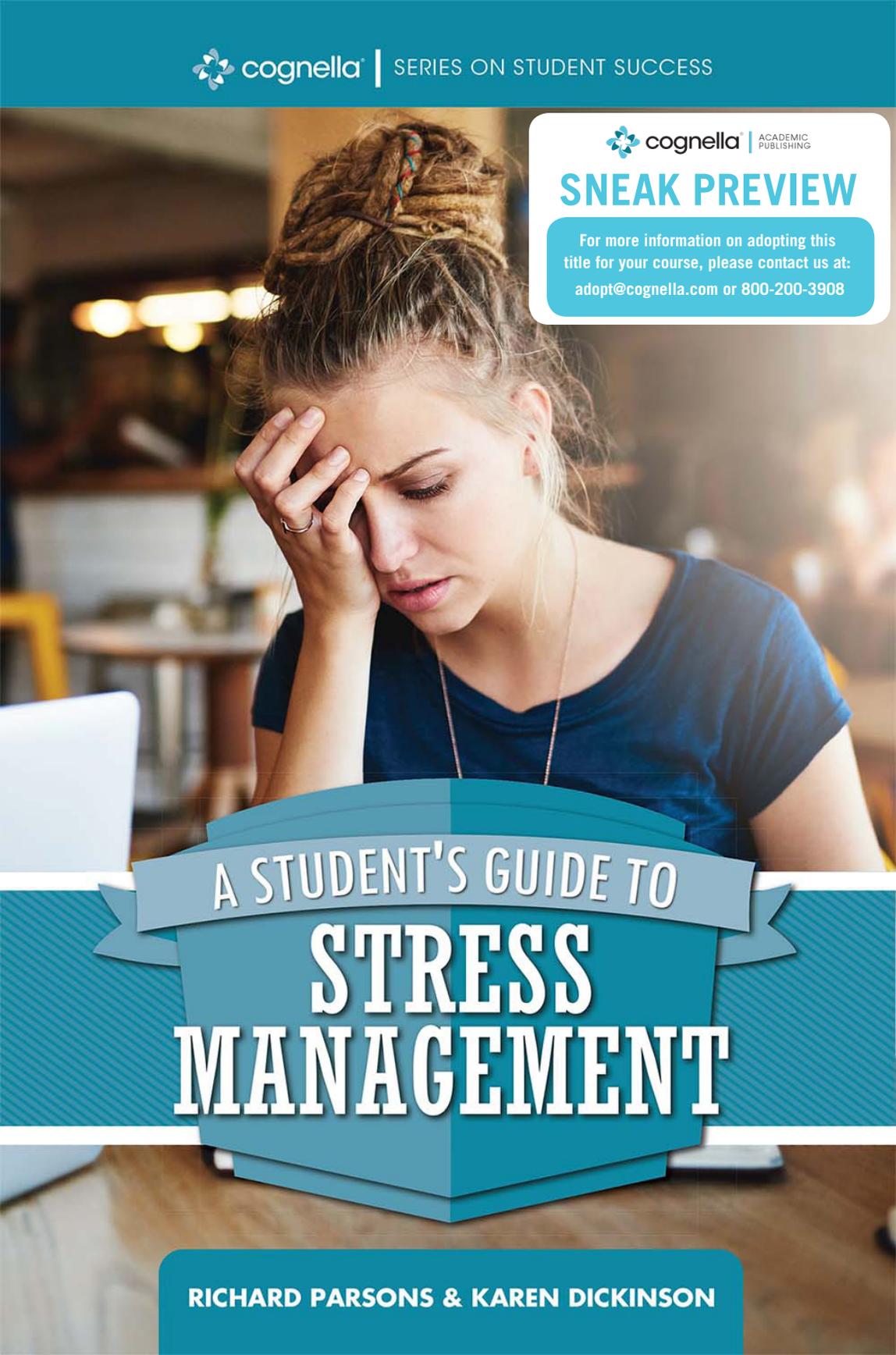


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A STUDENT'S GUIDE TO STRESS MANAGEMENT

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CHAPTER

2

YOU CAN'T AVOID STRESS, NOR WOULD YOU WANT TO

Don't you love it when people say to you, "Enjoy! These are the best years of your life"?

Best years? Yikes. How about all the deadlines, demands, and social pressures? How about the stress you feel?

Yep, it may be a surprise to some but the truth is that even young adults experience stress, real stress. But then you know that. You are stressed. You have to be. After all, you are human! And like it or not, stress is essential to the human condition.

As far as we know (and we do not have any direct experience with this), the only time you won't be stressed is when you are no longer alive and well. That excludes any belief in the "walking dead," who, from what we have seen on television, clearly remain stressed.

Stress is and should be part of living. While we may fantasize about being stress free, it is neither an achievable state nor is it a desirable state, as you will see.

2.1: Stress—Ouch!

To put it bluntly, stress, as you saw in Chapter 1, is bad for you. Or more accurately, can be bad for you. Stress can attack everything from your gums to your heart.

As we mentioned, stress, in the short term, can contribute to problems such as headache, stomach upset, sleep disturbances, short temper, and difficulty concentrating. And with chronic stress the impact can be even more destructive to your well-being.

Chronic stress can result in anxiety, insomnia, high blood pressure, heart disease, and a weakened immune system. And then to make things worse, some people attempt to deal with their stress using unhealthy strategies such as overeating, eating unhealthy foods (check those wrappers in your desk drawer), smoking cigarettes, or abusing drugs and alcohol.

Given that stress can generally make you miserable and be a challenge to your health and well-being, it would be easy to conclude that we simply need to avoid stress.

2.2: So Let's Just Go Mellow

So we are sure you get it, pressures and stress can build and it can really mess with your head and health. So we have an idea, let's all buy lottery tickets, win the "gazillion" dollars, and escape to some island where we can all be stress free!

Well, where do we start with the irrationality of such a fantasy? Perhaps the first thing we should attack is the chance of winning the lottery. But that is too obvious.

No, where we should look is at the incorrect assumption that winning the lottery and moving to an island would remove us from the experience of stress. If you want to do a little eye-opening research, check out "Here's How Winning the Lottery Makes you Miserable" at <http://time.com/4176128/powerball-jackpot-lottery-winners/>.

Lottery winners do not avoid stress, and in fact, they often find that their windfall in cash comes at quite a cost. But even this begs the point.

The fact is that any time we are presented with a condition or experience that requires us to make an adaptation, we are by definition placed under stress. So whether it is deciding on how to enjoy our “gazillion” dollars or attempting to find money for rent, stress is part of our life, part of living. While we can't live a stress-free life, our focus and goal can be on improving the way we respond to stress so that we may even use stress to our benefit.

2.3: Say What? Stress as Beneficial?

It is clear that stress can be bad for our health—both our physical and mental well-being. But what few people appreciate when they hear the term *stress* is that stress can actually be beneficial to our functioning. Honest! We know, this may be somewhat of an unexpected, even radical idea.

Radical? Perhaps.

True? Most definitely!

Typically when thinking about stress we think about the negative form of stress (which is typically called distress) and the negative impact of stress. But there is a second form of stress, called eustress, and it can be beneficial and can even contribute to our successful functioning. It is a form of stress most often associated with engaging with positive, pleasing demands.

Now, wait.

Before you jump to the conclusion that this is the rationale for your continuing to play your video games and thus wait until the last moment to attack that assignment, this is not exactly what we mean.

Eustress is not simply the avoidance of distress or the negative effects of stress. Eustress is the positive reaction one experiences when presented with a challenge. It is an experience of “excitement” and a reflection of our psychological arousal. For example, if you are one of those people who gets a rush out of riding a roller coaster or skiing a black diamond course or skateboarding or singing in public or (you can fill in your thrill-based activity here), then you know the experience of eustress.

During these activities your heart pumps fast, your muscles may tighten, and your concentration and focus are heightened. These are all our bodily reactions to the demands of the activity. These are all reactions to stress. Yet, they are perceived and experienced as that which is stimulating and

life giving, something positive rather than the negative experience of stress encountered when we are being distressed. The following Voices From Campus highlights how a singular event, which in this case is receiving a lot of money, can be experienced as either distress (negative stress) or eustress (positive stress) and the effects that such a different perspective and experience can have on our well-being and functioning.

VOICES FROM CAMPUS 2.1

A Dream Turned Nightmare

I can remember it as if it were yesterday. I was entering my junior year at college and as a lark I bought a lottery ticket. You can't imagine the rush I got when I found out that I actually won 1.7 million dollars. I mean really, I'm 20 years old and now I'm a millionaire. How great is that?

Not great at all. First of all like an idiot I immediately dropped out of college. I am not sure what I was thinking other than I was going to live large. New car—maybe boat—lots of partying. Somehow the realities I was to encounter never came into that initial decision. It was within days that I began getting literally hundreds of calls a day asking for money. There were charities, investment schemes, political organizations, family members (some whom I never knew I had) and ... oh yes, the Internal Revenue Service.

You would think that with 1.7 million—wait that was pre-taxes—with 925,000 dollars you would think a 20-year-old would be sitting pretty. I should have been, but I soon found myself being “worried” about money. Me! Worried about money! It was ridiculous. I was happy living in a one-room apartment off campus, eating Ramen noodles, and having one too many beers on Saturday. Now I sat, pretty much alone, in an upscale apartment, worrying about what I was going to do.

I can't blame the money, but I can tell you I wasn't ready to handle it and how I did was pretty darn upsetting to my health. I drank too much. I offended friends and family. I pretty much became a waste, blowing through almost \$300,000 in nine months.