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on April 18, 2019

under Campus Life, Home,
Opinion

tagged Commentary, finals,
stress

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COMMENTARY – BURNED OUT: DEALING WITH STRESS AS A FULL-TIME STUDENT



Photo by Joanna Monzon

By Jady Elias

With finals week fast approaching, the buzz of student activity feels a little dimmer. Students still walk dutifully to classes and excitedly attend events, but a closer look reveals heavier feet and darker bags under the eyes. Dorm room lights stay on later, but the hallways are quieter. What happens to students during the semester? Where does the energy go?

Many students juggle jobs along with classes, as well as commutes to work or school. And despite meticulous planning, some things slip through the cracks — even sleep and eating can be neglected. This busy schedule can mean sacrificing physical health, which can quickly affect overall performance.

The workload might be no different than past semesters, but it seems to weigh heavier on some students. Projects and deadlines begin to pile up faster than they can be dealt with. Stress becomes a constant hum behind the eyes. Sickness and fatigue can suddenly affect a student that has had no problems with health or time management in the past. For some reason, they simply start to burn out.

What is burnout, and how is it different than regular stress? Sarah Davison, Counseling Supervisor at the NU Wellness Center, said that burnout is when your body and your mind have just had enough.

"When you've been in fight or flight for so long, in a heightened state where we feel like there is a bear that we need to run from, but our bodies aren't designed to do that for very long," said Davison. "When you're in burnout, you're not processing, you're not in problem solving mode. You're using fight or flight, which is only meant to be used for a short time, so it wears out your body and mind quickly."

One student said that burnout feels foggy, with no ending.

"It's getting to the point where everything loses meaning. You do the same thing over and over again with no goal," she said.

Burn out can make students feel hopeless, and soon, giving up can seem like the best option. Although burnout can be emotionally draining, it can actually have physical effects as well. Julia Fitts, the Registered Nurse at the Wellness Center, said that excess stress and burnout can lead to a long list of physical problems. Frequent colds, headaches, and loss of appetite are all short-term side effects of extreme stress.

"Anxiety has a huge impact on our metabolism. It actually slows it down, which can cause a lot of gut issues like stomach aches and constipation," said Fitts. Extreme stress for extended periods of time can lead to greater issues like obesity, high blood pressure, and a higher risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Many students don't have the option to work less hours or skip out on assignments, but must find a way to manage their stress without sacrificing their responsibilities. According to the Wellness Center staff, adequate self-care is the key to managing stress. The staff came up with an acronym SELF (Sleep, Exercise, Leisure, Fuel), to help students understand effective self-care.

S stands for Sleep. With a busy schedule, sleep is often the first thing sacrificed. When the body doesn't get enough sleep, it can be difficult to function properly or deal with even a small amount of stress.

"If you want the brain to function properly, you need at least three hours of to allow the body and brain to recharge," Fitts said. The Wellness center recommends a consistent routine, including going to bed before midnight if possible, and no screen-time right before bed.

E stands for Exercise. If hitting the gym isn't an option, yoga or a walk works well too. It doesn't take much to trigger a flow of helpful endorphins, and taking deeper breaths calms the body and the mind. The Wellness Center says that getting active with a friend is a great way to stay accountable, as well as doing small exercises between assignments. "If I get too stressed I'll just start doing pushups," said Fitts, "Just to refocus and keep moving forward."

L stands for Leisure. When facing a mountain of tasks and assignments, it can seem unending from close up. A break from work is necessary to gain perspective and recharge. The wellness center recommends taking breaks often to spend time with friends, out in nature, or just not looking at a screen. Leisure can even be used as a motivator to increase productivity. Allowing yourself a leisure activity after working for a certain amount of time can help you remember how to take assignments one at a time instead of all at once.

F stands for FUEL; another acronym the Wellness Center staff came up with reads: "Fill up on water each day; Unite carbohydrate and protein rich foods in snacks and meals throughout the day; Expand your vegetables, fruit, whole-grain and lean protein food choices; and Laugh – the more relaxed you are the better your body can metabolize the food you eat." If the body isn't properly fueled, it won't be able to focus properly. Something as simple as having a snack or drinking water throughout the day gives the body energy to focus, and to feel well doing it.

These acronyms are key to managing stress on a basic level. If the body and mind are malnourished, students can't expect perform well under stress. Even if the stack of assignments feels urgent, students should take the time to make sure their bodies and minds are equipped to deal with the task. If the body is nourished, the mind is convinced that the task at hand is not an emergency. Self-care disengages fight-or-flight mode and helps students deal with stress without burning out.

SELF and FUEL are all needed steps in dealing with stress and burnout in general, but each student should find a few, specific, healthy outlets for stress that work for them. "Creativity and drama don't live well in the same brain," said Davidson. Being creative can help relieve stress, whether that means drawing, painting, writing, or music. Making sure that there is a beginning and an end to school work can make it easier to deal with. Students can do this by doing larger tasks first, then taking a break, then doing smaller tasks. Going on short walks are also a great way to reset the brain in between assignments. Finally, even simple breathing exercises can increase blood flow to the brain, causing clearer thinking. "

When we get stressed our breathing gets more shallow, even if we don't realize it," said Fitts, "We are starving our brain of oxygen which can contribute to stress. Even taking a few breaths can remind the body that it is ok."

One student deals with stress by organizing.

"I'll start cleaning my messy room to destress," she said. "It gives me some type of control over my crazy schedule. I'll clean out my car, organize my desk, or fold my clothes. They're small things but they are productive and make me feel like I've finished something."

The Wellness Center also offers a variety of stress-relieving tools and services. Counseling, a dietitian, and a registered nurse are available for students struggling with stress or health issues. Staff also encourages students to utilize the self-care room, which includes sand boxes, coloring books, tea and a massage chair.

It is important to remember that stress is temporary, and opening up to friends can help students cope. Each student on campus is dealing with their own mountain of stress, so reaching out to friends is a great way to get help and let others know that you support them too. It is also important to know that you are your worst critic.

"I get stressed because I want to do well at everything I am doing," said one student, "It's important to remember that the goals that you have are your own personal goals. You're the only one that's being disappointed. Often your expectations of yourself are higher than others' are. Be happy that you are getting it done, even if it's not at the level you were expecting."