

A large, stylized white number '50' is centered on an orange background. The '5' has a thick top bar and a curved bottom. The '0' is a simple circle. The number is partially enclosed by a thick, dark blue circular line that starts at the top left and ends at the bottom right. The text 'fifty ways to' is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font across the top of the '5'. The text 'manage stress' is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font inside the '0'. The text 'stella cottrell' is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font along the bottom curve of the blue line.

*fifty ways to*

manage  
stress

*stella cottrell*

# 50 ways

**to manage stress**

Stella Cottrell



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# About this book

This book suggests 50 Ways to manage stress whilst a student. It includes:

- Ways to use, and benefit from, stress
- Ways to prevent excess stress (at least for more of the time!)
- Ways to cope when over-stressed
- Ways to reduce excess stress

Many of the suggestions involve an element of self-nurturing, relaxation or fun, so can be enjoyable as well as helpful for relieving stress.

## Just a taste ...

This is a small book with many big ideas. Each 'Way' is a starting point, offering suggestions of things to do and to think about. Browse these to spark ideas of your own. You may find this small taste is enough in itself to spur you to action – or you can follow up suggestions using the resources recommended.

## Map your own route

Stress is a highly personal experience, so use page ix to get started, then select from the 50 Ways to suit your own circumstances and interests. Be adventurous – try out things you might not usually consider.

## The 50 Ways series

This series is especially useful for students who want to dip into a book on an aspect of study or student life that is relevant to them at this point in their studies. The 50 Ways books are easy to carry around for a short burst of inspiration and motivation.

*This book is not a replacement for specialist counselling, therapies or medical care.*

# How to use this book

## **Get started**

Begin with the introduction and Ways 1–5.

## **Discover**

Find out about stress and different things that people do to use it and to manage it.

## **Become more self-aware**

Find out more about yourself through trying out different things.

## **Reflect**

Use the mini self-evaluations to focus your thinking. Then consider possible ways forward suggested by your answers.

## **Choose**

Decide which of the 50 Ways you want to try out. You don't have to do them all!

## **Commit**

Once you decide to commit to something, put your whole self behind your decision. Do it!

## **Shape new habits**

Make stress-management a natural part of your everyday routine. See page x.

## **Find out more**

Follow up using the recommended resources if you wish. See pages 110–13 or use the reference list to follow up sources numbered in superscript in the text.

# Shape new habits and ways of thinking

## Don't wait until you 'feel stressed'

It is easier to try out new things when you feel less under pressure. You can start to reduce stress straight away – just by making a change. Manage stress longer term by developing a repertoire of coping mechanisms. Flip through the book from time to time to stimulate your thinking and stay on top of stress.

## Start to shape new habits

The Ways suggested in this book aren't a quick fix for excess stress but, over time, they will help to build confidence and improve your health and well-being. Developing good lifestyle habits can help you to use stress effectively, maintain it at reasonable levels and cope better with new challenges.

- **Be active in shaping new habits** – and new ways of thinking. Most pages provide opportunities to reflect, choose, decide and commit.
- **Put yourself fully behind your good intentions** – write down what you intend to do, using the 'I will' boxes. Be selective: you don't need to do this on every page. You can use pages 104–5 to track and monitor new habits you want to form.
- **Keep track of your progress.** It takes time to form new habits so give it time and keep returning to them. You can use pages 106–7 to track your progress with any of the Ways you try out.

## Feeling panic, anxiety or depression now?

If you are feeling highly stressed, anxious, depressed, panicked or are considering harming yourself or others, talk to someone who can help. Don't wait until things get worse.<sup>1,2</sup> See page xxiii.

# What is stress?

Stress is the amount of pressure placed on an object or person. Being 'stressed' is a personal response to the pressure of a situation, event or circumstances. Some people can manage a lot of pressure, others less.<sup>3,4</sup> What we experience as a 'feeling' of stress is the result of how our minds perceive pressure: what excites and energises one person is experienced by others as too much pressure. Even 'doing nothing' is relaxing for some but makes others anxious.



## A natural response

Stress has helped us to survive and thrive as a species. Much of what we experience as stress is the result of chemical reactions used by the brain to warn us of potential danger and set in train our 'fight or flight' mechanisms:

- The heart rate increases
- Blood pressure rises
- More adrenaline is released into the blood
- Glucose levels rise to give more energy to fight/run away.



These put us on the alert and energise us to cope in the moment. When the danger is past, these should revert to normal levels.

## A helpful energiser

In short bursts, the alertness brought about by the stress response can be useful for study, problem-solving and performance.

## Stress inoculation: A learning response

Experiencing a highly stressful situation triggers the brain into action for several hours. This is to help our systems absorb what occurred so we can recognise similar challenges speedily in the future and respond in ways that will enable our survival. Taking on stress in a positive way builds our coping mechanisms and helps us to take on future challenges with less anxiety.<sup>5</sup>

## Excitement or stress?

The same chemical combination in our bodies signals both excitement and fear. It is our minds that decide whether we interpret the experience as scary or exciting. Knowing this gives us power over our responses.

## Unhelpful sense of danger?

We need our bodies to switch off the stress response and use up excess adrenaline. If we don't need to fight or run away, the adrenaline can hang around in our bodies, leaving us feeling unsettled or 'on edge' or with a sense of nameless dread. Our minds remain on the lookout for supposed threat, searching for potential problems and replaying known worries, keeping us anxious.

# Why is stress an important issue for students?

Student life creates its own combination of potential stressors.

## **Shock of the new**

A new course and institution can feel bewildering. It can take time to get used to the change. There is a lot to process, which can be tiring.

## **Homesickness**

Student life can be amazing, but it is hard to be away from familiar people and places. It is natural to feel homesick at times.

## **Academic challenge**

Study is meant to stretch your mind so that you grow academically. Whilst that is good, it can also be unsettling when it feels you are constantly grappling with difficult material and can't get through the work easily.

## **Workload and grades**

Research suggests that students get stressed by the sheer amount of work they have to do.<sup>6</sup> They worry about assignments, exams and getting good grades.

## **Pressurised deadlines**

Meeting deadlines for submitting assignments or being ready for an exam adds to the sense of pressure. As you don't set those deadlines, it can feel as if you have no control at all – but you do!

## **New responsibilities**

For many, it is the first time living away from home, taking care of all aspects of everyday life on their own. That takes some adjustment.

## **Multiple responsibilities**

Many students have jobs, family and caring roles and other commitments that add to their responsibilities and eat into time.

## **Unstructured time**

Having lots of study time to structure for yourself can be disorientating. Things can go wrong if you don't take steps to manage time effectively.

## **Social pressures**

You are surrounded by people you don't know. This can feel lonely or as if you don't 'fit in'. It might seem everyone else has great social networks, even if those are not all that they seem.

## **Fitting everything in**

There are exceptional opportunities open to students: new experiences, work, travel, friends, knowledge, skills, growing as a person. When tired, it might all seem exhausting or too much!

## **Worry about the future**

After being in education for almost all your life, it can be scary thinking of this coming to an end, especially if there are many unknowns about what to do next. It might mean making decisions on matters not yet clear to you, such as work, jobs, careers or where to live.

## **Money worries**

Concerns about loans or debts can be stressful. Students usually have low incomes so they have to be creative in making money stretch.

## **Student lifestyle**

Busy timetables, racing between back-to-back classes, not eating proper meals, staying up all night to study (or party), missing lots of sleep: all these drain physical and mental resources. Tobacco, recreational drugs, alcohol, coffee and sugar don't stress either!



## **And students still do well!**

All these demands can be experienced as too much pressure or unhelpfully stressful. They are real. They can be tricky – but they don't last for ever. Students do get through them and succeed! It is possible to find ways of easing your stress, managing stress – and to have a great time as a student!

# Levels and causes of student stress

## A common concern

Students around the world report feeling highly stressed at some time.<sup>7,8,9,10,11,12</sup> For example, in Northern Ireland, 78% of students reported mental health concerns in the past year, stress being an issue for more than four in five of them. Others reported anxiety, lack of energy or general unhappiness.<sup>10</sup> Student stress has been a concern for decades.<sup>13</sup> In the USA, in 2004, over 50% of college students reported being too depressed to function.<sup>14,15</sup> Generally, international students have tended not to report stress or gain support.<sup>16,17,18</sup>

## Study-related stress

Study-related worries, such as pressure to succeed, exams, and coping with assignments and the intellectual demands of the course, are the main cause of student stress in many countries – from India to the UK to Saudi Arabia.<sup>9,11,12,19,20</sup> A 2017 study found 87% of new UK students struggled to cope with the academic or social aspects of student life.<sup>9</sup>

## Similar concerns

Although causes of stress vary by course, gender and culture,<sup>11,15,19</sup> students worry about similar things: study, relationships, home sickness, family problems, food, accommodation and money.

## Age-related stress

It is important to bear in mind that student stress levels are not necessarily any worse than those found in the overall population of young adults. In particular, serious mental disorders tend to be lower amongst students – for example, 12% of UK students compared to 25% of the whole population.<sup>21</sup>

Some common mental health illnesses such as eating disorders, alcoholism, addiction, depression and bipolar disorders tend to appear first during early adulthood. They coincide with the time when many young people are at college or university, so their first experience of such difficulties will be when they are already going through other key life transitions.<sup>22</sup>



## Other typical causes of stress

### Stress internationally

Feeling stressed is a global phenomenon – similar causes affect people around the world. In India, 90% of people suffer from stress, higher than an already high global average of 86%.<sup>23</sup> Money and work are key causes of stress there. However, India had the best ratings for well-being, too (70.4 compared to a 61.2 global average).

Similarly, high levels of stress are reported in China, where key causes are long working days and high costs of accommodation and living.<sup>24</sup>

In a UK survey in 2018, 85% of adults said they experienced stress regularly. The most common causes were money, work, health, lack of sleep and daily tasks that had to be done.<sup>25</sup>

In the USA, in a 2014 survey of 2500 adults, almost half of these had experienced a stressful event in the past year. Respondents were asked to indicate the kinds of experiences they found most stressful. The results opposite show that nearly two-thirds of causes are related to everyday matters such as health, bereavement, work, family and change.<sup>26</sup>

### Typical causes of stress (USA)

Health-related	(27%)
Bereavement	(16%)
Work-related	(13%)
Family events	(9%)
Life transitions	(9%)
Personal relationships	(6%)

### These affect students too

Students experience the usual range of factors associated with excess stress, such as money, moving home, bereavement, divorce in the family, relationships and health concerns. If any of these are weighing on your mind now, it is useful to talk it through with someone you trust (Way 8).

# The effects of prolonged stress

Whilst some stress is useful, especially in short bursts, prolonged stress affects us negatively physiologically, chemically, emotionally, socially and cognitively. The causes and effects can become mutually reinforcing, making it hard to break a cycle of negative and harmful thoughts and behaviours.

## Being 'out of balance'

Excess or prolonged stress puts your system out of balance. Any aspect of life might be affected, depending on the individual. You might notice you are 'not yourself' or not getting things done as before. Or you could perform well at some things but show signs of stress without even realising. Others might notice you have changed, are more irritable, tired, snappy, or neglecting well-being.

### Physical effects

These could include:

- Skin problems (acne, eczema, etc.)
- Palpitations; rapid heart beat
- Poor digestion, upset stomach or constipation
- Shakiness; wobbly legs; feeling faint or clammy
- Headaches or migraines.

### Physiological effects

- Potentially harmful levels of the hormone cortisol
- Reduced levels of chemicals associated with 'happiness' and well-being, such as serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin
- Suspension of functions such as digestion, tissue repair and the immune system (as these are not needed for immediate 'threats').

### Cognitive impacts

- Easily distracted
- Attention drawn to external stimuli and potential threats
- Poorer decision-making, creativity and problem-solving.

## Impact on emotions, social life and behaviour

- Difficulties sleeping
- Feeling scared or vulnerable
- Harder to relax or feel calm
- Withdrawing from social networks; spending less time with friends and family
- More likely to abuse alcohol, drugs, food, other substances
- Behaving in ways that are not typical of you/unhelpful to you
- Poorer quality of life
- Weaker sense of well-being.

## Impact on study

- Weaker focus/concentration
- Harder to settle down to study and stick with tasks
- Harder to absorb material in class or when reading, and to recall material
- Study tasks can take longer and/or work is poorer quality
- Fear of lower grades/failure.

## Impact on thought patterns

- Thoughts get caught up in cycles of worry

- A focus on things that could go wrong
- It is harder to think of a way out of the difficulties
- It can feel as if there is no escape.

## Impact on mental health

- Feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope
- A sense of panic or anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Low mood/depression
- Potentially, long-term mental ill-health.

## Impact on health

A continued period of high stress can damage health at any age.

- It can weaken the immune system, increasing vulnerability to disease and reducing the ability to fight off sickness
- Over time, high cortisol levels break down muscle, weakening the heart and other organs<sup>27</sup>
- Cortisol can also damage hippocampus neurons, affecting learning and memory.

## Vicious cycle of stress

