KEEPING STRESS FROM EVOLVING INTO DISTRESS:
Managing Student Stress Through Course Design

Defining Stress, Distress and Their Origins

Stress is an omnipresent feature of most Americans lives (American Psychological Association 2010). The American Psychological Association defines stress as a "pattern of specific and nonspecific responses an organism makes to stimulus events that disturb its equilibrium and tax or exceed its ability to cope" (Gerrig and Zimbardo 2002).

Stress affects all Americans regardless of age, gender, race, socioeconomic status or prior life experience. Typically those who are experiencing stress report feeling "overwhelmed, worried or rundown" (Alvord et al., n.d.). Now more than ever, college students feel stressed in the university setting (Yorke 2004). These feelings are particularly acute among first and second year students who may be away from home for the first time and trying to adjust to college life (Misra and McKean 2000).

Stress can be both beneficial and harmful. Stress is beneficial when it leads to the production of energy boosts that increase alertness and help individuals power through high stress situations such as exams and/or work deadlines. This type of stress is typically referred to as eustress. On the other hand, stress is harmful when it is experienced in excess (Alvord et al., n.d.). This form of stress is referred to as distress. According to the American Psychological Association, distress can lead to adverse health outcomes that affect the immune, cardiovascular, neuroendocrine and central nervous systems (Alvord et al., n.d.). Students in distress remain a concern for those who lead, and interact with, students in Fredonia's classrooms.

Within the academic setting, causes of student distress may include:
- Test anxiety, a form of performance anxiety where a person experiences high levels of distress or uneasiness before, during, or after an examination. Test anxiety interferes with students' ability to perform in testing situations
- Perfectionism, the need to be or appear perfect
- Imposter syndrome, a persistent belief or feeling that one is inadequate even in the face of success
- Stereotype threat, a self-confirming belief that one may be evaluated based on a negative stereotype of a group in which they belong
- Generalized anxiety, ongoing anxiety and worry that interferes with day-to-day

References

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