Must. Be. Productive. But I'm so stressed out!

Dear Alice,

I have this problem with my studies. I feel that I need to work 24 hours a day in order just to keep up. I have been getting panic attacks and outbreaks of eczema because I am so stressed out. Can you advise me of any relaxation techniques that will allow me to unwind after a hard day?

Yours,
A tightly wound spring

Answer

Dear A tightly wound spring,

All work (or studying) and no play can certainly take a toll on you, both emotionally and physically. It's common for students to feel stressed out by their academic demands, so know that you're not the only one who gets wound up. Relaxation practices may release some of your tension, but it might also be worthwhile to check in with a health promotion or mental health professional about how to address the root cause of your stress and panic attacks.

There are a variety of techniques that can help to relax your mind and body after a long day of hitting the books. You could try some of these stress-relievers in the morning, to help you start the day on the right foot, or between study sessions, to renew your energy throughout the day. Here are few ways to make stress more manageable:

- **Turn up the volume.** Music has a powerful effect on mood. Experiment with nature sounds, soft jazz, or more energizing tunes with a hot beat to combat your stress.
- **Get moving.** Physical activity boosts feel-good chemicals in your brain called endorphins and provides a physical outlet for pent-up worries. Other schools of movement like yoga and tai chi can also help to relax the body and clear the mind. Also, you can dance your cares away!
- **Say ooohm.** There are many approaches to meditation, but some common elements include rhythmic breathing, visualizing a peaceful place, and repeating a mantra.
- **Rub it in.** Take a study break with a friend and take turns giving each other a quick shoulder rub.

In addition to relaxation techniques, it may be helpful to pinpoint what specifically is causing you to feel so stressed out. For example, you mentioned that you feel like you need to work...
around the clock to stay on top of your schoolwork. Is your stress related to a lack of down
time or pressure to do well academically or perhaps both? Is it that you're taking more classes
than normal or have a particularly challenging course load this semester? or has school-
related stress been an ongoing problem for you?

Once you nail down the source of your worries, you can make life changes that get to the root
of the problem and prevent stress from building up in the first place. For example, the difficulty
balancing academics and personal time is a common source of stress for students. If time
management is your biggest concern, you could try making a detailed schedule that lays out
time for classes, studying, meals, exercise, and other activities you enjoy minute by minute for
each upcoming week. Another option would be to set aside one of your commitments for a
while to free up space in your schedule. Is there an activity that you can take a break from or
a way to reduce your course load in the future? Taking control of your schedule may require
some tough choices, but in return, hopefully you'll feel more at ease throughout the day.

Stress has a pesky way of blurring the big picture, and magnifying troublesome details. To
help you put things into perspective, you may want to talk with a health promotion or mental
health professional about your recent stress and panic attacks. Check to see if your campus
has a counseling center to make an appointment. They may also offer a variety of support
groups and workshops, including some related to stress and time management. While you're
booking appointments, you might also consider visiting a health care provider to treat your
eczema as well.

Setting high academic standards is something to be proud of, but all studying and no personal
time may quickly leave you burnt out. By taking time out to relax and addressing the real
source of your stress, you'll "wind up" happier and more productive in the long run!

Alice!

Category:
Emotional Health [3]
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Related questions

Stress at the start of school [5]
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Resources

Stressbust Yourself Toolkit [10]
Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [12]
Medical Services (CUMC) [13]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [14]

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