

Fact Sheet – Stress

Stress is essentially any demand placed on a person and their body’s reaction to it. It is usually associated with a perception that the demand placed on the person is greater than the person’s capacity and resources to deal with it. Stress arises as much from our perception and interpretation of a situation as it does from the situation itself.

Not all stress is a negative thing – a small amount can prompt us into action, and ensure we accomplish what we set out to do. It is only when stress becomes unmanageable or overwhelming, or otherwise affects our ability to function, that it becomes a negative thing. Each of us has an optimal level of stress – a level of at which we are challenged but not overwhelmed.

Stress prompts an adrenal response in the body – this is the ‘fight or flight’ response. There is a quick release of the hormone adrenalin, accompanied by an increased heart rate and blood pressure, with energy delivered to the muscles to ready the body for action. However most stresses we experience in law school are not of the ‘run away from the ferocious lion’ kind. They are better handled through a calm, measured, rational approach. Also, if we have an adrenal response every time something frustrating or stressful occurs, we can wear down our adrenal function and experience burnout.

How do I know if I have stress? There are several symptoms:

Physical	Emotional	Behavioural
Headache	Irritability	Difficulty sleeping
Dizziness	Hostility	Working hard and achieving less
Sore eyes	Depression	Withdrawing from others
Stomach ache	Anxiety	Blaming others
Shortness of breath	Difficulty relaxing	Fighting about little things
Difficulty concentrating	Indecision	Denial

How can I manage stress? Here are some tips and strategies:

- Become conscious of what stresses you by keeping a stress diary
- Look after yourself – eat well, sleep well, and exercise regularly
- Avoid ‘avoidance’ – drugs and alcohol, or overeating, saying “I’m fine” (which really means I’m freaked out, insecure, neurotic and emotional!)
- Be accepting and forgiving of your imperfections
- Use positive self-talk
- Factor in some ‘down time’ each day – time to just relax
- Learn some relaxation techniques like breathing, or yoga
- Talk about it with your friends and family
- If it is really bad, see a counsellor
- Put things in perspective
- Focus on the future – for example, if you are stressed about the mark you got in an assignment, it’s best to move on and focus on the exam.