



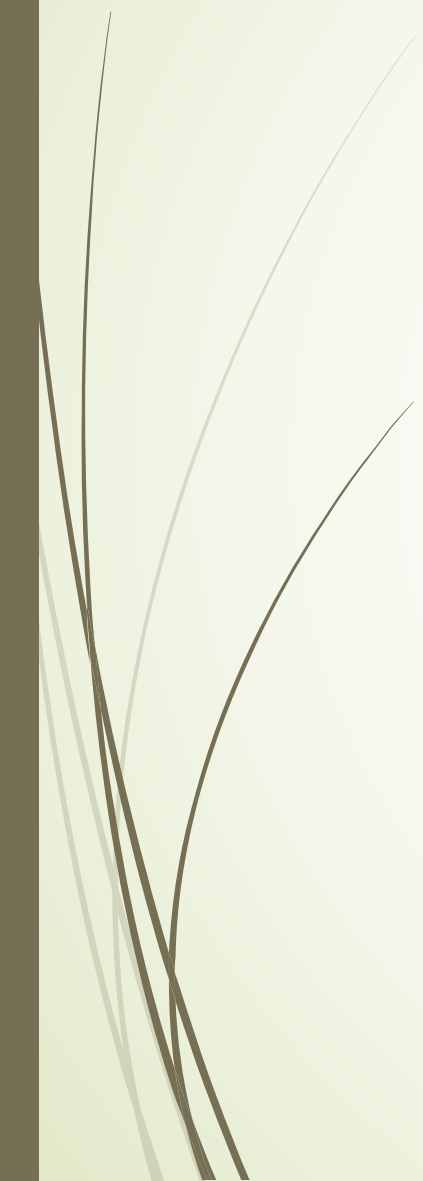
Managing Stress as a Graduate Student

Paula G. Williams, Ph.D.

Dept. of Psychology



Workshop Overview

- Defining stress
 - The components of comprehensive stress assessment
 - Strategies for each component
 - Stress buffers
- 

How would you define stress?



Overtime Sick Tired
Dread Health No Time Headache
Stress Bills Payments
No Sleep Stress Debt
Fear Work
Worry Job
Anxiety Retirement
Savings Anxiety
Overdue Expectations
Insuran Time Management
Fear Late Nights
Late Ni ear

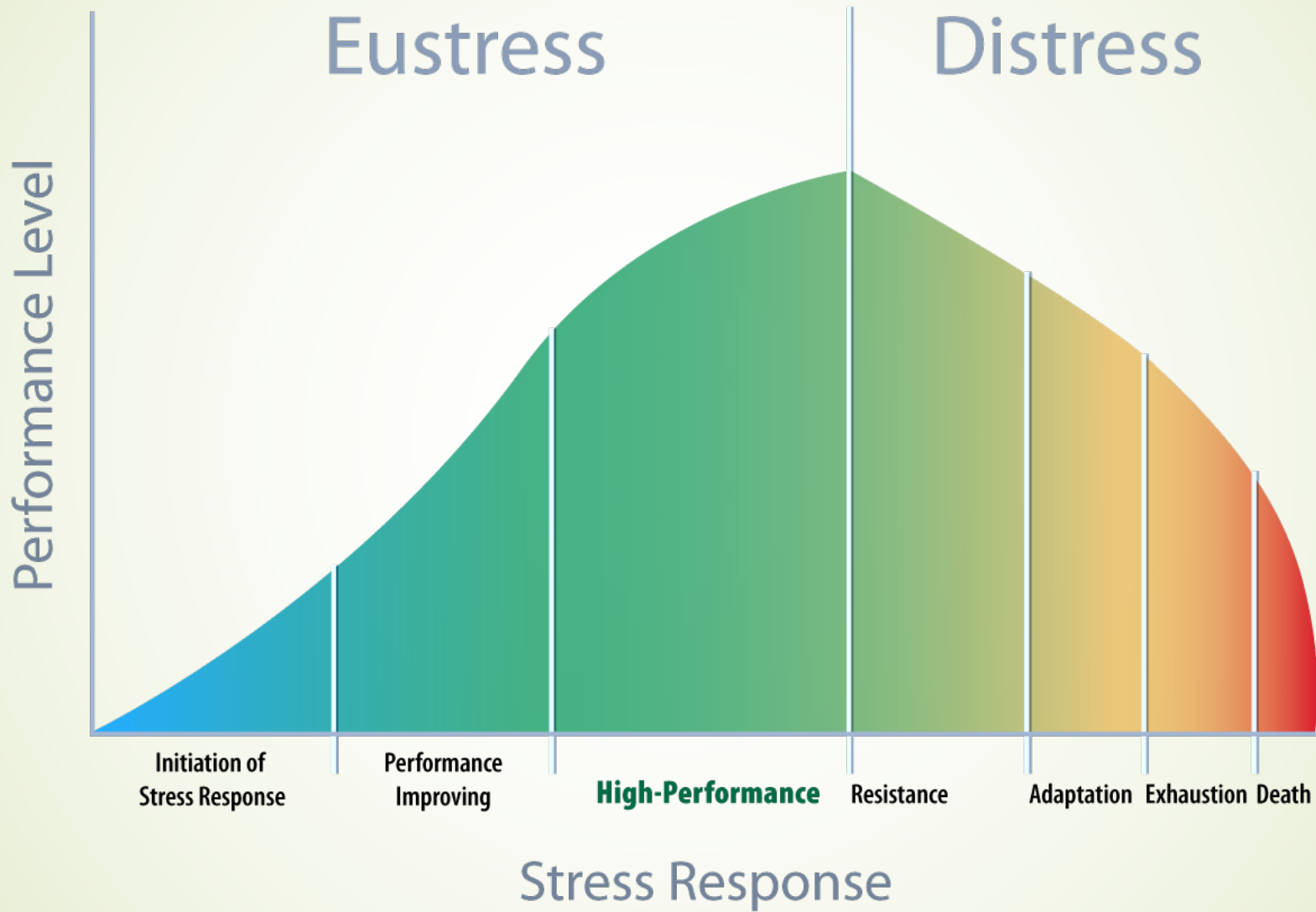


Stress as a set of component processes

- Stress Exposure (“stressors”)
 - Daily hassles, major life events
 - Worry, rumination
- Stress Reactivity
 - Physiological (“fight or flight”), emotional, cognitive
- Stress Recovery
 - Immediate, end-of-day (pre-sleep)
- Stress Restoration
 - Sleep and other processes that repair stress-related damage



Is all stress bad?



The Human Function Curve, Nixon 1982 (Yerkes-Dodson Curve 1908)

Stress Assessment

- ▶ Understand yourself and your characteristic style (Individual differences)
 - ▶ Personality/temperament
 - ▶ Stress-reducing, stress-enhancing behavior
- ▶ Identify sources of stress in your life (Stress Exposure)
 - ▶ Daily hassles, major life events
 - ▶ “Internal” stress exposure: worry, rumination
- ▶ Characterize your tendencies for stress reactivity
 - ▶ Physiological, emotional, cognitive
- ▶ How are you able to recover and restore during and after experiencing stressful events?
 - ▶ End-of-day cognitive and physiological
 - ▶ Sleep assessments and diary
- ▶ What is your profile with respect to stress buffers
 - ▶ Health behavior, positive experiences, social support



Sources of daily stress exposure

- Daily events that have the potential to be stressful (“hassles”)
- Typical categories:
- Negative interpersonal interactions
 - As grad students: chronic evaluation, managing challenging interpersonal interactions with faculty, students, peers
- Time management
 - As grad students: competing demands for time
- Physical well-being / health
- Work / school
- External events
- Thinking about future events / stressors
- Thinking about past events / stressors

- Also, “life” still happens while you’re in graduate school (Major Life Events happen, which in turn → increased hassles)

Stress Appraisal & Cognitive Reactivity



- ▶ How do you interpret potentially stressful events?
- ▶ Positive vs. neutral vs. negative
- ▶ Threat vs. challenge
- ▶ Maladaptive thinking examples:
- ▶ Black-&-white thinking
 - ▶ *always, never (e.g., I never do anything right)*
- ▶ Catastrophic thinking
 - ▶ Irrational, worst-case outcomes
 - ▶ *If I fail this test I won't pass this class, then I will fail out of school, then I won't graduate, then I won't get a good job, then I will be unhappy in a dead-end job forever.*
- ▶ Exaggeration (e.g., frequency, severity)
 - ▶ *This is the worst thing that could happen. I can't manage it.*
- ▶ Imperatives (e.g., *I must..., I can't...*)
 - ▶ *I shouldn't take any time off. I must work hard all the time.*



Emotional and Physiological Stress Reactivity


- What are your emotional and physiological reactions to stress?
- Negative affect: Upset, Scared, Hostile, Irritable
- Positive affect: Alert, Interested, Attentive, Determined (related to feeling “challenge”?)
- Physiology: heart rate, blood pressure, electrodermal response, heart rate variability, cortisol, muscle tension



Stress Recovery



- ▶ How long does it take you to recover from a stressful event?
- ▶ Return to resting levels of emotion and physiology
- ▶ How much time do you spend in a state of emotional and physiological arousal?
- ▶ Also relevant: Pre-sleep arousal (cognitive and somatic symptoms before bedtime)



Stress Assessment: Restoration - sleep

- Sleep hygiene
- Aspects of global sleep quality:
- Duration (total sleep time) [7-9 hours recommended]
- Continuity (sleep latency, wakefulness after sleep onset, sleep efficiency [total sleep time/time in bed])
- Quality (feeling restored, refreshed)
- Architecture (REM & NREM sleep stages)
- What constitutes insomnia?
- Problems falling asleep, staying asleep, waking too early
- Interference of poor sleep with daily functioning
- Subjective distress over poor sleep



Stress Self-Management



- Avoid/reduce stress exposure
 - Time management
 - Assertiveness training
 - Alter cognitive responses to stress
- Reduce stress reactivity
 - Mindfulness meditation / yoga
 - Relaxation training
 - Exercise
- Enhance recovery & restoration (e.g., sleep)
- Buffer yourself from stress
 - Exercise, healthy behavior, positive activities

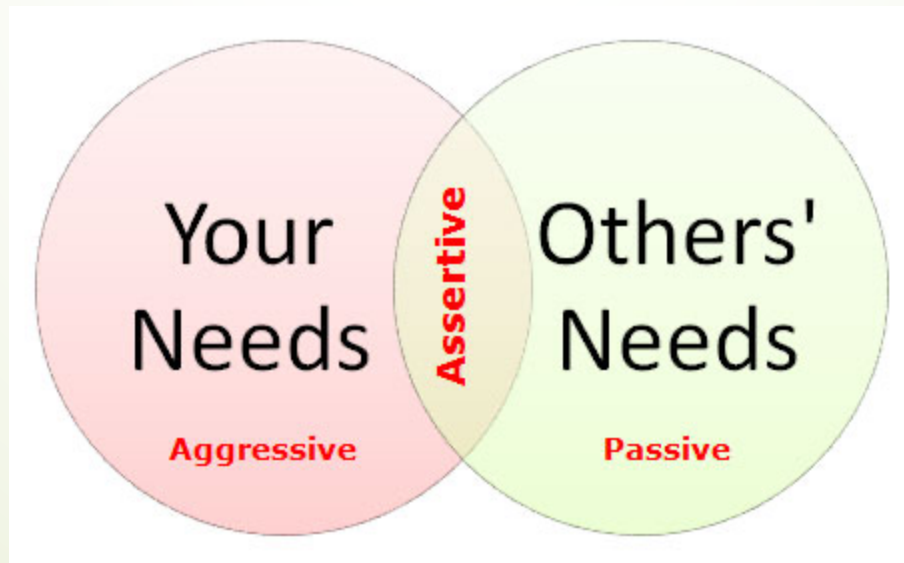
Time Management Assessment & Techniques

- Goal Setting
 - Set goals (short term & long term)
- Prioritize (ABC lists)
- Create a schedule
 - Consider your natural rhythms (peak time vs. low energy)
- Manage procrastination and anxiety avoidance
 - Shaping: start with a “do-able” amount of time, set an alarm
 - Distress tolerance
 - Use rewards
- Manage distractions (phone off, email notifications off, etc)
- Avoid multitasking
- Take scheduled breaks
 - Move, meditate, manage blood sugar



Definitions - Assertiveness

- *Assertive behavior*: satisfying own needs, but not at the expense of others
- *Non-assertive behavior*: giving up wishes and needs in order to satisfy others
- *Aggressive behavior*: seeking to dominate others and meet needs at the expense of others



Verbal/Nonverbal Assertiveness

- ▶ Nonverbal assertiveness: body language consistent with verbal assertiveness
- ▶ Watch affect / facial expression (assertive words + angry face = still aggressive)
- ▶ Empathic statements—acknowledge the other person's position (*"I understand that you want/feel/need ____..."*)
- ▶ Verbal assertiveness: DESC formula divided into four parts
- ▶ Describe situation (stick to behavior, not motivation)
 - ▶ *"When you do ____..."*
- ▶ Express feelings ("own " your feelings, use "I" statements)
 - ▶ *"I feel ____..."* (vs. *"you make me ____"*)
- ▶ Specify change (again—behavioral—what do you want to see happen?)
- ▶ Consequences of the outcome, regardless of change (good to focus on *positive* outcomes, but also negative if needed)



Mindfulness Meditation



- ▶ Mindfulness = paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally
- ▶ Is, essentially, attention control training
- ▶ Observation of thoughts (vs. being caught up in them)
 - ▶ Like clouds passing in the sky
 - ▶ Like watching them from the bank of a stream
- ▶ Similarly, observation of bodily sensations, emotions
- ▶ Two (related) approaches in psychology research & intervention:
 - ▶ Mindfulness-based stress reduction
 - ▶ Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression



Sleep & Stress



- Increased stress exposure, reactivity, & recovery can lead to poor sleep
- Poor sleep, in turn, can lead to increased next-day stress exposure, reactivity, & recovery
- Diminished cognitive functioning
- Changes in functional connections between the limbic system and pre-frontal cortex
- Increased emotional reactivity
- Increased interpersonal conflict
- Increased pre-sleep arousal after stress
- Increased blood pressure reactivity
- Prolonged sleep problems can lead to dysregulation of the stress response—blunted blood pressure responses, lack of engagement

Sleep hygiene

- *Environmental and behavioral decisions and practices which contribute to healthy sleep habits that precede and prepare one for a quality night of sleep*
- create a bedtime routine that allows for 7-9 hours of sleep
- Avoid stimulants (caffeine, nicotine) and alcohol close to bedtime
 - Note: caffeine has a 6-8 hour half-life
- Exercise helps with sleep, but avoid vigorous exercise close to bedtime
- Stay away from large meals close to bedtime
- Get adequate exposure to natural light

Sleep Hygiene (cont.)

- Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine.
- Avoid emotionally upsetting conversations and activities before bedtime.
- Associate your bed with sleep. Avoid other activities (computer, phone, TV).
- Create a sleep environment that is pleasant and relaxing. The bed should be comfortable, the room should not be too hot or cold, or too bright.
- Lower ambient noise. Consider earplugs, white noise.

Other recovery and restoration considerations

- Strive to lower pre-sleep arousal
- Relaxation and meditation
- Write down next day “to-do” lists or other concerns
- Avoid bright light (e.g., TV, computer screen, phone) close to bedtime
 - Blue light blocking eyewear, filter screens, light bulbs
- Warm shower or bath about an hour before bedtime
- Elevate feet (e.g., up the wall)
- Lavender oil
- Middle of the night awakenings?
 - Often occur from REM state; focus thoughts on dream state
- Sleep Cycle app
 - Uses sleep stage to time alarm



Stress buffers

- ▶ Are there aspects of your life that seem to buffer or counterbalance stress?
- ▶ Daily “uplifts” and positive activities
 - ▶ e.g., positive social interactions, completing a task
- ▶ Social support
- ▶ Health behavior (diet, exercise, limiting substance use)
- ▶ Spirituality or religion
- ▶ Aesthetic experiences (connection to art, nature, & beauty)



Resources



- ▶ Online meditation and relaxation audios
- ▶ Useful Websites & Books (handout)
- ▶ University Counseling Center
- ▶ Psy 3330: Stress Management (but look for a 1 credit-hour Stress Assessment course in the future)
- ▶ Study participation (restlab.psych.utah.edu)
 - ▶ Get feedback on personality, stress, and sleep while contributing to science!