

Turning Stress into Beautiful Music by Derrick Doige

This week and next college students will write their final exams. As you can imagine, there are a number of “stressed out” students (and even some faculty) walking around campus. You can tell by the “bags under their eyes” and the nervous energy that seems to hang in the air. Do doubt, this is a stressful time of year, but as I often tell students “stress doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing”. In fact, can you imagine a year or two without any stress at all? Although initially some may find this idea appealing, in the end, life would be pretty boring – no need to get out of bed in the morning.

People need stress just like strings on a guitar need a certain amount of tension to get in tune. The danger comes when there is too much tension; people, just like the strings on a guitar, will snap. So, the secret around stress, is not to try to eliminate all stress, but rather to identify your optimal stress zone.

How much stress do you need to keep your “strings” in tune? Not enough, your life lacks luster – too much you’ll snap, and just as each string on the guitar requires a different amount of tension to be in tune, so do people. Some people need a little more, some work better with a little less.

How do you find this optimal stress zone? It begins with “listening to your body”. Unfortunately, many of us have received years of training on how not to listen to our bodies. We’ve learned to ignore the early warning signs of stress overload such as headaches, little aches & pains, irritability, trouble falling asleep, fatigue, indecisiveness and so on. We just plough along, dangerously close to our ‘snapping points’, ignoring our built-in radar systems.

In the stress management workshops I do for students at the College, I handout strips of colorful stickers. Next, I instruct the students to splatter the stickers all over their lives. Water bottle, coffee cup, day timer, cell phone, computer mouse, appliances, dashboard, and alarm clocks are all good places for a sticker. Every time you see one of the stickers, spend a moment, take a deep breath and do a quick body scan. What is your body telling you? Are you clenching your teeth? Do you have a headache? Did you just snap at someone?

I also encourage students to take regular five minute breaks and set aside a little “Flex and Me” time each day. “Flex” time can be used to catch up on things that took longer than expected. “Me” time, such as taking a walk, reading a book, listening to music or chatting with a friend is necessary to help unwind and also gives you something to look forward to.

For additional information on stress management and other mental health issues go to www.heretohelp.bc.ca/. You can also visit my web site at <http://people.okanagan.bc.ca/ddoige/>.

Derrick Doige is the Chair of Counselling Services at Okanagan College