



# HELPS

Health Enhancement for Lifelong Professional Students  
Newsletter

## Heading from Stressed to Depressed? Experts Offer Insights and Coping Tips

You can feel it building. A stressful day. A high-intensity week. A whole semester of unrelenting pressure. How much more can one person handle?

“Graduate school sets up the ideal conditions for stress,” says Ramani Durvasula Ph.D., Professor of Psychology at California State University, Los Angeles. As a licensed clinical psychologist, she has worked with many students on this issue and says she remembers what grad school was like.

“Students may be overwhelmed, often feeling out of control,” Durvasula says. “They can begin to have a diminished sense of efficacy—the feeling that once you learn something the bar gets raised again. Graduate students also often have financial struggles as they attempt to put themselves through school. The conditions of graduate school can precipitate stress, which can in turn exacerbate depressive symptoms.”

Those depressive symptoms may include

sadness, anhedonia, apathy, sleep problems, appetite problems, difficulty concentrating, feelings of hopelessness, guilt and worthlessness, Durvasula says.

“Stress impacts neuroendocrine function which can impact the onset of depressed mood and associated symptoms such as lack of motivation, hopelessness and general distress,” she continues. “Stress can also affect immune function, so on top of feeling depressed, stress can place graduate students at risk for getting sick. It’s important to understand that depressive symptoms are not always full-blown depression. Full depression is multiple symptoms that occur nearly every day for two weeks or longer.”

### Good Stress, Bad Stress

“The stress I encountered doing doctoral work was unlike anything I’ve experienced before or since,” recounts author Marlene Caroselli, Ed.D. “Stress is the natural and normal reaction to events that occur on a regular and on a less-frequent basis. When we fail to control stress or cope with it, we may experience distress.”

Caroselli went on to a highly successful career following graduate school. She has written 60 books, the most recent of which is *The Critical Thinking Tool Kit*. She offers insights on stress and how to know when it’s time to ask for help.

“When we handle stress well, it can give us the drive we need to compete and to succeed,” says Caroselli. “There is the ‘good stress,’ or eustress, for example, that a bride experiences on her wedding day; and there’s the ‘bad stress’ that we experience when things get out of control. A related problem is burnout, which we usually associate with work. If our jobs are causing an ongoing deterioration in our ability to cope, or if they are causing mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion, then we may be experiencing burnout.”

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### Are You a Candidate for Burnout?

Stress takes its toll on us in various ways. When stress is prolonged or too intense, it ultimately has a serious effect on both the mind and the body.

One way to judge if you are a candidate for burnout is to ask yourself:

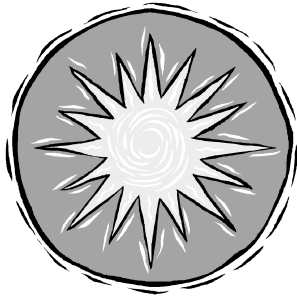
- Are my expectations too high?
- Am I constantly seeking perfection?
- Do I have trouble admitting problems?
- Have others mentioned the possibility of burnout to me?
- Am I too idealistic?

The more “yes” answers you have, the greater your risk for burnout. Be kinder to yourself, and make it a point to do something fun and healthy for yourself to refresh your mind and body.

*Source: Marlene Caroselli, Ed.D.*

***We want you to thrive,  
not just survive, at USF***

*The Health Enhancement for Lifelong Professional Students program can assist when you’re not sure where to turn. HELPS is available for you 24/7: 813-870-0184*



**HELPS 24-hour  
phone line:  
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## *Coping Tips for Stress*

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### Help for Stress

The good news is that we can recharge our batteries and restore optimism, Caroselli continues. “But if we are unwilling or unable to rejuvenate, then the cumulative effect can be very damaging indeed.”

Among the techniques useful for dealing with stress are breathing exercises, offers Pasadena, Calif. therapist John Sovec, M.A., LMFT, who specializes in working with students.

“I use mindfulness-based techniques to bring students back to a more calm and

focused point of view,” Sovec explains. “One of the biggest tools is a simple three-breath breathing exercise. I ask students to pause what they are doing, take three deep full breaths and then pause to reflect on what their focus needs to be in that moment.”

By taking the time to bring attention the breath, students alter their focus point, step off the stress wheel, oxygenate their bodies and minds at the same time, says Sovec. “In the final pause, they take a moment to evaluate how to best focus their attention to complete the task at hand.” Sometimes stress reaches

the point that more than self-help is needed. “Dysfunction is the indicator that a graduate student needs professional help to deal with stress or depressive symptoms,” says Caroselli. “Signs of dysfunction include turning to drugs or alcohol; missing appointments or assignments; being unable to get out of bed for prolonged periods or crying frequently.”

Remember that HELPS offers a 24-hour phone line staffed by professionals who know what you’re going through and are trained to help you work toward healthy solutions.

### Resources

- *Experience Your Life Blog* by John Sovec [johnsovec.com/eyl-blog.html](http://johnsovec.com/eyl-blog.html)
- *5 Ways to Beat Stress*, YouTube video by Donald J. Darst, MD, Nebraska Medical Center [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpl\\_jMnaj1E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpl_jMnaj1E)
- *Addicted to Stress* by Debbie Mandel, M.A., Wiley and Sons, 2008. [www.turnonyourinnerlight.com](http://www.turnonyourinnerlight.com)
- *Get It Done When You're Depressed* by Julie A. Fast and John D. Preston, Psy.D., Alpha, 2008. [www.juliefast.com](http://www.juliefast.com)

## *Mark traumatic anniversaries by building your resistance*

Your own resilience is an excellent defense against becoming anxious or depressed, and for weathering crises. As the tenth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks approaches, you may find yourself experiencing strong emotions. Similar feelings can be triggered around the anniversaries of devastating natural disasters—hurricanes, floods or wildfires in Florida, for example—or intense personal tragedies. Even if you were not on the scene or experienced personal loss, you may experience natural empathy and even relive some of the feelings of grief that accompanied the original event.

You can build your resilience in a number of ways. Spend time with friends and family, exercise, stick to a healthy diet and maintain good sleep habits. You may also want to channel anxiety into practical steps that will give you extra peace of mind, like assembling your family’s hurricane kit, or taking a class on how to prepare for natural disasters and emergencies.

While you may find it worthwhile to participate in activities that mark the anniversary, remember it’s okay to limit your exposure to media images that could stir up intense sadness or grief. If you find yourself overwhelmed with lasting anxiety or sadness, seek the help of a professional.

### Read more:

- “9/11: Ten Years Later,” Roxane Cohen Silver, PhD, Special Issue Coordinator/Editor; *American Psychologist*, Vol. 66, No. 6.
- Florida Community Emergency Response Team [www.floridacertassociation.net/](http://www.floridacertassociation.net/)
- American Psychological Association [www.apa.org/helpcenter/index.aspx](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/index.aspx) [search term: resilience]