

stress

By Elizabeth Dunlop

"It's the continuing series of small tragedies that send a man to the madhouse . . . not the death of a love but a shoelace that snaps with no time left."

—Charles Bukowski

Charles Bukowski could very well have added an overdue term paper or a roommate who leaves the dirty dishes in the sink. All these seemingly small things add up to create stress.

Stress is no stranger to the university student. All students must deal with stress, but not all stress is bad. A very thin line divides positive and negative stress. Indeed, a certain amount of stress is a good and healthy thing. Hans Selye, the father of stress research, believes that stress is "the spice of life," and leads to a productive existence. Happy moments in your life trigger the same sort of changes that less pleasurable ones do. For instance, falling in love can cause the same physical and emotional symptoms that you might experience while writing an exam. It is not until stress becomes excessive that it is considered harmful.

Many symptoms are associated with stress: feelings of depression, nervousness, memory lapses and lack of concentration, headaches, faintness, nausea and lower back pain.

Studies also show that your tolerance of any sort of illness is lower when under acute stress. In some cases a stressful event may even cause you to become ill. In the early 1950s psychiatrist Thomas Holmes found that tension did indeed promote the disease process. Tests proved that tissue damage was caused by merely talking about a stressful event.

The question of who is more susceptible to stress is a hard one to answer. Take for example the university setting: is it fair to assume that an engineer will experience more stress than an arts major? Experts think not.

Psychologist Richard Lazarus of the University of California at Berkeley says, "Many things influence a person's ability to cope regardless of external pressures." Factors such as physical health, past experience and social support are all important in the handling of stress. What is meant by social support is the help that others can provide during stressful times in the form of encouragement, caring concern and reassurance.

Studies by professors at Columbia University have shown that stress can be regulated. It seems that the less control you have over your life, whether at school or in the workforce, the more likely you are to experience acute stress. However, if you can maintain a feeling of independence you stand a far greater chance of coping.

A questionnaire was handed out to 183 York undergraduates in January of this year. Respondents included students enrolled in the Science, English, Film, Physical Education, Psychology and History programs. The sample consisted of 79 males and 104 females. The major aim of this survey was to assess the quality of life at York and thereby isolate the main causes of stress among university students. The survey contains three parts: 1) academic requirement, 2) university environment and 3) personal stress factors.

The most frequently mentioned causes of stress in part 1 were: excessive workloads, deadlines and academic achievement. Cries of "I haven't got enough time" and "too much work" were repeated over and over again. It seems that the quantity of work given along with the quality of work expected makes for an anxiety-ridden student populace. As if this weren't enough, students also must deal with the pressure of pending exams, assignments, presentations, compulsory courses and lecture attendance.

York may not seem like the Don Valley at 8:00 in the morning, but it has its own brand of traffic that many students find really stressful. Overcrowding, herds of pedestrian traffic and endless lineups were frequently mentioned. The library, cafeterias and Central Square specifically were named the most overcrowded areas. Student crowding was likened to Boxing Day at Yorkdale or Kiddies Day at the Ex.

Expenses and administration were also considered factors that contributed to stress on campus. Hassles with regard to registration and the excessive amount of red tape involved topped the list.

Juggling studies along with a satisfying social life proved to be a major concern among those surveyed. This conflict in interests proved to be a universal thorn in the paw of university students. So, too, was money. This is and will continue to be one of the most common causes of stress. Coupled with the bleak employment situation in our country, this proves to be more

than many students can handle.

Harry Minden, Chairman of the Counselling & Development Centre at York, feels that having an awareness of what is creating stress in your life is the first step in learning how to deal with it. Once you have identified stressful factors, Minden suggests you rate them on a scale of 1-10: 10 being very important and 1 not so important. This should help put things into a little clearer perspective. Some people are chronic worriers and everything from a death in the family to an empty cereal box sends them into a frenzy. These types may take a little time to discover what is most genuinely stressful. Generally, once a rating is established the road to coping is not so rough.

This road is lined with many ways in which to combat stress. While none of them is without merit, specialists warn against the dangers of masking a stressful problem. For example: You are a 4th year science student and each week you must submit a lab for 3 out of your 5 courses. As the year progresses this becomes more and more difficult and you experience more and more stress, complete with headaches and fatigue. Instead of approaching your professors in a reasonable fashion, you wake up every morning at 5:30, jog six miles, do yoga for 20 minutes and listen to the complete, unabridged collection of Monty Python's greatest moments. Relaxation, exercise and humor are all genuinely good ways to alleviate the symptoms of stress. But experts feel that they must be used along with other skills such as problem-solving or reappraisals of stressful events. The ability to look at things in a new light is often all that is needed to gain that first foothold on the climb towards valuable stress management.

An awareness of the nature of the stressful factors that students face today may serve to enlighten both faculty and administration to the difficulties that exist at York. Help is available on campus through the Counselling & Development Centre and seminars are offered on a regular basis.

If students are able to cope with stress now, they will have a far easier time coping with the more stressful environment of the workplace. And while stress can be productive, worrying is usually useless. As one wag stated: "Worry is a fast getaway on a wooden horse."

YORK STUDENTS STRESS SURVEY

TABLE 1
Academic Requirements

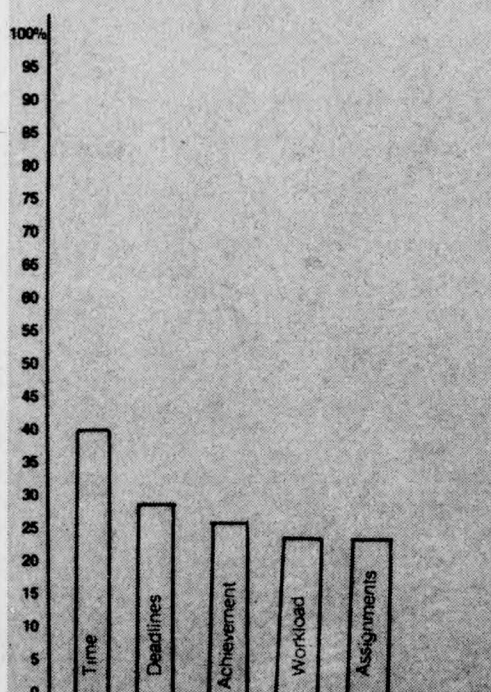


TABLE 2
University Environment

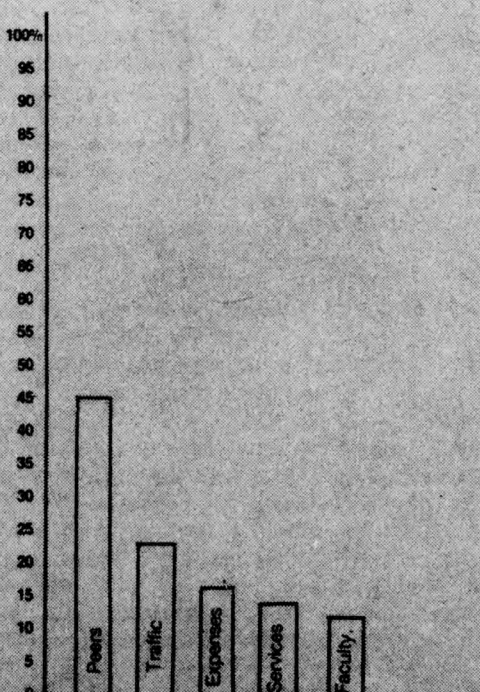


TABLE 3
Personal

