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

Bookmark this page for when you need it. Remember that in times of stress you do not need to be alone. This campus cares!

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
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.
- **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 and attempts are efforts to cope by permanently escaping a temporary problem.

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.

There are three important ways to cope with a personal crisis in a positive way:

1. Explore and clarify your **feelings**
2. Identify and take control of your **thoughts**
3. 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 interpretations of events or thoughts about yourself become distorted. You are no longer thinking rationally, 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 overgeneralizing 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.
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.

Giving Support

If a friend or acquaintance confides in you about a problem he or she is experiencing, it's important to remember two things. It was probably hard for him or her to share this with you, and there is a lot you can do to help.

Listening Without Moralizing or Judging

Someone who has recently experienced rejection or a failure, or whose problems have led to ineffective coping strategies such as substance abuse, eating disorders, or suicidal thoughts, may be afraid of being an outcast. This fear may make it difficult for that person to reach out for help, even if he or she is in great pain. You can help by expressing your caring for the person. You can convey this support by being calm, accepting and non-judgmental, and by listening actively.
Listen Actively
Listening actively has two components: Paraphrasing and Acknowledging Feelings.

- Paraphrasing is listening so that the person knows you are listening, by repeating back in your own words what the person just said.
- Acknowledging Feelings is listening so that the person knows you understand his or her feelings, by verbalizing them.

When you are paraphrasing or acknowledging feelings you are not giving advice or making judgments. You are simply restating in your own words, calmly, frankly and openly, what you believe the person has said and what feelings he or she has expressed. By doing this you help to clarify the situation for the person and yourself. Most importantly, you help the person feel supported and heard through your understanding and acceptance, and hence less overwhelmed and isolated.

Encouraging Open and Frank Discussion

If a friend or acquaintance discloses a problem to you, it's important that you allow him or her to talk openly about it. However, you as the helper may have some feelings and beliefs which may make it difficult for you to encourage open discussion.

Contrary to these statements, encouraging someone to talk about his or her suicidal thoughts will not increase the chances of a suicide attempt, and ignoring or denying someone's problem will not make it disappear! Acknowledging the reality of a problem by talking about it is the first step toward solving it. In addition, it may provide the individual with some needed hope and relief.

The faulty belief underlying these statements is that being helpful means taking responsibility for the other person's problem and solving it, all by yourself. This is not true. We are all ultimately responsible for our own behavior and there are many community and campus resources available to provide assistance.

In our society and on our campus there are many taboos about having "problems" or being emotionally distraught. What are some of these unwritten and unrealistic rules which make it difficult for someone to reach out?

I must:

- Always be in control
- Never cry
- Always be cheerful
- Never appear weak
- Always appear successful
- Never express anger
These unwritten rules may make it difficult for someone in crisis to talk about feelings, thoughts, or behavior. By being warm and accepting, and encouraging discussion, you can enable the person to give up these unrealistic rules and get help.

**Be an Active Friend**

Don't wait for someone to ask you for help if they are obviously in trouble. Sometimes you will need to actively reach out by calling or seeking out the person. Once you are together, all it may take is a question or comment to get a person talking about a difficult problem. Following are some warning signs that someone may be in serious emotional trouble:

- Apathy, tiredness, difficulty getting through daily tasks
- Low self-worth, feelings of inadequacy
- Marked change in eating or sleeping habits
- Hopelessness
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Any suicidal talk or allusions (These are sometimes quite indirect)
- Sudden cheerfulness after an extended depression-person saying that problems are solved
- Sudden failure or a set of failures
- Giving away important objects to friends and family
- Break-up of a long-standing relationship

Alone, or in combination, these signs can indicate a high risk for suicidal or self-destructive behavior. In particular, the last two signs are often signals that the person has decided on suicide and therefore may require immediate attention. Use these warning signs as a cue for you to reach out, give support, and get help. Don't wait until it's too late.

**Making Referrals**

There are many times when just being a good listener and providing a friend or acquaintance with personal support will be all that is needed. Then are also times when it is appropriate to encourage the person to see professional or speak to a trained volunteer.

In the previous example, the person reports not wanting to live anymore due to a relationship break-up, and feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness. As the helper in this case, you would probably want to encourage the person to talk to a mental health worker or trained crisis counseling volunteer. Being supportive, accepting, and listening actively would probably help this person be more receptive to your suggestion to seek additional help. Here are some general rules for knowing how and when to refer.
Refer if:

- The person has identifiable personal problems and is using one or more ineffective coping strategies
- The person is exhibiting several of the distress warning signs
- The problem the person shares with you does not appear to be alleviated solely by your support
- The problem has existed for an extended period of time and the person's attempts to solve it have been unsuccessful

Refer by:

- Reminding the person that counseling is confidential and that it can often help
- Reminding the person that recognizing a problem and reaching out for help is a strength, not a weakness
- Calling the referral agency yourself to get the name of a specific counselor to encourage the person to call
- Staying with the person to provide support when he or she makes the contact with the agency

If despite your efforts the person still chooses not to seek outside help, call the appropriate agency yourself for support and consultation.

Remember, being a good helper means....

- Remaining Calm
- Listening without moralizing or judging
- Listening Actively through Paraphrasing and Acknowledging Feelings
- Encouraging Frank and Open Discussion
- Helping the Person find Professional resources when needed
This Campus Cares - Support Each Other

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. The campus counseling center, and the county crisis center are good places to start. They can provide you with confidential counseling, support, and consultation at no charge. They can also provide guidance on additional specialized campus and community resources available related to eating disorders, substance abuse, sexual assault, study and test-taking skills, medical or spiritual issues, and other areas of concern. Additional resources are also listed at the back of this booklet.

Dean of Students Office

The staff of the Dean of Students Office provide individual student advisement, liaison with campus ministries, orientation for new students, advisement to fraternities and sororities, multicultural student services, veteran student services, services to students over traditional age, women's programs, student judicial affairs services, disabled student services, alcohol abuse prevention programs, black and Hispanic culture resources, and assistance with student withdrawals from the University.

General Counseling Resources

CWC -(352) 392-1575

The CWC, located at 3190 Radio Road, is open Monday-Friday, 8:00 am - 5:00 pm. Staffed by psychologists and Counselors, the Center offers individual, couples, and group counseling to students and student partners with personal, academic, and career concerns. Students may call to arrange initial counseling appointments. Counseling without a pre-scheduled appointment is available in cases of immediate crisis during office hours.

Alachua County Crisis Center - (352) 264-6789

Crisis Center provides 24 hour a day services seven days a week through a crisis telephone hot line and a crisis intervention outreach team. These services are provided by trained volunteers with backup from mental health professionals and are available to anyone in Alachua County experiencing an emotional crisis.
UF Resources:
University of Florida Police Department
Counseling and Wellness Center
College of Law Student Services (UF)
College of Medicine Office of Student Counseling & Development (UF)
Sexual Assault/Abuse Recovery and Education
Institute of Black Culture
International Center
La Casita Institute of Hispanic/Latino Cultures
Reading and Writing Center
Sexual Health
Sleep
Stress
Student Health Care Center
Teaching Center
Time Management
Tobacco
UF Health Outpatient Adult Psychiatry Clinic
UF Health Recovery Center-Drug and Alcohol Addiction
UF Health Shands Hospital Patient Guide
Gainesville Women's Health Center

Gatorwell Health Promotion Services:
Alcohol and Other Drugs
Body Image & Eating Concerns
Campus Ministries Cooperative
Dean of Students Office
Housing Staff and Student Development Office
Healthy Eating & Active Living
STRIVE (Sexual trauma/interpersonal violence education)

Community Resources:
AIDS-North Central Florida AIDS Network
Alachua County Crisis Center
Alcoholics Anonymous/Alanon/Alateen
Corner Drug Store
County Veterans Service Office
Gay Switchboard
Overeaters Anonymous
Planned Parenthood of North Central Florida in Gainesville
Police Department Gainesville
Rape/Crime Victim Advocate Program (County)
SPARC (Sexual and Physical Abuse Resource Center)