



# Stress in students: what you can do as a lecturer

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Centre of Expertise for Higher Education (University of Antwerp)

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As a lecturer or an education assistant, you will have surely encountered stress in students before. **What can you do** in situations where a student is clearly suffering from stress symptoms? **What is stress** exactly? To what extent are stress symptoms 'normal'? And **when** is the situation so serious that you should **refer** the student? In this ECHO tip, we'll give you some pointers.

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## When it all becomes too much

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In and of itself, stress is a perfectly **normal and useful** physiological response, triggered when you experience tension or pressure. Adrenaline and noradrenaline increase your heart rate, speed up your breathing, and put your senses on high alert. Energy is diverted to your limbs, so that you're ready to fight, or to run. The general sensation is one of restlessness and tension. Your body is mobilised for potential action. In this sense, stress actually allows you to face challenges. So when a student experiences stress before an exam or before a presentation, this **isn't necessarily a bad thing**.

However, stress **can become problematic** if it lasts too long and if there's not enough time to recover from it. After all, stress takes a toll on the body. The energy diverted to the limbs has to come from somewhere, and that includes the gastrointestinal and immune systems. That's why acute stress can cause not only muscle tension, faster breathing and an increased heart rate, but also stomach discomfort, nausea and irritability. These symptoms usually disappear after a week of rest. After a stressful moment or period, the body needs **time to recover**. Otherwise, long-term negative consequences may include **chronic stress** or even **burnout**. That's why it's important for you as a lecturer or education assistant to **be on the lookout for signs of**

**chronic stress or burnout**. Here are some examples (based on Franck, 2021).

- Study-related signals

Some students start **studying a lot, or more and more**, no longer taking time off to relax or to engage in fun activities. Then there are also students who lose all **motivation**. They start postponing or avoiding assignments, causing them to miss deadlines or ask for exceptions. There are also students who become **insecure** about their studies: 'What if I don't have what it takes?' Stress can also cause **concentration and memory problems**.

- Emotional signals

Students who report feeling that they're **losing control** may be suffering from stress. This may include anxiety and/or panic, feelings of depression, frustration, cynicism and irritability.

- Physical signals

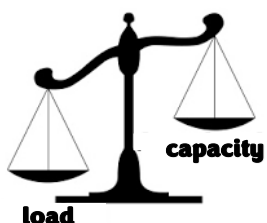
Students who are under a lot of stress may feel **overtired** and exhausted. Other symptoms include having trouble sleeping, persistent muscle pains, chronic gastrointestinal complaints, heart palpitations and chronic hyperventilation (chest tightness and shortness of breath).

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## Load versus capacity

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**When does stress become chronic?** There are several factors that can cause prolonged stress. A useful model in this regard is the *Load vs Capacity* model, often represented by a pair of scales.



The **load** is made up of all the things that deplete the student's energy. These include external elements – like the pandemic, lack of social contact, combining a full study programme with a job, financial worries, or family problems – but certain internal factors can also increase the load or burden that a person has to bear. Behavioural patterns formed in the past, for example, can cause and perpetuate stress reactions. Think of fear of failure, perfectionism, having a hard time saying no, being very idealistic, always wanting to take care of others, etc. These patterns can of course differ greatly from person to person.

The **capacity**, on the other hand, is determined by all the things that replenish the student's energy. These are the things that help the student recover. Getting enough sleep, moments of relaxation throughout the day, a healthy diet, going for walks or engaging in other types of moderate-intensity exercise or sports, a fun hobby, chatting with a friend, and really any activity that calms the student down. Again, it's important to realise that there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Different people get energy from different things.

When the **balance is skewed**, i.e. when the load systematically exceeds the capacity, that's when problems can arise. Whenever a student feels that there's more weight on their shoulders than they can comfortably carry over an extended period of time, chronic stress symptoms may develop.

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## How can you help?

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Here are some **tips**.

- Try to **assess** the severity of the stress symptoms. Ask the student about what they're feeling or experiencing, and acknowledge this. Is this a temporary situation of elevated stress? Or have the symptoms been present for some time now and is the student getting chronically overstressed? Or even heading in the direction of a burnout? If the **stress signals are severe** (e.g. panic attacks) and/or have been present for a long time, **refer** the student to a doctor and/or student psychologist.
- **Provide the student with information on load vs capacity.** Together with the student, explore what causes might be at the root of their stress. What factors are weighing on them, increasing their load? Try to break down the total weight on their shoulders into different components.

Assess **external causes**: how are the studies going? Is the student studying full-time or part-time? Are there any other commitments (e.g. work, extracurricular activities, a family to take care of)? Try to think of ways to take some of this weight off the student's shoulders. Consider opting out of certain programme components, or spreading out the study programme over a longer period of time. If there are relationship or family problems that are getting in the way of the student's normal functioning, it's best to encourage them to make an appointment with a student psychologist.

Be sure to address **internal causes** as well: Is the student minding their health? Encourage healthy eating and sleeping habits. Are there any limiting patterns at play, such as fear of failure or perfectionism? If so, encourage the student to work on that. You can refer the student to self-help tools (online or otherwise) or to group sessions guided by a student psychologist. If you suspect that there's something more going on (e.g. the student has depressive symptoms, gives signs of not being able to cope), encourage the student to make an individual appointment with a student psychologist.

- Together, try to come up with ways the student can unwind and **recover**. What gives the student energy? What helps the student to calm down? Or who?

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## Referring the student

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You can refer students to self-help tools or group sessions organised by a student psychologist at your institution. For severe stress symptoms, it's best to have the student book an individual appointment.

Examples of some **self-help tools**:

- **'Studies Without Worries'** is a free online programme for students who suffer from **fear of failure, procrastination and insecurity**. Students can also take a test there. The programme is available in Dutch and English for students at six Flemish higher education institutions: Artevelde

University of Applied Sciences, HoGent, Karel de Grote Hogeschool, KU Leuven, Thomas More and UAntwerp.

- **'Moodspace'** is an online platform for students with reliable info, tips and self-help tools to tackle **emotional problems** and to find the resilience to **study confidently**. The platform is available in both Dutch and English.
- UAntwerp's Study Advice and Student Counselling Service has created several **workbooks** for students (and their parents) on the topics of study and career choice, fear of failure, study approach, studying with autism, perfectionism, and procrastination.

## References and more information

Franck, E. (2021). *Spectrumlezing Stress is stresserend. Preventie van chronische stress om burn-out te voorkomen*, 16 December 2021.

Van de Voorde, S. (2021). *Van stress naar veerkracht*. Borgerhoff & Lamberigts.

[Screencasts and accompanying handouts](#) of the coaching module on emotional well-being (in Dutch). This module is part of a [broader 'Coaching skills' training course](#) (in Dutch, link accessible only to UAntwerp staff) for UAntwerp lecturers and education assistants.

### ECHO Teaching Tips (in English)

[Want to get the best out of your students? Let's coach!](#) (2021)

[What to do as a lecturer when a student panics?](#) (2021)

[Anyone can coach? Focus on student well-being](#) (2021)

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