

Section 4

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Key Points

- 1 The Physical Effects of Stress
- 2 The Relationship Between Stress and Performance
- 3 Managing Stress

Combat stress control is much more than just a few stress reduction techniques which busy leaders are supposed to learn from books or mental health workers and use now and then when the stress seems intense. Army combat stress control activities must be a part of everything the Army does.

From Field Manual 22-51, Leaders' Manual for Combat Stress Control

Introduction

Stress is your reaction to the changes and pressures in your everyday life. Some stress is good and helps us stay alert to accomplish important tasks. But constant, unrelieved stress can lead to serious physical and mental difficulties. You cannot eliminate stress, but you can learn to manage it and prevent it from damaging your relationships, your college and work performance, and your life in general. As you continue in ROTC, you'll learn that learning to manage your stress and that of your Soldiers is an important part of your job as a platoon leader.

Stress is both a physical and a mental response to events that call for change, that threaten your life's order or safety, or that tax your physical, emotional, and mental resources. It can creep up on you and negatively affect your response to normal activities, even before you realize it. If that happens, you might find yourself in the same state as the Army public affairs officer in the following vignette.

Stress at the Office

My son volunteered in my office during the entire summer. His job was to help with the general office work. One day, he asked me a question about a project I had assigned to him. Without realizing it, I "barked" out the answer and went back to work.

Within seconds, my son had walked to where I was seated, put one hand on my shoulder and said, "Mom, take three deep breaths . . . one, two, three."

At that point, I realized I was stressed.

Stress becomes a problem when it's overwhelming stress or a person has difficulty coping with the stress, say psychology experts.

Almost everything in today's workplace can be a potential stressor. For example, new advances in technology that are supposed to make life easier can actually make life more uncomfortable.

There is a faster pace to our work life. We get inundated with e-mail messages in a way that didn't happen with the telephone.

Limited resources can also contribute to job stress. All across the country, employees are doing more with less. People are now expected to do many more things than they would have previously.

We may have a tendency to try to do everything. Consequently, we can end up not getting much accomplished or not doing things very well.

stress

the physical and psychological responses to the pressures of daily life

stressor

any event or situation that requires a change in routine or behavior—often creating conflict among motives within the individual

The Physical Effects of Stress

Stress is the body and mind’s reaction to dealing with a **stressor**—an event or situation that requires you to change your routine or behavior. Stressors often are unfamiliar to you and create a conflict among motives. For example, you might need to work at the same time you should be studying for tomorrow’s big exam. If you don’t show up for work, you could lose your job and the money you need for school. If you don’t study, you might flunk the test and endanger your financial aid.

Understanding stress is important whether you’re a college student or a second lieutenant leading an Army platoon. That’s because stress creates changes in your body—it triggers the body’s “fight or flight” reflexes. Among other things, these reflexes give humans a shot of adrenaline, arouse their nervous systems to make them more aware of danger, and increase the blood flow to certain parts of the body (like muscles) to enable them to better fight off an attacker or to make a dash to safety. Stress makes your heart beat faster, raises your blood pressure, and quickens your breathing.

The most frequent reasons for “stressing out” fall into one of three categories:

1. the unsettling effects of change
2. the feeling that an outside force is challenging or threatening you
3. the feeling that you have lost personal control.

Not all stress is bad. Positive stress, or *eustress*, helps you face stressors and increases your tolerance for stress in certain situations. It can focus your energy, helping you rise to challenges and deal with boredom. But if you view a situation as unmanageable or out of control, that increased energy can easily turn to negative stress, or *distress*. At that point, it becomes a problem.

Different people react very differently to stressful situations. One person may thrive in a stressful situation that another finds intolerable. For example, one student may wait until the last minute to write a term paper, finding the stress of the deadline helps her to concentrate entirely on the task at hand. Another student may find he can’t go to sleep at night unless he knows he’s made a little bit of progress each day on his report.

College Students and Stress

It’s not surprising, then, that studies have shown college students to be quite vulnerable to stress. College students face an unusual number of stressors. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), for example, lists the following as some of the most common:

- Increased academic demands
- Being on your own in a new environment
- Changes in family relations
- Financial responsibilities
- Changes in your social life
- Exposure to new people, ideas, and temptations
- Awareness of your sexual identity and orientation
- Preparing for life after graduation.



Study requirements can impact stress levels.

Sources of Stress for Soldiers and Their Families

Soldiers and their families also must deal with higher levels of stress than most people. Some, like the stress of combat, are obvious, although their effects may not appear immediately. Others are both more subtle and more common, including long separations from family, a suddenly increased or decreased workload, financial problems, family changes that take place in the Soldier's absence, performance ratings, or health problems. Other sources of stress can be deployment itself, military housing problems, relationships with other members of the unit or with a supervisor, or conflicts between family responsibilities and military duties. Some officers and Soldiers have even found it stressful to find themselves suddenly back home after several months' deployment in a very stressful environment.

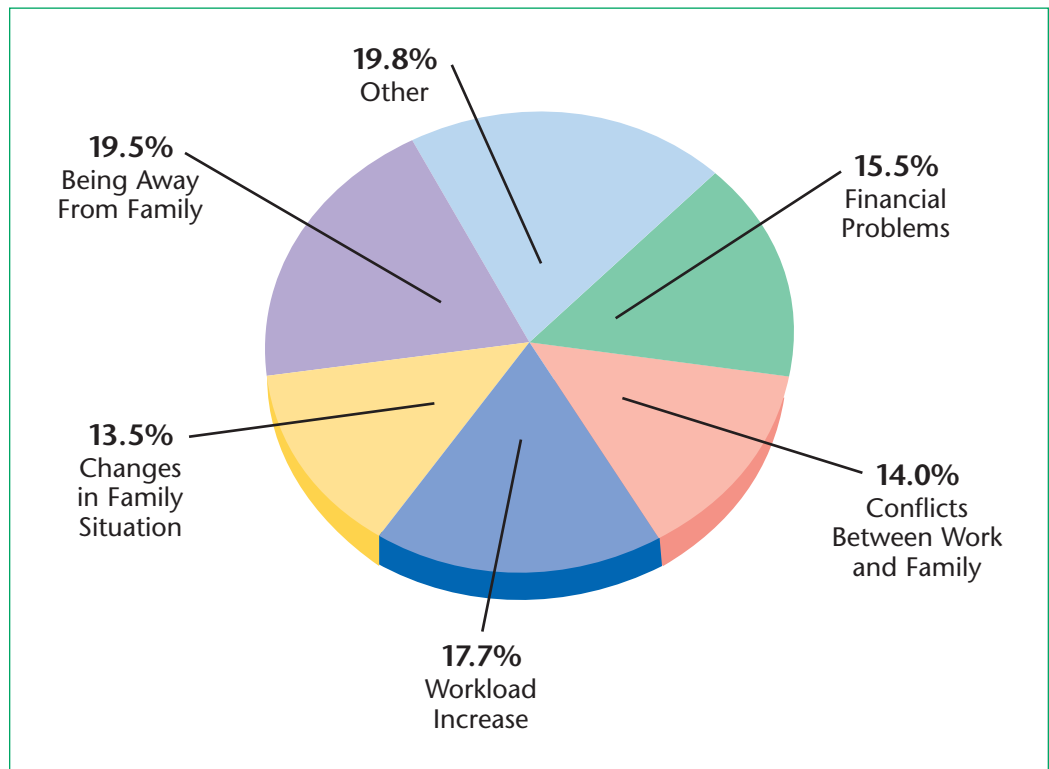


Figure 4.1 Sources of Stress for Men

Department of Defense studies have revealed some interesting differences in the ways military men and women react to stress. In a 1998 survey, military men said they were most stressed (in order) by being away from their families, increased workloads, financial problems, conflicts between work and family, and changes in their family situation (Figure 4.1).

Military women, on the other hand, said they were most stressed by (in order) being away from their families, changes in their family situation, increased workloads, work relationships, and financial problems (Figure 4.2).

According to the survey results, the major difference was that men were concerned more about conflicts between work and family, while for women, the big issues were changes in their families and work relationships.

The Results of Stress

Stress is not something you can afford to take lightly. Unrelieved stress can damage your physical and mental health—and that of your friends or Soldiers—in many ways.

- It causes your muscles to tense, leading to headaches, neck ache, jaw pain, and backache
- It brings on stomach pain, indigestion, upset bowels, or ulcers
- It deepens feelings of anxiety, nervousness, tension, and helplessness
- It increases your anger or irritability, and can lead to chest pain
- It can lead to depression, exhaustion, lack of concentration, and insomnia
- It can result in restlessness, boredom, confusion, or the impulse to run and hide.

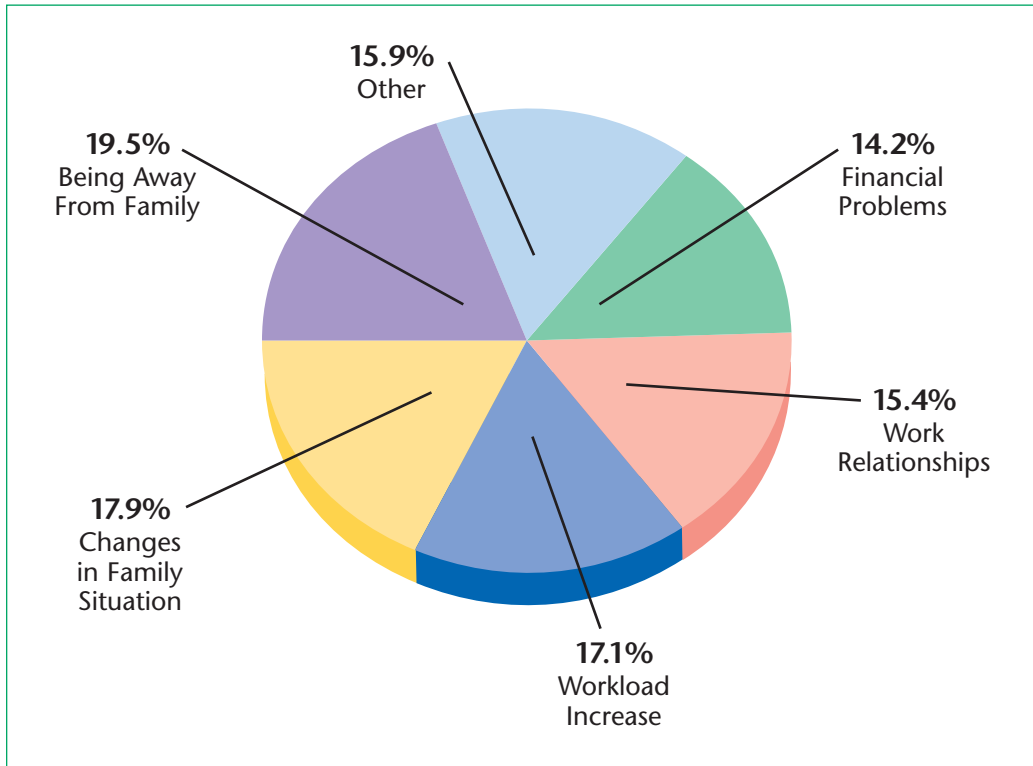


Figure 4.2 Sources of Stress for Women

Stress may also lead you into counterproductive and damaging behavior. You may become irritable and deal harshly with others, especially loved ones. You may isolate yourself from other people. You may find yourself shopping compulsively. You may overeat, undereat, or use more alcohol, tobacco, or caffeine—substances that usually cover up your stressors, rather than helping you face and deal with them.

The Relationship Between Stress and Performance

It stands to reason, then, that stress can affect you and your Soldiers' performance—both positively and negatively. You've already seen that stress can provide the mental and physical stimulation you need to meet a challenge. That can be a good thing—increased stress leads to increased performance. The right amount of stress helps you reach the “zone of optimal performance” shown in Figure 4.3.

But there comes a point at which too much stress, just like too little, makes you unable to perform. This idea is called the Inverted-U Hypothesis. With too little stress or arousal, you may become lethargic or distracted, unable to perform your best (Figure 4.4). Your reflexes are slow and you don't respond fast enough. Too much stress or arousal, on the other hand, may cause you to freeze up or become paralyzed with fear or anxiety (Figure 4.5). For example, have you ever had trouble unlocking a door when you were badly frightened? Or, as you are about to take an exam, have you ever felt that you have suddenly forgotten everything you learned that semester?

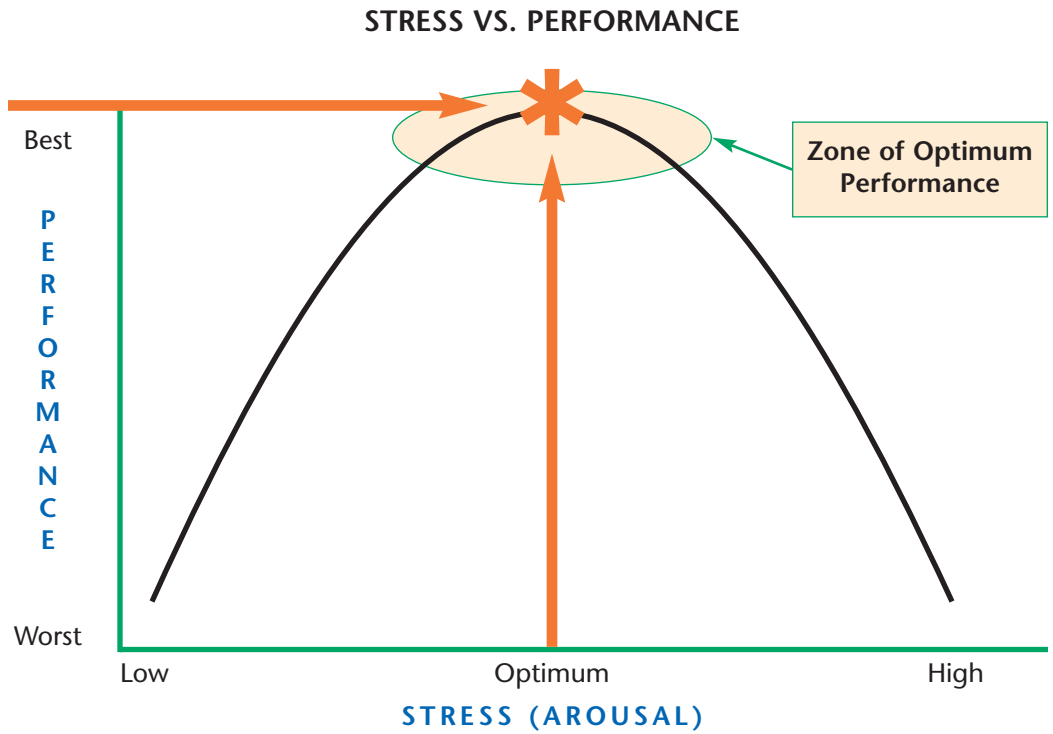


Figure 4.3 The Zone of Optimal Performance

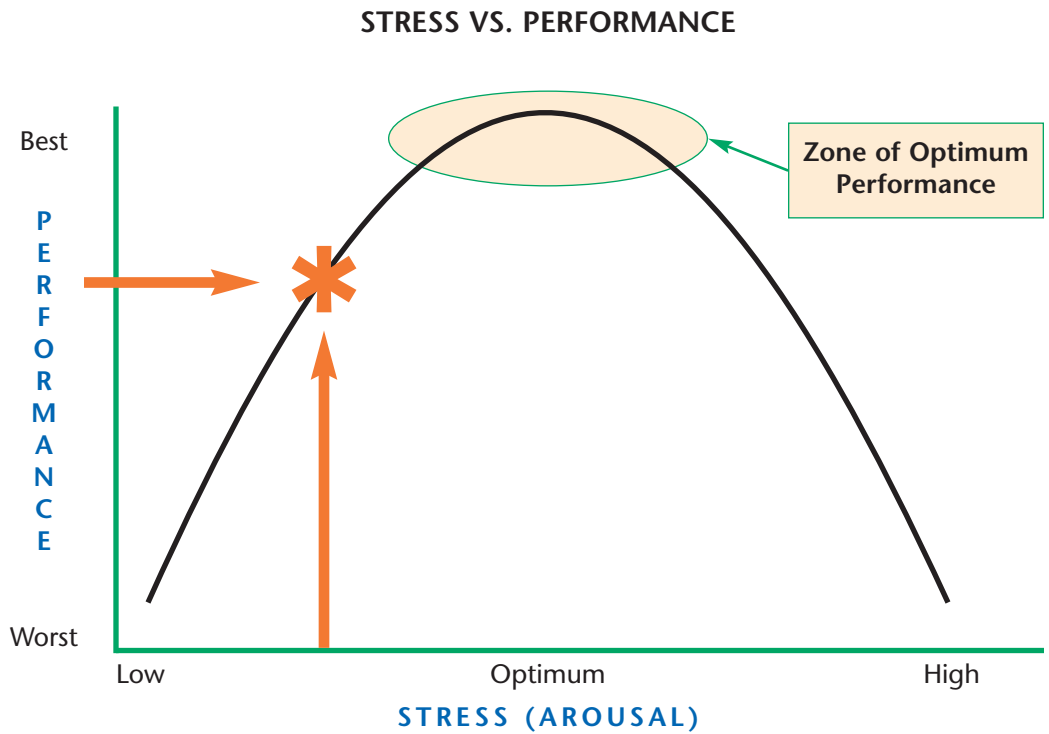


Figure 4.4 Below the Zone of Optimal Performance

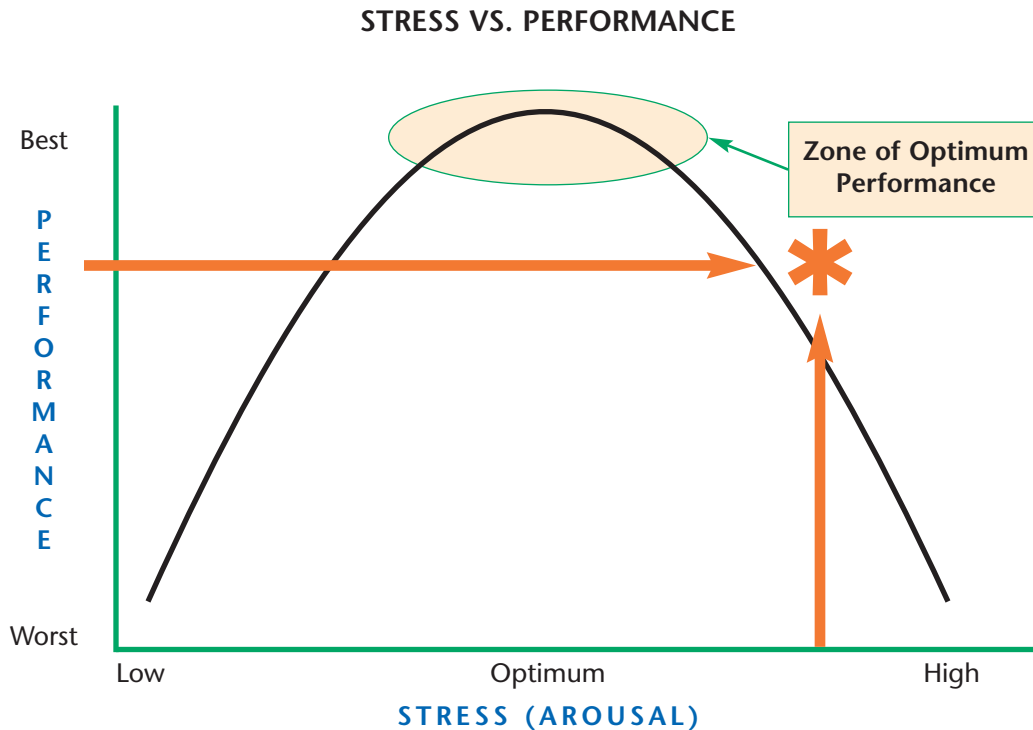


Figure 4.5 Beyond the Zone of Optimal Performance

Your goal, then, is to find ways to stay “in the zone”—to balance the stress in your life so that you have enough to keep you sharp without overtaxing your ability to handle the challenges life throws your way. Staying “in the zone” means learning how to *manage* stress.

Managing Stress

The first step in managing your stress is to understand yourself. You should ask yourself several questions: What causes you stress? How do you react in certain situations? What do you normally do when you feel stressed?

Perspective

Stress, like almost everything, is a matter of perspective—how you look at things. You hear all the time about people who see a glass as half empty versus those who see it as half full. You can’t always control what happens to you—you can only control how you react to it. Psychologist and stress expert Richard Carlson points out that recognizing *patterns of behavior*—your own and others’—can be a big help in dealing with stress.

Recognize Patterns of Behavior

No matter where you work or what you do, becoming an expert in recognizing patterns of behavior can help you reduce the stress in your life by eliminating many of your unnecessary interpersonal conflicts. It will also help you to keep your perspective by being less surprised when “stuff happens.” When you learn to recognize patterns of behavior, you will be able to detect problems before they have a chance to get out of hand; nip certain arguments in the bud; and prevent hassles that might otherwise manifest themselves.

If you take a careful look at the people you work with, you will probably agree that most people (you and I, too) have a tendency to repeat patterns and engage in habitual reactions. In other words, we tend to be bothered by the same things, irritated by the same sets of circumstances, argue over the same sets of facts, and act defensively toward certain types of behavior. Indeed, for most of us, our reactions to life, particularly stress, are fairly predictable.

This being the case, it’s enormously helpful to take careful note of the people you work with—and recognize any negative or destructive patterns of behavior that are likely to repeat themselves. You might notice, for example, that if you take on or challenge a member of your team, he will become defensive and tend to argue. This doesn’t mean it’s never appropriate to challenge him—there will certainly be times when it is. What it means is that when you recognize, with relative certainty, what is going to happen if you engage in certain types of interactions, you might determine that it is not worth getting into. In this way, you can avoid unnecessary conflict and spend your time and energy in more efficient ways. To be able to do this, of course, you will have to take an honest look at your own patterns of behavior. Perhaps you are the one who starts some of the arguments, or you are a willing participant once they get going.

Maybe there is someone in your office who is virtually incapable of completing a project on time—he is always a day or two late. [He’s] always got a great and legitimate sounding excuse, yet the end result is always the same—he is late. By being aware of the pattern and the virtual certainty with which it occurs, you may be able to protect yourself, or at least be less frustrated by it. You can attempt to avoid participating in projects with him where on-time performance is a must. If working with him cannot be avoided, you can try to build in some extra time, or get off to an early start, knowing full well what is likely to occur. And in a worst-case scenario, you will probably be less stressed out [by] his lateness because you already knew it was going to happen. . . .

By recognizing patterns of behavior, you are in the driver's seat at work. This type of reflective wisdom allows you to better choose what to say and what not to say; who to spend time with and who to avoid, when possible. It helps you make the decision "to go certain places" with certain people. Starting today, take a careful look at the patterns of behavior where you work. You will be less stressed out very soon.

Self-Talk

Another important tool in handling stress is to examine what you are saying to yourself. Are you thinking positive or negative thoughts? Your thoughts affect how you feel. Are you constantly telling yourself things are going to turn out badly, or that you are miserable, or that you can't complete a task you've been given? These thoughts can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Think about *what* you are thinking. Talk to yourself positively. Tell yourself instead that things are getting better, that you are happy, and that you can do it. You'll find your whole outlook changing.

Attitude

As you can see, your attitude about life, yourself, and others affects how you deal with stress. You *can* control what and how you think, although it may take practice.

People who are positive and confident base their lives on positive spiritual, moral, or psychological values. They confront the same stressful situations as other people. But they have learned mental, verbal, and physical exercises to short-circuit stressful feelings.

These comments from a young lieutenant just after he returned from Afghanistan in 2005 reveal some of the most important ways he learned to deal with stress.

How do you combat fatigue, stress, and fear in yourself? In your Soldiers?

Probably the best way I have found to combat fatigue, stress, and fear in myself and my Soldiers is attitude. Maintaining a positive attitude while focusing on the task at hand helps to maintain a solid working atmosphere. Ensuring that Soldiers receive proper rest is obviously a necessary factor. Finally, working out and maintaining physical fitness both reduces stress and takes the Soldiers' minds off their less-than-desirable situation.

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Critical Thinking

Take a moment to reflect on your spiritual, moral, or psychological values. How can they help you maintain a positive attitude toward life? Does your day-to-day outlook reflect those values?

Exercises

Mental exercises include those you read about above. Guard your thoughts to see that you don't fall into the same mental traps over and over again. Think ahead of time about stressful situations and how you will handle them.

Verbal exercises include using soothing words to calm yourself or another person. Watch what you say to others. Don't use provocative language. Give yourself plenty of time to calm down, think carefully, and then react.

Physical exercises include such simple things as going for a walk, breathing deeply for a few minutes, or taking time to consciously relax your jaw, legs, thighs, or back.

Organize to Reduce Stress

Organizing yourself and your time better, preparing ahead of time, and ensuring that you are ready will also help you reduce and manage stress. In the Army, when leaders and Soldiers know they are well trained and ready for their mission, they can tackle the job more confidently.

Set priorities

Use your time wisely. Make a To-Do list. Decide what is really important to get done today, and what can wait. This helps you to know that you are working on your immediate priorities, and you don't have the stress of trying to remember what you should be doing.

Don't procrastinate

Putting things off creates more, not less stress. Do your most difficult task first and get it out of the way.

Practice facing stressful moments

Think about the event or situation you expect to face and rehearse your reactions. Find ways to practice dealing with the challenge. If you know that speaking in front of a group frightens you, practice doing it, perhaps with a trusted friend or fellow student.

Examine your expectations

Try to set realistic goals. It's good to push yourself to achieve, but make sure your expectations are realistic. Watch out for perfectionism. Be satisfied with doing the best you can. Remember that mistakes can be a good teacher.

Live a healthy lifestyle

Get plenty of exercise. Eat healthy foods. Allow time for rest and relaxation. Find a relaxation technique that works for you—prayer, yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises. Look for the humor in life, and enjoy yourself.

Learn to accept change as a part of life

Nothing stays the same. Develop a support system of friends and relatives you can talk to when needed. Believe in yourself and your potential.

Healthy Behavior

Engaging in healthy behavior also strengthens your ability to handle stress. Eat right, get plenty of exercise, drink plenty of water, get enough sleep, and avoid tobacco and excessive alcohol use. Not only will this give you more energy and self-confidence, it will help you avoid the physical side effects of stress.

Exercise

The Army emphasizes physical fitness and exercise training in combat readiness. But physical fitness will improve your quality of life whether you're a Soldier or a civilian. Studies indicate that regular exercise is good for your mental as well as your physical health. It's a good antidote to stress, anxiety, and depression. Why? Regular exercise helps you feel in control—and your sense of control over your body can translate to a sense of control over other parts of your life.

Moderate physical activity—biking, walking, running, swimming, lifting—also helps you cope with your “fight or flight” reflexes. It flushes adrenaline from the body, relaxes tight muscles, and lowers your blood pressure. It also produces *endorphins*, which are neurotransmitters in your brain. (Neurotransmitters are chemicals that transmit nerve impulses through your body.) These endorphins are natural tranquilizers that can make you feel calm for as long as three hours after moderate physical activity. Some people refer to this as a “runner's high,” but you don't have to be a runner to feel it.

Nutrition

Proper nutrition—eating right—is also a potent weapon against stress. The USDA Food Pyramid can help you make healthy food choices and improve your physical fitness. A new version of the pyramid debuted in 2005 and shows the types of foods and the proportions that most healthy people should eat.

In addition, the USDA has an interactive website to help you track your diet. Visit www.MyPyramid.gov, where you can personalize your diet by age, gender, and general fitness level.

A healthy diet has the right kinds of foods in the right amounts. The person walking up the steps on the left in Figure 4.6 represents the need for daily physical activity and different individuals' different nutrition needs. The different widths of the food group bands indicate the need for proportion—how much you should choose from each group.

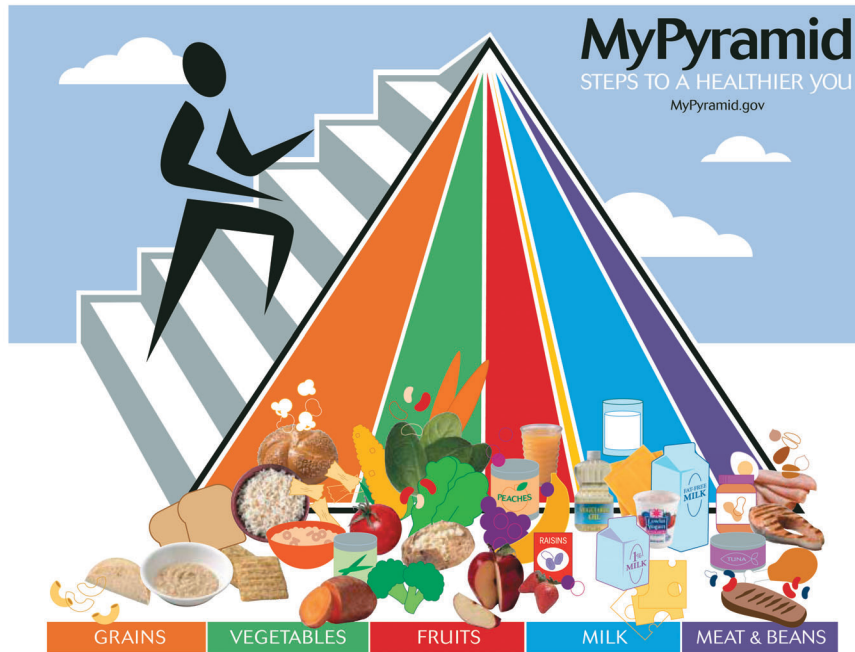


Figure 4.6 The Food Pyramid

Taken from www.mypyramid.gov

The six color bands symbolize the food you need daily from each group for good health.

Orange (grains): The USDA recommends you eat at least three ounces of whole-grain bread, cereal, crackers, rice, or pasta every day. *Half your grains should be whole.* To make sure you're eating whole grains, look for the word "whole" before the grain name on the list of ingredients on the food package.

Green (vegetables): You should vary vegetable servings, eating more dark green vegetables, orange vegetables, and dried beans and peas.

Red (fruits): Eat a variety of fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruit, but go easy on fruit juices, which may contain empty calories in the form of added sugars and sweeteners.

Yellow (oils and fats): Most of your fats should come from fish, nuts, and vegetable oils. Limit your consumption of solid fats like butter, stick margarine, shortening, and lard. Instead, when possible, consume foods with omega fish oils, which help maintain your cardiovascular health.

Blue (milk, an important source of calcium): Choose low-fat or fat-free milk. If you don't or can't drink milk, choose lactose-free products or other sources of calcium, such as hard cheese (cheddar, mozzarella, Swiss, or parmesan), cottage cheese, and low-fat or fat-free yogurt (including frozen yogurt).

Purple (meat, beans, and eggs): You may notice that this band, like the yellow band for oils, is thinner than the others. This visually reminds you to "Go lean on protein." Choose low-fat or lean meats and poultry that are baked, broiled, or grilled rather than fried. Vary your choices, including more fish, beans, peas, nuts, and seeds. If meat typically covers most of your plate, take another look at the Food Pyramid.

Critical Thinking

Given what you have learned about nutrition and stress, do you think it is a platoon leader's concern whether his or her Soldiers are eating well?

When and Where to Seek Help

Some people reach a point, however, where stress overwhelms them, and they slip into depression. People with depression have similar symptoms to stress, except that the symptoms are not temporary—they can last for weeks or longer. Depression is a serious illness that can negatively affect your eating habits, your relationships, your ability to study and work, and how you think and feel.

If you have five or more of the following symptoms of depression, you should go to a mental health professional for an evaluation:

- Sadness, anxiety, or “empty” feelings
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being “slowed down”
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, oversleeping, or waking much earlier than usual)
- Appetite and weight changes (either loss or gain)
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, and worthlessness
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or remembering
- Irritability or excessive crying
- Chronic aches and pains not explained by another physical condition.

The resident adviser in your dorm, the student health center, your family health-care provider, or a clergy member can steer you to treatment resources. There are several effective treatments for depression, and—depending on the severity of the symptoms—you can feel better in just a few weeks.



CONCLUSION

Learning to manage stress will help you as a college student, a platoon leader, or in any walk of life. Failing to manage your stress, on the other hand, will degrade your performance and could damage your health. Consistently practicing stress-management techniques, starting now, will help you in college and will also prepare you to handle the kinds of stress you will face as an Army leader. It will also equip you to help the Soldiers you lead deal more effectively with their own stress.

Key Words

stress

stressor

Learning Assessment

1. Describe the physical effects of stress.
2. List some ways to manage stress.
3. Explain the relationship between stress and performance.



Critical Thinking

Think back over the past week and the stressors you faced. How did you handle them? Given what you have just read, how could you have done better, and how can you do better next time you face these same stressors?

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