

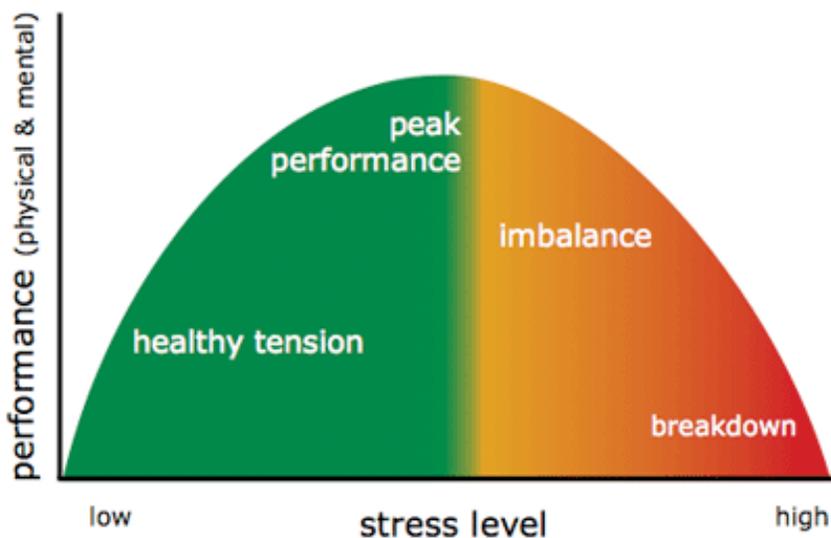
## Stress Management

Stress is our natural (and normal) response to the demands, pressures, and/or competing priorities in our life.

**Not all stress is bad.** A little bit of stress can motivate us and help us focus on achieving our goals. **But too much stress**, or stress carried too long, **can activate our “fight or flight” response ...** which, if left unchecked, can decrease our ability to function in one or more areas of our life

The goal isn't to try to get rid of all stress. Rather, the goal is to try to respond well to stress. This means balancing out stress with those things that replenish the physical, mental, and emotional energy lost to stress. This balance is the “healthy tension” zone.

**Consider this stress continuum graph** showing the relationship between our performance / functioning and our stress level:



1. **Healthy tension (green zone):** Moderate stress is appropriate sometimes. It helps us focus on studying for a test, or turning in a paper on time. It motivates us to do our best. When we experience “good” stress, we feel challenged, but in control, as we work toward accomplishing our goals.
2. **Peak performance zone (top of curve):** In order to achieve our personal best – academically, or otherwise – we need to be well-prepared physically, mentally, and emotionally. This comes from a place of healthy tension (green zone), balanced with self-care practices that bolster resilience.
3. **Imbalance (yellow zone):** When daily pressures build and self-care falls by the wayside, we can experience irritability, fatigue, aches and pains, sleep problems, and a decline in focus and academic performance. But it's not too late to move back to the healthy tension zone. Rising stress can be brought back down to a more manageable level through stress management

techniques and resilience-building (see below).

4. **Breakdown (red zone):** When stress is left unchecked, symptoms can worsen, causing forgetfulness, serious physical complaints, illness, and feelings of anxiety, panic, and/or depression (see more signs that you're too stressed, below). When breakdown occurs, support and assistance from others is crucial to help us recover.

### **More information ...**

#### **Signs your stress is too high**

Short-term stress is fairly common for college students. But when you can't return to a relaxed state, the sustained changes in your body (increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, muscle tension) can affect your functioning over time.

#### **Emotional symptoms:**

- Irritability
- Anxiety, fear, worry
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anger
- Sadness, crying
- Loss of pleasure in things once enjoyed
- Depression
- Hopelessness

#### **Academic/cognitive symptoms:**

- Difficulty retaining information read or heard
- Unwanted or repetitive thoughts
- Poor concentration
- Disorganization, forgetfulness
- Deterioration in quality or quantity of work

#### **Physical symptoms:**

- Muscle tension
- Frequent illness
- Stomach aches
- Sleep disturbances

- Diarrhea or constipation
- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Headaches
- Vague aches and pains
- Appetite or weight changes
- Heart palpitations

**Still not sure whether stress is a problem in your life?** Take this [Stress Quiz from Mental Health America](#).

### Tips for managing stress

No one can eliminate stress from their lives. But we can learn to manage it better. How you think about and respond to daily situations determines whether you find them overwhelming or manageable. Here are a few tips to help keep stress in check:

- **Practice self-care:** [Get enough sleep](#). [Eat well](#). Get some exercise. Improving these habits alone can go a long way to mitigating your stress.
- **Connect with others:** People with strong social support networks (friends, family, teammates, etc.) report less stress and overall improved mental health.
- **Let go of perfectionism:** Cornell students have extremely high standards for themselves. But no one hits it out of the park every time. Try to be as understanding with yourself as you would be with a friend.
- **Refuse to play the stress game:** Sometimes we wear our busyness like a badge of honor, and compete with each other about who's more stressed. Remember that stress diminishes your enjoyment of life, and aspire to be organized and healthy instead.
- **Improve your time management skills:** [The Learning Strategies Center](#) is an excellent resource for learning to be more organized and efficient.
- **Keep things in perspective:** Ask yourself – what's REALLY the worst thing that could happen? And what is the likelihood of that happening? Remember, no matter how bad (or good) things are right now, they *will* change.
- **Reframe:** Stop negative self-talk, and give yourself some credit for your abilities and accomplishments. See mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow. Overcoming the fear of failure is only accomplished by doing things you fear over and over again, resolving to bounce back, and learning throughout the process.
- **Cultivate resilience:** Build a foundation of good mental and emotional health, and learn to bounce back from adversity. [[see our Building Resilience page](#)]

- **Learn to meditate:** Meditation has numerous proven health benefits, including relaxation and stress management. You can learn to meditate through Cornell's [free Let's Meditate program](#). Other resources for guided meditation practice can be found on our [Meditation page](#).
- **Get out in nature:** Studies show that spending time in nature can reduce stress and improve our sense of well-being ... and there's plenty of nature to be found in Ithaca. [You can start here](#).
- **Power nap:** A 20- to 30-minute nap in the early afternoon can increase your alertness, reduce stress, and boost your cognitive functioning without leaving you feeling groggy or interfering with night-time sleep.
- **Take purposeful breaks:** Allow yourself to take guilt-free 5- to 15-minute breaks to do something you enjoy ... or just to relax and do nothing. (See more ideas below.)

### 5-minute stress busters

- **Deep breathing:** Take slow, deep breaths through your nose – filling up your whole chest – and exhale slowly through your mouth. Try to make your exhale longer than your inhale.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Starting with your toes and working your way up to your head, slowly tighten ... hold ... and then relax your muscle groups (feet, legs, buttocks, abdomen, shoulders, arms, hands, face). This type of body scan exercise is also great for helping you fall asleep.
- **Mini-meditation:** Even two-five minutes of meditation can calm your mind and help you feel more focused and relaxed. Learn how on our [Meditation page](#), or stop by a [free Let's Meditate session](#) on campus.
- **Visualization:** Mentally rehearse a task you want to master. Imagine yourself acing the task (taking an exam, having an important conversation). Now, focus on how your success feels (excited, relieved, satisfied, smart). Re-visit this feeling often.
- **Change of scenery:** Get up and take a short walk. Or take the longer route to class to take in a few extra minutes of nature.
- **Let it out:** Laugh with a friend. Do 20 jumping jacks. Put on your favorite song and dance.