Flying a Plane That Is Still Being Built
By Chris Heltne, Student Affairs

Contrary to popular thought, stress is designed to help – an alarm that goes off when there is a threat, much like an alarm system in a house. In that sense, stress is not a bad thing. Stress is the body and mind's response to challenging situations.

The problem arises with our reactions to stress. The skill is to recognize the things that are going to cause stress, and to deactivate the false alarms. Duke provides a number of resources to help students identify the causes of alarm and physiological manifestations of stress, to take positive steps toward using this understanding, and to add tools for today and a lifetime that will help students turn stress to their benefit.

The Culture of Stress. "The culture and values that created our most successful high school graduates is also a culture that can create a lot of stress and expectations," says Donna Hall, director of the Academic Resource Center (ARC). Often these same students who were so successful in high school come to Duke and struggle in one way or another. It's a surprise to many of them when their earlier success does not translate to college life and academics as seamlessly as they may have expected.

Hall reminds us that stress arises when the demands of the environment are greater than the student’s capacity to manage the demands. For this age group, there's more to it than increased academic demands.

"Students are building the plane at the same time they’re trying to fly it," she says. "The human brain is not fully developed until well into the twenties, and college students are still developing the mental capacities that are essential for success in college, namely the mental control involved in planning and reasoning through problems, logical thinking, controlling emotions and motivation."

"The culture of success and competition in college can be both rewarding and stressful. Stress can come in a number of forms. Some of the demands on their time and attention are necessary and/or unavoidable – classes and course work, a job, etc. Others need to be evaluated and prioritized – and yes, some things on the list of commitments may need to be dropped."

"For example, students often feel unrealistic obligations to meet peer demands. We hear all the time that students don’t want to let their friends down – even if it means less time studying for a critical exam," Hall says. "And the culture of achievement often leads students to create a laundry list of leadership positions,
involvement in organizations, and other obligations. In such cases, quality is sacrificed at the expense of quantity."

So What Can Be Done? The ARC offers a variety of services that provide students with valuable skills to help mitigate stress: identifying learning styles and how to use that knowledge to improve academic success; developing time management skills, setting personal goals and strategies for achieving them; learning study skills that help with exam preparation, and more.

Also available are stress workshops through Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS). While ARC focuses more on identifying stressors and developing tools to help in the academic realm, CAPS takes a broader look at stress.

"Our work with stress begins with offering students a definition of stress as a normal and healthy response to challenging situations, highlighting that this response is physiological and that it occurs automatically," says Gary Glass, CAPS staff psychologist and assistant director for outreach and developmental programming.

"We don’t talk about different 'types of stress' but rather different triggers of the stress response. These aren’t stresses; they are stressors," Glass says. "There are personal stressors – problems that come up in life such as conflicts, financial problems, illness, etc. There are academic stressors – difficult classes, poor grades, poor match with majors, etc. There are relational stressors – roommate problems, friendship conflicts, romantic relationship strain, etc. And there are environmental stressors – racism, sexism, homophobia, attitudes toward thinness and weight gain, effortless perfection, etc."

These workshops are complementary to the work done at the ARC. "Our CAPS workshops focus on helping students recognize how stress impairs their thinking, causes them to become overly concerned with control in a way that actually further activates the stress response, and impacts the way they relate to their emotions," Glass says. "With that understanding in hand, we can build onto that ways of recognizing and dealing with stress in productive ways. CAPS and ARC work together well on both fronts."

Taking Time to Reflect. Glass and Hall agree that busy people need more time to reflect, evaluate and process their experiences in order to manage stress and achieve their goals.

"Cell phones, Facebook, other technologies now fill in all the little spaces that students used to use to process and reflect," says Hall. "Success is not about doing more and working harder – it’s about sifting through all of the options and experiences, and deciding what's most valuable."