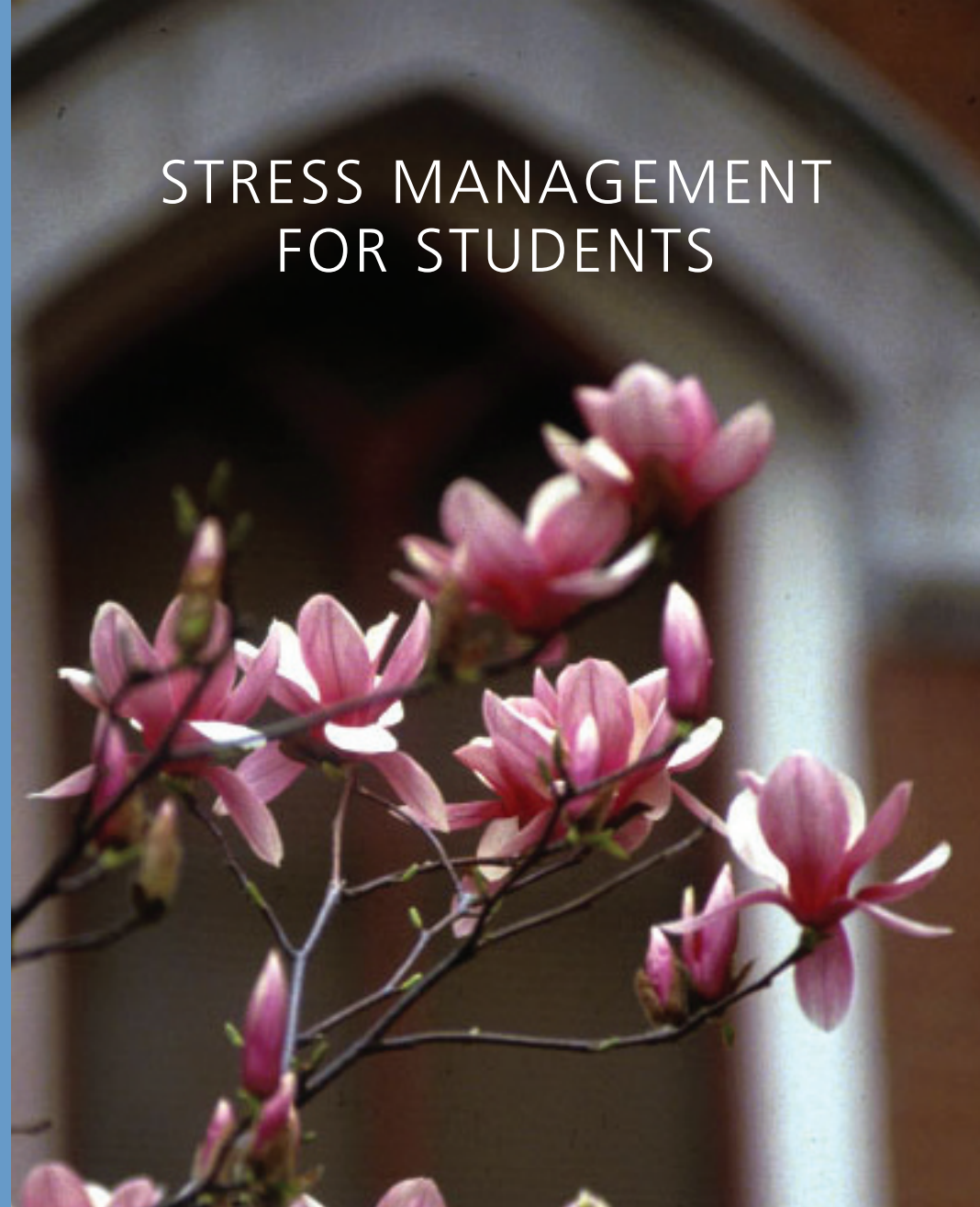


STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR STUDENTS



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STUDENT HEALTH CENTER

VANDERBILT  UNIVERSITY

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WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress refers either to an emotional or physical reaction to a challenge or threat. Stress is a part of daily life. While the intense stress you experience throughout your college years may seem overwhelming at times, it is also an excellent opportunity to learn stress management techniques to help you cope with future stressful experiences.

The major stressors identified by college students include: time management; parental expectation; test anxieties and pressures of paper writing; interpersonal relationships; financial problems; and adaptation to the new campus environment. College is often described as “the best years of your life”, but “best” does not necessarily mean “easiest”. College is a time when you face many developmental tasks. Developing your identity as an adult includes:

- deepening your capacity for relationships with both women and men
- discovering what kind of work you want to pursue
- questioning, discovering, and re-forming your personal values
- forming your sexual identity
- becoming independent from your parents and learning to relate to them as an adult rather than a child

These developmental tasks may be both exhilarating and stressful and are a natural process that will continue all your life.

SIGNS OF STRESS

It is important to recognize the signs of stress overload. Physical signs include headaches, stomach distress, excessive hunger or weight gain; loss of appetite; muscle tension with neck and/or back pain, dizziness/numbness/shortness of breath, and heart racing or pounding. Emotional signs of excessive stress can show up as anxiety or irritability; depression symptoms such as sadness, hopelessness, and lack of pleasure or zest for life; insomnia or nightmares; forgetfulness or lack of concentration; increased procrastination or difficulty in making decisions; and feeling overloaded, as if “the weight of the world” is on your shoulders.

Danger signs of stress overload may manifest as a growing need for food, alcohol, sleeping pills, or other drugs; risky behaviors such as driving too fast, vandalizing school property, or unprotected sex; thoughts or plans to harm yourself; and friends who keep telling you that you seem stressed out. These indicate the need to speak with a counselor to find healthy ways to unwind.

Please note: since all of these symptoms can be signs of other problems as well as stress, it is very important to see a medical and/or mental health professional if your symptoms are severe or long standing (either in your opinion or in the opinion of someone who knows you).

PREVENTION

You can help prevent stress overload by keeping up your resources—adequate sleep, good nutrition, regular exercise, social support, and taking time for activities that you find relaxing and enjoyable. Even with good resources, however, we will feel overwhelmed by stress at times; this is part of living. Learning methods of coping with stress can help: time management strategies; improving study skills; and developing new, improved social skills.

Another set of methods for coping with stress involves changing your thoughts and feelings about yourself or a situation. Talking or venting with a trusted person can help as well as avoiding “catastrophizing” or perfectionistic thinking, and reviewing past successes.

Some people find meditation or prayers to be very beneficial when they are overwhelmed or in a crisis. Meditation can help clear the mind and allow a fresh look at the situation. People from a variety of religious backgrounds find prayer helpful to bring problems into focus in a way that allows examination of alternatives and potential solutions.

STRESS REDUCTION

Relaxation and imagery techniques, when practiced regularly, can help you feel calmer, more centered, and stronger when confronting painful or difficult circumstances. Many types of relaxation and imagery techniques are available. Experiment and find what works best for you.

Stress reduction websites or books such as *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Davis, McKay, and Eshelman provide more detailed explanations of the above concepts and methods for stress reduction.

Sometimes help-seeking is the best strategy. When you are unsure of how to solve a problem and you feel stuck working on it alone, seek help from someone you trust. Family or friends can be good choices, but the following people on campus are available to help you as part of their jobs: resident advisers or area housing directors; deans or professors; staff at the Career Center or University Chaplain and Ministry Office, medical staff at the Student Health Center; or counselors at the Psychological and Counseling Center or Student Health Center.