

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung)

Information about stress

1. What is stress anyhow?

Stress refers to a state of being we can find ourselves in and consists of the following factors: a stressor, a personal stress amplifier and stress reactions (symptoms).

There are no objective criteria for individual experiences of stress; the only thing that counts is the subjective assessment of a situation. Stress can therefore be described as **a subjective experience of excess pressure**. The English word 'stress' originated in the field of physics and described the behaviour of elementary particles under pressure. It wasn't until around 1950 that stress researcher Hans Selye applied the term to people. He used it to refer to internal and external stimuli that the body has to respond to with an adaptive reaction. This activation is not stressful per se, but instead keeps the organism functioning and is a **prerequisite for development and performance**.

The term 'eustress' refers to positive excitement or tension that enlivens us and puts us into a state of motivation or flow. The term 'distress', which leads to illness, refers to negative excitement or tension that overwhelms us over time. In general usage, the negative meaning of stress has become the dominant one.

2. What is a stressor?

Stressors are all of the demands and input that come from our surroundings and lead to stress reactions. The frequency, duration and intensity of these stressors play a big role here. External physical stressors are, for example, heat, cold or noise. Bodily stressors are hunger, pain, inadequate sleep and illness. Social stressors include competition and conflicts.

The following stressors can play a role during your studies:

- Too many distractions and frequent interruptions when studying
- Unclear instructions for take-home work and assessments
- A lack of clarity about what needs to be studied for an exam
- A lack of time- and goal-management
- Incomplete homework
- Inadequate lecture preparation and follow-up
- Time pressure and a hectic pace

Student Counselling Office (Zentrale Studienberatung), HAW Hamburg, Stiftstraße 69, 20099 Hamburg

We're here to answer all of your questions about your studies – by email, by phone or in person.

You can find up-to-date contact information and office hours at bit.ly/HAW-ZSB.

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- Rivalries with fellow students
- Conflicts with instructors
- Fear of failure

3. What are stress reactions?

Stress reactions can take place on the following four levels: *physical, behavioural, cognitive (thoughts), emotional (feelings)*

Typical reactions to distress include the following:

- *Physical*: tension and restlessness
- *Behavioural*: hectic behaviour, making mistakes
- *Thoughts*: negative thoughts such as 'I'll never manage that.'
- *Feelings*: feeling overwhelmed

Typical reactions to eustress include the following:

- *Physical*: physical excitement and butterflies in your stomach
- *Behavioural*: increased attentiveness and concentration, drive, stamina
- *Thoughts*: positive thoughts such as 'that is totally interesting and exciting'
- *Feelings*: ambition, enthusiasm, a desire to work

4. What are the physical effects of negative stress?

Headaches, back and neck pain, teeth grinding, shakiness, burping, heartburn, heart palpitations, breathing difficulties, dry mouth, diarrhoea, frequent need to urinate, chronic susceptibility to infections/illness, feeling of pressure in stomach, low or high blood pressure

5. What are the psychological and emotional effects of negative stress?

Sleep disorders, nightmares, anxiety, feelings of being under threat, feelings of helplessness, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, tiring easily, depressed mood and loss of motivation, emotional overreactions, feeling burnt out or empty, irritability, hostility and withdrawal

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6. What role do personal stress amplifiers play?

Personal stress amplifiers are the link between the stressor and the stress reaction. It is not the stressor itself but rather the way it is perceived, judged and processed that determine an individual's experience of stress and their stress reactions. **Our own personal approach to handling stress and our attitudes about the stressors are therefore decisive!**

For example, an upcoming exam can be viewed as a challenge that drives you to review the course material intensively and in depth. But an exam can also be viewed as a necessary evil for which you torture yourself by studying the minimum amount of course material possible. In this way, our personal experiences of stress and our stress reactions can be either positive or negative.

7. What is burnout syndrome?

Burnout syndrome is a specific consequence of ongoing stress. It is a lasting and severe state of exhaustion as the result of a chronic stress reaction with physical and emotional symptoms.