

# Beating the Stress

## TREAT YOURSELF RIGHT

By Lucia Thornton



As a student, you face many challenges and stressors. However, as a nursing student, you are likely to experience even more stress than your friends and colleagues enrolled in other programs. A study comparing the stress levels of various professional students found that nursing students experience higher levels of stress than medical, social work, or pharmacy students (Beck et al., 1997). Even more telling, in another study one third of nursing students experienced stress severe enough to induce anxiety or depression (Prymachuk, 2004).

In addition to contending with exams, grades, long hours of studying, work, family and other personal commitments, you are also faced with the challenges of clinical practice. Clinical practice has been identified as one of the most anxiety producing components in nursing programs. Lack of experience, fear of making mistakes, difficult patients, discomfort at being evaluated by faculty members, worrying about giving patients the wrong information or medication, and concern about harming a patient are just a few of the stressors nursing students face (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005).

Stress management and self-care practices can help you navigate through nursing school and can provide the foundation for creating a balanced and wholesome life. Now is the time to establish healthy habits of self-care that will serve you for a lifetime!

## A Holistic Approach

Holistic nursing views everything as inseparable and interrelated – your mental, emotional, physical and social/ relational aspects are interconnected. What affects one aspect of yourself will influence all other aspects. For instance, in my work I've found that:

- The thoughts you think affect every cell in your body.
- The emotions that you feel affect your thoughts, and the thoughts you think affect your emotions.
- The way you care for your body -- the foods you ingest, the type and amount of exercise you engage in, the amount of rest and sleep that you get, the air you breathe -- all of these practices have a profound effect on your thoughts, your emotions, and your relationships.
- The types and nature of the relationships that you engage in affect your overall physical health, your emotional health, your mental clarity, and your sense of well-being.

A personal plan to help you deal more effectively with stress can include a variety of holistic approaches. Since every aspect of who you are is interrelated with every other, when you create health in one area the positive effects spill into all other areas of your life!

## Nurture Your Spirit

The ability to access your spiritual essence is perhaps the single most important and powerful practice in stress management. When you engage in practices that allow you to access your spiritual essence, you are in fact getting in touch with an infinite reservoir of energy. These practices allow you to set aside your concerns and

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*The American Holistic Nurses Association (AHNA) is a partner with the NSNA and offers students discounted membership.*

*The AHNA supports students in creating and maintaining healthy lifestyles through publications and on-line support. You can contact the AHNA at [www.ahna.org](http://www.ahna.org).*

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worries, quiet your mind and rest in the essence of your infinite, spiritual being. When you “engage” your spiritual essence you are “disengaging” from that part of you that perceives and reacts to stress. Basically, these practices allow you to set aside your ego and allow your awareness to rest in a space of wisdom, knowingness and compassion. Practices that are most useful and commonly used include prayer, meditation, contemplation, and communing with nature.

Make it a habit to begin your day with whatever spiritual practice you choose and during this time create an intention for what you want to manifest during the day. Creating an intention sets into motion what you will achieve. Setting aside 10 minutes when you first wake up to engage in a spiritual practice sets the tone for the entire day and will help you move through challenges with grace and equanimity.

## Nurture Your Body

### Get Physical!

One of the best antidotes for stress is exercise. Stress affects nearly every part of the body. Exercise, on the other hand, improves the functioning of nearly every part of the body that stress adversely affects.

Develop a daily exercise/movement routine that works for you:

- Exercising 30 minutes to an hour each day helps you immensely in coping with life’s stressors. The best exercise program involves a combination of anaerobic (weight –lifting, calisthenics etc.), aerobic (jogging, walking briskly, swimming, biking, aerobics classes, dancing etc.) and stretching/yoga. Seventy to eighty percent of your exercise should be aerobic.
- Begin your exercise activity at a slow, controlled pace for five minutes or longer until your body warms up and incorporate five to ten minutes of stretching.
- Incorporate types of exercise and movement that you enjoy and that fit into your schedule. Remember, doing even twenty minutes of exercise a day is better

## THERE ARE 4 COMPONENTS FOR EFFECTIVE VISUALIZATION:

- Define your goal in clear detail.
- Relax your body and calm your senses.
- See yourself achieving your goal in great detail. Engage all of your senses so the outcome becomes a “felt experience” – physically, emotionally, mentally and socially.
- Practice regularly.

(Thornton,2006)

than none. Use simple measures to incorporate movement into a full schedule.

- Create practices that are fun, doable and will nurture your heart as well as your body.

### Eat Well!

Stress upsets our nutritional balance, so careful attention to your diet during stressful times is crucially important. The body requires increased levels of vitamin A, vitamin C, thiamine, riboflavin and protein when under stress. Eating whole natural foods, especially fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes gives the body the added nutrients you need during times of stress. Since stress increases the production of free radicals in your cells it is important to increase your intake of antioxidants (vitamins A, C, & E) either through supplements or whole food sources (Thornton & Gold, 2000).

Also, since stress causes your metabolism to increase it is most beneficial to eat 5 to 6 low calorie nutritious meals during the day. This will provide you with a steady source of energy and maximize your physical stamina.

Drinking plenty of water is always important but even more so during times of stress. When the body becomes dehydrated, the physiological processes that occur are some of the same ones that occur when coping with stress. So, when you sit down to study, make sure you have a large glass of water on hand and don’t leave for school or clinical without your sports, size bottle of water tucked securely in your backpack.

There are definite foods to avoid during times of stress:

- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol. Caffeine can overstimulate the adrenal glands, and further deplete your body of B-complex and C vitamins and induce symptoms of anxiety, such as nervousness, palpitations, nausea, restlessness, and tremors (Null, 2005).
- Alcohol also contains a lot of simple sugar, so eliminating or avoiding alcoholic beverages is also advisable.
- Replace that cup of coffee with a cup of hot water and a slice of lemon. The hot lemon water will calm and relax you and also help with digestion.



- Eliminate foods high in simple sugars from your diet such as processed foods, sodas, breads, and anything containing fructose, glucose, corn syrups, corn sweeteners, and white and brown sugars.

## Breathe From Your Belly

How many times have you found yourself breathing faster right before a big exam? Common responses to stress include shallow breathing, holding your breath and irregular breathing. These actually lead to greater tension, anxiety and further difficulty with breathing which leads to decreased awareness and clarity in thinking, so you're definitely not helping yourself out for that test!

It is possible to voluntarily activate the parasympathetic system by breathing in a slow and deliberate manner into and out of your belly. This type of abdominal-breathing shuts down the stress response and places you in an optimal performance zone (Luskin and Pelletier, 2006).

Belly breathing is a wonderful technique to incorporate throughout your day and also is a very useful technique to teach your patients who are experiencing stress and anxiety. Try this simple exercise for abdominal breathing.

Put your hand just under your navel:

- Now breathe deeply into the base of your lungs and expand your lower abdomen as you inhale, so that you feel your hand rising as you breathe in and falling as you breathe out.
- As you inhale count very slowly to four. Then, as you exhale, count very slowly to yourself from four back to one.
- Repeat until you feel relaxed and calm.

## Nurture Your Mind

### Visualize Positive Outcomes

Visualization is a highly effective way of creating healthy responses to stressful situations. Visualization helps you achieve your desired outcome in any given situation.

One area that creates a lot of stress for students is taking exams. How can visualization help change a very stressful and anxiety producing situation into a positive experience?

1. **First define your goals and then create positive thoughts to support those goals.** Rather than engaging in worrisome thoughts about not getting a good grade, or studying the wrong material, focus on the positive outcomes. You might think: "I am efficient and focused in my studying; the material that I study is useful and appropriate; I take exams with ease and receive excellent grades for my performance."

2. **Take a moment to relax.** Take a deep breathe and set aside other thoughts and concerns.

3. **Imagine yourself reaching these goals.** Imagine

## Basic Steps of Meditation

1. Pick a focus word or phrase or prayer.
2. Sit quietly in a meditative position:
  - Sit up so that the spine is erect. Use a straight-backed chair or sit on the floor or sofa with pillows to support your back
  - Find a place to meditate where you will not be interrupted. Designate a special spot in your home or work area to create a space where you can more easily become relaxed.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Focus your attention and internal gaze at the point between your eyebrows-sometimes referred to as the "third eye".
5. Relax your body.
  - Mentally scan your body for areas of tension. Breathe into those areas to release the tension.
  - It is a good idea to do stretching exercises, yoga, or a progressive muscle relaxation before sitting down to meditate. Focus on stretching the back and neck muscles so that your body is free from any tension, which will be distracting.
6. Breathe slowly and naturally and, as you do, repeat your focus word as you exhale
  - Sometimes repeating a word on inhalation and then a word on exhalation creates a very relaxing state. For instance, the Sanskrit words, So Hum ("I Am That"), are a common phrase in meditation. On the inhalation, silently repeat "So" and on the exhalation, silently repeat, "Hum".
7. When any thoughts come to mind – gently refocus your attention to the point between your eyebrows and repeat the phrase with the natural rhythm of your breathing.
8. Practice the technique for ten to twenty minutes once or twice daily.
9. Be patient and don't judge:
  - When you first begin to meditate start with 5 minute sessions and then increase to ten minutes over a couple of weeks.
  - Don't judge your meditation as good or bad. Don't become discouraged if your mind continues to wander, gently refocus your attention on your phrase and breathing.
10. Set your intention for the day.
  - After you have finished meditating set an intention for the day that will help guide your thoughts, feelings, and actions, such as: "I will move through the day with grace and ease. I meet all challenges with confidence, compassion, wisdom and clarity."

*Note: From Creating a healing culture: Course I - Whole-person caring. (p.D3-D5) Thornton, L., & Gold, J., Copyrighted. (2000), Self-published workbook, Roseland, NJ.*

## THE ADVANCED STOP TECHNIQUE

The advanced stop technique was developed by combining a behavioral modification technique, known as the stop technique, with the process of heart centering. The stop technique is useful in stopping undesirable thoughts, feelings or reactions that we experience. Consequently, it is useful in ridding us of our negative reactions to stressful people and situations.

Here are instructions for practicing the advanced stop technique:

- When you feel stress building from highly emotional communication, overwhelming situations, negative self-talk, etc, silently say “stop” to yourself.
- Visualize a stop sign in your mind.
- Take a deep breath and focus your attention on and around the area of your heart, also known as your “heart-space.”
- Imagine that you are breathing into your heart-space – and then bring to mind a loving moment, thought, or feeling. For instance, you could imagine holding an infant, cuddling or petting a favorite pet, being in love, etc.
- When you have connected with feelings of love and caring, do one of the following:
  1. Ask yourself, “What would be a useful or wise response to this situation?”
  - OR
  2. Repeat an affirmation that is meaningful to you in this situation – such as: “I feel calm and peaceful inside, I listen and respond with kindness and compassion.”

I have found this technique to be very helpful for students and easy to use in a variety of stressful situations. So the next time you find yourself stressed or having fearful thoughts, simply use the advanced stop technique. You’ll find that this technique not only shifts your feelings, but also soothes your body, mind, heart and soul.

Note: From *Creating a healing culture: Course III – Transforming the Healthcare Environment*. (pg C-15) Thornton, L., & Gold, J., Copyrighted. (2001), Self-published workbook, Roseland, NJ.

what it feels like to enjoy studying, to feel good about learning material that will be useful to you and to others. Then, imagine yourself actually taking the exam. Finally, imagine yourself having successfully completed the exam, handing in your paper and knowing that you did very well and are completely satisfied with your performance. Get in touch with as many senses and feelings as you can. “See” and “feel” yourself successfully completing the exam.

### 4. Practice this visualization whenever you find yourself worrying about the exam or becoming scattered or inefficient in your studies.

Visualization is a tool that you can use to help deal with any stress-producing situation. Whether the stress is related to managing studies, clinical performance, relationships with family, friends or co-workers, this is a tool that can help you mentally recreate and imagine healthy outcomes to life’s many challenges. The visualization

process will only take a few minutes. Remember if you can see it, feel it, and believe it . . . you can achieve it!

## Affirmations

An affirmation is a positive statement that you develop and repeat to yourself in order to change negative thoughts and feelings to positive thoughts and feelings. They are one of the quickest and most powerful ways to shift you out of stress mode and into a more relaxed and calm state of being. There are a few things to remember when developing affirmations.

- Always state affirmation in a “positive” way: For example, instead of “I am not tired,” say: “I am rested.” This is because “negations” such as “not” often go unrecognized by the brain so you might then interpret the first statement as “I am tired.”
- Repetition and duration: Repeat affirmations 20- 30 times daily over a 3- 5 week period of time. It takes somewhere between 21 and 32 days of daily practice to form an unconscious thought pattern. During each repetition practice repeating your affirmation a minimum of 10 times.
- Reminders: Remind yourself to practice by sticking post-it notes in your bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, car, on your computer, etc. Write your affirmation on an index card that you keep in your pocket. Use it throughout the day and repeat your affirmation.

I still remember the affirmation that I used when I went back to school and was trying to juggle work, school, and a young family. I was constantly feeling anxious about not being able to complete all that I needed to do during the day. I created the affirmation, “I move through life with grace and ease, I have ample time and abundant energy to accomplish all that I must do.” After using this affirmation for several days I became more relaxed and at ease. I also noticed that the stress-related

symptoms that I was experiencing such as indigestion, headaches and insomnia subsided, and I felt energetic throughout the day.

## Develop a Permanent Practice of Self-Care

The foundation for a stress management program is incorporating healthy habits into your daily life. Learning to care for yourself enables you to role-model and mentor the same kind of behavior in others. Remember to set limits and boundaries that are self-loving such as: taking adequate time for meals and breaks, eating well, taking in optimal amounts of water each day; getting eight hours of sleep each night and tending to your spiritual needs.

It is easy to fall back into unhealthy habits, especially when school and life conditions become very stressful. If this happens, simply notice this, and without judging yourself, return to the practice of caring well for yourself. Create a support mechanism or group that regularly reinforces healthy habits of self-care.

Establishing healthy patterns of responding to stress and incorporating self-care practices into your daily regimen will benefit you throughout your entire life. Now is the time to make a commitment toward a healthier, happier and stress-free you. Don't delay- you deserve it! ☺

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