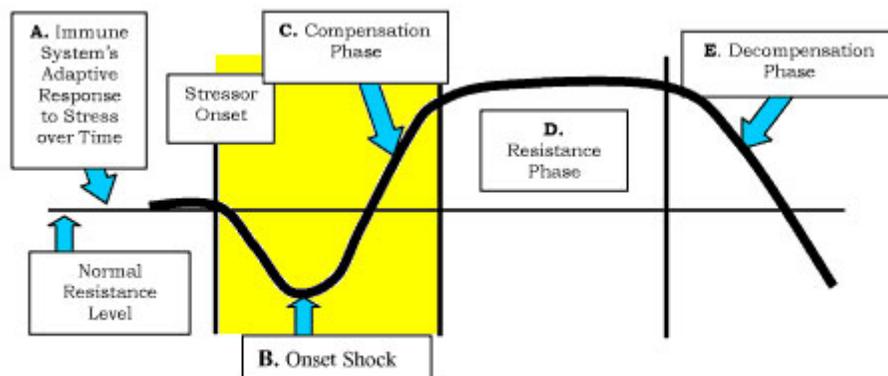


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This dip is responsible for the way people catch cold when they get chilled. We don't really "catch" a cold. What happens is that because our resistance is decreased after the initial shock of stressor onset, the germs that ride along with us all the time are able to get a foothold in our systems and we become sick.

When the stressor has a personal or social implication, the feelings we have as a result are most commonly anger, threat and fear. We can feel angry that something has happened to us, threatened by the cause of the stress or event, and afraid of the consequences or the meaning of the event.

A few examples of stressors that have personal or social implications are:

- A bad grade or grades
- An argument with someone you are close to

- A breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Moving to a new school, or changing roommates
- Feeling bullied or gossiped about
- Being behind on your schoolwork
- Money problems
- Health problems for you or someone you care about

When these types of stressors hit, the immune system takes a temporary dive, which is the *onset shock* dip on the graph. It's at this point that illness can result – you have probably experienced being stressed out and getting sick.

However, even if illness doesn't result, the strain you feel due to fear and the typical angry emotional reactions toward the source of the threat can cause you to shift your thinking dramatically for the short term.

**For example:**

If you are falling behind on your schoolwork, you might feel angry with yourself for procrastinating, or perhaps angry with your instructor for assigning so much study material. You probably will feel afraid of the consequences, which could include bad grades or failing the course. You might also feel threatened by the cause, which could be the volume of work required to stay current with a full course load.

At these times, you might *start to think* that you won't be able to succeed in college, or that the work is too hard. You might feel that you're under too much strain to continue, or that the workload is unreasonable. These thoughts are caused by a temporary shift in your outlook and thinking. The *reality* is probably that you just need to implement a time management plan, eliminate distractions, and focus.

It's safe to say that a person's individual outlook on life can be powerfully affected by the amount of stress coping resources that are available. When these resources are low, impulsive decisions can get made in order to escape your stress.

**For example:**

You can imagine that if you were actually experiencing the thoughts in the above example, it wouldn't take long to begin to consider impulsive decisions like dropping classes, or dropping out completely.