

Managing Stress One Breath and Meal at a Time

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Nursing 180 Stress and Strategies to Promote Well-Being

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Stress is present amongst all university students and can emerge from academic workload, procrastination, relationships and mental health challenges (Stallman & Hurst, 2016). Stress is individualistic in nature and highlights the importance of a holistic understanding of well-being (Seaward, 2018). Research depicts that university stressors include maintaining relationships with peers, career and financial stressors, high academic expectations as well as unhealthy sleeping and eating patterns (Hamaideh, 2011). In 2018, I embarked on my journey at UBC and have since expanded my knowledge, engaged in self-discovery and become an independent adult. These experiences generate health, social and academic stressors in my daily life as well as my future life as a student. Health-related stressors; scheduling time for exercise, eating a nutritious diet and getting adequate amounts of sleep. Social stressors; balancing time with friends, speaking to family, resolving roommate conflicts and finances. Academic stressors; maintaining high grades, deciding a career path and completing overwhelming amounts of work.

As emphasized by Seaward, there are various coping strategies to mitigate stress including visualization, ecotherapy and diaphragmatic breathing (2018). As a former competitive gymnast, I learned diaphragmatic breathing as a strategy to relax and improve concentration in competition. This skill has been beneficial in university to prepare for a test, resolve conflict, manage accumulated daily stressors, outline effective strategies for regaining control and in self-care practices. This year, I moved into an apartment and have been responsible for paying rent and preparing my meals. As stated, eating a nutritious diet is a common stressor amongst university students (Hamaideh, 2011) and presents as significant stress in my life. Not only is it difficult to find affordable products but time-consuming to plan, prepare and cook healthy meals. For this project, I engaged in meal-preparation and created a recipe book to foster my passion for food and connect with others. My goal was to discover new recipes each week and add healthy

variety into my diet while reducing stress associated with grocery shopping, preparing meals and food costs. Cooking has proven an effective coping strategy to improve my overall wellbeing while fostering self-care practice within my life.

As stated by Hopper, Murray and Singleton, diaphragmatic breathing is inexpensive, individualized and can be employed in all environments (2019). Studies found that diaphragmatic breathing inhibits the sympathetic autonomic nervous system therefore decreasing breathing rate, increasing physical body temperature and promoting relaxation (Chen et al., 2017). In engaging in diaphragmatic breathing as a self-care strategy, I improve my mental and spiritual health while encouraging relaxation of my body before falling asleep. As emphasized by Chen et al., studies conclude that after eight weeks engaging in diaphragmatic breathing, individual's anxiety levels were significantly reduced (2017). Studies conclude diaphragmatic breathing's advantageous ability to improve relaxation and concentration in patients with attentional deficit disorder as well as decrease burnout in the workplace (Ma et al., 2017). Diaphragmatic breathing is beneficial within my daily life to regain control over my academic stressors, improve my focus and concentration during exams and to decrease my anxiety symptoms.

Meal preparation is associated with increased assortment of food, increased nutritional value and decreased rates of obesity (Ducrot et al., 2017). Studies conclude that people who prepare meals in advance are more likely to increase the intake of fruits and vegetables than non-meal planners (Ducrot et al., 2017). Researchers also observed the relationship between comfort food and the stress response, finding no correlation (Finch, Cummings, & Tomiyama, 2019). These studies depicted that in consuming healthier meals, individuals could significantly improve their overall wellbeing and diet (Finch, Cummings, & Tomiyama, 2019). This

encouraged me to incorporate healthier options amongst my recipe book, improving my overall wellbeing and decreasing health-related stressors. Meal preparation ensured I ate throughout the day and fueled my body for the tasks at hand. Additional research concluded that meal planning is associated with faster meal preparation times and decreased likelihood of eating at restaurants (Ducrot et al., 2017). Research depicts that 41% of people who prepare meals in advance take inspiration from previous recipes (Ducrot et al., 2017), emphasizing the benefits of a recipe book. Meal preparation minimized my financial stressors in encouraging healthy eating practices at home and improved both my physical and mental health.

Despite high levels of stress, studies show only 13% of Australian students engaging with professionals to manage their health (Keech et al., 2018). For these reasons, it is crucial university students implement self-care practices as well as engage in stress-reducing activities. In creating my recipe book as well as engaging in weekly meal preparation, I was able to reduce the stress of planning a healthy dinner and allot more time to speaking with family, engaging with friends and completing academic work. Meal preparation encourages me to fuel my body resulting in increased energy throughout the day. Throughout this self-care practice, I realized I enjoy connecting with others through cooking as well as engaging in the creative process of making my recipe book and entertaining others with recipe videos. In implementing diaphragmatic breathing throughout the day and before falling asleep, I improve my focus as well as decrease my chronic insomnia. Diaphragmatic breathing allows me to relax my mind and body and engage in care practices to increase my overall well-being. Moreover, in practicing diaphragmatic breathing I have noticed less anxiety symptoms and a greater sense of control in my life. Cooking paired along with my diaphragmatic breathing revealed the overall impact of self-care and has positively translated to other areas of my life. In taking more time to focus on a

passion, I have been diligent with my studies, strengthened my connection with others, decreased my anxiety and improved my quality of sleep.

I intend to use diaphragmatic breathing and meal preparation in my upper years of university as well as in my career and in raising a family. In particular, my recipe book will ensure I maintain a nutritious diet as I enter the rehabilitation workforce as well as provide a healthy variety of meals for my family. Moreover, I plan on implementing diaphragmatic breathing within my daily routine to improve my emotion control and mindfulness as a parent. Diaphragmatic breathing and meal preparation have served to inspire my further engagement in self-care practices such as yoga and encouraged reflection of my health. In taking time to practice self-care, I am able to connect with others in my community and maintain a strong relationship with myself.

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