By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Recognize the importance of identifying your priorities in life
- Define the relationship between stress and overall health
- Define wellness
- Consider how your social and cultural environment can impact wellness
- Identify the steps and processes involved in changing behavior
- Recognize your personal talents and consider how you might use them to prevent and manage stressful situations

* Image 1: Akash Khairate @ sxc.hu
So, you've registered for this course; maybe you're feeling a little stressed out, maybe you're curious about stress and health, or, maybe you just needed one more credit. Regardless, you're here; fabulous! Even if you're not quite sure why you chose this course, we think you'll enjoy it and learn about achieving balance in this crazy world along the way!

Often, we just accept stress in our lives not realizing that we have other options and that being continually "stressed" is actually not healthy, nor does it have to be our standard operating procedure. A little stress can actually be a good thing, but overwhelming stress can make you unproductive and even sick. In this class, you will learn that you have many options and choices for solutions to stress. This course will provide you with resources and tools so you can find what works best for you.

* Image 1: Andrew Beierle @ sxc.hu

[OneStop](http://onestop.umn.edu)
While you were preparing to start college, someone probably told you something like this: "Make the most of college; it's the best time of your life!" And, while this may be true for many students, it is also true that the college years involve a bit of uncertainty, confusion, and adjustment.

College is a time of exploration and soul-searching. You have a sense of independence and freedom, but also an awareness of personal responsibility. Additionally, you're meeting new people, encountering new issues, and being challenged - academically and personally - in ways you may have never imagined.

Really, your college years can serve as a great test-case for how you perceive and manage stress. Some aspects of college life - dorm rules, class expectations, academic regulations - are very prescribed while other aspects - social life, personal habits, roommate issues - are ambiguous at best. Learning how to navigate your way through this maze of diverse issues will be good training for life in general. And, you just might find that you feel less stress and enjoy the college journey even more in the meanwhile!
As you move through your college career, you'll find that you'll need to identify your values and priorities – and accept that they may change throughout your journey. One thing that will remain true though, is that you'll need to balance the demands of college life with your priorities. If you let your decisions flow from your priorities, you'll find that making choices will become a lot easier – and you'll often feel less stressed.

What are your priorities? What "things" in your life are most important?

- Your family?
- Deciding a major?
- Being happy?
- Figuring out what to wear on Friday night?
- Getting good grades?
- Being a good friend?
- Or your health?

Take a moment to consider what would be on your list.
Obviously, some of the items in your list are greater priorities than others. The trick is defining what's important to you and then structuring your life around those priorities. There's so much happening on a college campus - so many options for activities, interests, and diversions - that it's sometimes hard to decide just what to do. To avoid feeling overwhelmed, keep going back to your goals and priorities and try to let your decisions flow from there. You'll find that you'll feel more balanced and prepared to tackle the challenges ahead – and to make the most of your college experiences.

- Image 1: Svilen Milev @ sxc.hu
You’ve probably already heard that stress can affect your health. It’s true! Many research studies support this claim. How stress manifests in one person might be incredibly different than how it manifests in another. But, in all of us, stress impacts our ability to live a healthy life.

So, what is health? Many people think of physical health when we ask that question, or they think that not being sick is being healthy. However, according to the World Health Organization¹, “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Thus, health is not just physical. Rather, health is all-encompassing, involving every area of your life. Likewise, according to this definition, health is not necessarily a goal in and of itself. Rather, it is the means to a fuller, richer life. Health can actually be viewed in this context as the harmonistic base of life. Also, one aspect of health can affect all of the other aspects. So, stress can certainly impact your health in many ways - sometimes, in ways we don’t even recognize.


• Image 1: Carlos Koblischek @ sxc.hu
It may be helpful to think of health in the broader context of wellness. Wellness can be viewed as:

- an ever changing condition in which an individual moves toward a higher potential of functioning.
- maximizing one's potential within the confines of the environment and one's capabilities.
- Or a lifestyle with a strong sense of responsibility for one's own health by taking an active rather than a passive stance towards life.

Within this course, we will use a model that lays out seven dimensions of wellness. They all contribute to a healthy lifestyle and include:

- Social
- Physical
- Emotional
- Career (or occupational)
- Intellectual
- Environmental
- And spiritual

An eighth dimension that is sometimes also included is “financial wellness.”

Many people believe that wellness can be achieved by maintaining balance among its various dimensions. If we focus on one area too much, or neglect another area, the entire system becomes unbalanced. Imbalance in one area impacts other areas, because all aspects of health are interdependent. Think of a domino effect. Consider this example:

- You don't get enough sleep (physical dimension); you become stressed and crabby (mental) and your friends can't stand to be around you (social).
- Because you're tired, stressed, and crabby and your friends are avoiding you, you start to worry and can't concentrate on your coursework (intellectual).
- To help you with your concentration problem, you replace a healthy diet with excess coffee and you wind up getting sick because your immune system is not functioning at full strength (physical).

We could go on and on here, but you probably get the point!

- Image 1: Scouts Caslu @ sxc.hu
Are you happy? Consider a basic decision-making model. First, you would ask yourself, "Am I happy?" If the answer is yes, great. Keep doing what you're doing. If the answer is no, you need to consider whether or not you're satisfied. If you are and you're okay with being unhappy then you can keep doing what you're doing. If, however, you are not happy but would like to be then some sort of change is necessary. Remember: if you always do what you've always done then you'll always get the same results.
One thing we should acknowledge is that it’s easier to achieve wellness when you surround yourself with those who value and support it. A group or environment that encourages, rewards, and supports healthy choices is a culture of wellness. Think about where you live, with whom you live, with whom you socialize, your family, and other groups in your life. Do you live in a culture of wellness?

Think about the roommate who is always trying to talk you into ordering pizza. How about the girlfriend or boyfriend who tries to talk you out of going to workout? Do you have a friend who pushes you to drink alcohol, even when you aren’t in the mood to? Are there ways to help those around you become more aware of your health and wellness needs? Can you add people to your circle of friends who promote wellness lifestyles? If someone in your life doesn’t support your efforts to make healthy choices, can you talk with him or her? Communication is often the key to fostering support!
As you think about health, wellness, stress, and life, you may identify some habits or other aspects in your life you’d like to change. Some of the changes you might want to make will be big changes; others, rather small. Maybe you don't like feeling stressed all the time. Or, maybe you aren't happy with the way you respond when you’re angry or tense. You may feel like you don’t have enough time to exercise. No matter what it is that you’d like to change, two things will be critical: your motivation and your sense of commitment.

Sometimes, when you are considering making a change, you decide that it would be easier to just continue doing things the way you have always done them. But that strategy will lead to the same results you’ve always realized, and what if you’re not happy with those results? To achieve better outcomes, change is often necessary. Throughout this course, we’ll focus on strategies for reducing and managing stress, but we hope that much of what you learn can be applied to other areas of your life as well. Although hard, positive change is often worth the effort.
If you want to make a change in any area of your life, you need a plan. Research on behavior change tells us that having a plan often yields greater chance of success. So, as we move through this course, keep the following stages of change in mind and ask yourself, with any given behavior, what your current stage of change might be.

Precontemplation: At this stage, the person has no motivation to change and in fact does not realize or acknowledge that there is a "problem."
Contemplation: The person acknowledges that there is a problem and is thinking about making a change.
Preparation: The individual is planning for change in the immediate future.
Action: The person is implementing the behavior change and is committing time and energy to the change.
Maintenance: The new behavior has been in place six months or more. This is an ongoing process.

Once you’ve determined where you are in the stages of change, you can move forward! Keep in mind, however, that the change process is not linear. An individual may go through all 5 stages, up and down, back and forth many times before a new behavior sticks. That’s ok!
Of course, to make any behavior change plan work, you have to first accept responsibility for your health and make a commitment to change. Evaluating the following steps carefully will help you not only plan for your change, but also achieve it!

- First recognize that a problem exists or that a change is needed. Do you need help reducing or managing stress? Identify specific things you'd like to change or do differently.
- Next, decide that you actually want to change. Identify your source of motivation. Why do you want to make a change? Where would you like to see improvement? What's not currently working for you?
- Then, gather information and weigh the costs and benefits of changing behaviors. Improving your management of stress often involves making some schedule, habit, and lifestyle changes. The benefits of the change are usually significant, but there may be some difficulties as well. It's best to acknowledge these up front.
- After that, evaluate the feasibility of your change. What will help you succeed? Do you need to gather support from friends, roommates or family? Do you need reminders? What will help you achieve your goals?
- Then, develop a plan and eliminate any obstacles. What temptations can throw you off track? What roadblocks do you foresee as you attempt to make changes? Can these roadblocks be removed or altered?
- Make sure to build positive reinforcement (rewards!) into the plan. How do you plan to reward yourself for achieving your goals? One caution: make sure your “reward” doesn’t throw you off the track of continuing to achieve your goal. For instance, if you’re trying to cut down on your procrastination, and you do that for a week, it’s probably not a good idea to reward yourself with several days of no studying! Or rewarding a tobacco-free week with a cigarette.
- Next, integrate your new behaviors into your lifestyle. If you practice your new strategies long enough, they will become habits. Thus, you need to think of them as a new way of operating, rather than a change that you’ll try “for a while.”
- Lastly, revise when needed – and that may be often! Adaptability is the key in a dynamic environment like college!

We'll remind you of these steps and the stages of change as we move throughout the course. We'll also provide you with many opportunities to reflect on the stages, your thoughts, and your progress!
Another key to success is using your strengths in healthy, productive ways. Strengths are built from talents, which are the ways in which you most naturally think, feel, and behave. Everyone has particular talents. What types of activities are you good at? What activities are you naturally drawn to? What do you find stimulating or rewarding? You must first recognize your talents. Then you can start to develop them into strengths. Consider this formula:

A Strength = Talent + Knowledge + Skills + Time Investment

According to Gallup, "A Strength is the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance in a specific activity." For example, an individual may be naturally drawn toward new people and may enjoy the challenge of making a connection (the Woo talent Theme). However, her ability to consistently build a network of supporters who know her well and are prepared to help her is a strength. To cultivate this strength, she will need to spend time broadening her knowledge base and practicing relevant skills to refine her talent.

The idea behind the strengths-based approach is that an individual can make great strides by cultivating their talents. Unfortunately, we tend to feel pushed to do the opposite in our society by trying to repair or correct areas of weakness. When a child brings home a report card with two A's, one B and a C-, which grade do you think his parents focus on the most? However, working endlessly to “fix your flaws” can create a lot of stress. As one author put it, "The best of the best invent ways of developing and applying strengths in areas where they want to improve, achieve, and become more effective."
So how do you find your talent themes and strengths? One way particularly relevant for college students is StrengthsQuest, which is an online assessment used to identify an individual’s top five talents out of 34. StrengthsQuest also provides resources for setting goals that put those talents into meaningful action. For example, if you possess the talent theme Arranger (someone who likes organization), creating a yearlong calendar of weekly tasks and a progress meter can help you reach the end result.
StrengthsQuest will provide you only your top five talent themes. This does not mean that you're terrible at everything else. Strengths exist on a spectrum. Just because a particular talent theme didn't make it into your top five, doesn't mean it wasn't a close 6th, 7th or 8th. Throughout adulthood, your top five talent themes may shift slightly, but research has shown that your top ten remain relatively consistent.
It is only natural to wonder about the talents that didn't make your list and were maybe closer to the bottom than the top. To differentiate these themes from your top 5, we will call them non-talents. However, non-talent does not automatically imply a shortcoming or failure.

A talent is a consistent pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. Talents feel as natural as breathing. Non-talents, however, may feel awkward or forced. It can feel uncomfortable to use one of your non-talents. Let's try a simple exercise to demonstrate this. Find a pen or pencil and a piece of paper. Now sign your name three times with your non-dominant hand. Not easy is it? Did you have to carefully focus your energy and hand movements? Was it a little bit frustrating? Now write your name three times with your dominant hand. It feels smooth and natural, doesn't it?
Taking a strengths-based approach does not imply that you ignore your weaknesses. Rather, you are encouraged to explore creative ways to manage your weaknesses within your roles. There are three basic approaches to this:

1. Build a support system: Find people who are willing (and hopefully excited) to help you capitalize on your strengths.
2. Find a complementary partner: If your role is shared with another person, have a conversation with him/her about each of your strengths so you can work more effectively together.
3. Use your strengths: Identify and practice creative ways to develop your talents into strengths and use these to overcome weaknesses.
There are ways you can use your talents to compensate for your non-talents. When you’re challenged with a weakness, clearly define the outcome you’re trying to accomplish. If you can achieve your overall goal in another way using your talents, great!

For example, Dan is a community advisor in his hall. He has the responsibility of checking in with his residents regularly. However, Dan lacks Woo; therefore, he is not naturally driven to go out and chat or be friendly with people he doesn’t know very well. To accomplish the outcome of keeping in regular contact with his residents, he utilizes his Achiever talent theme by keeping a weekly to-do list that includes walking the halls once per day and talking to people along the way. Dan enjoys checking tasks off his list, so he leverages this to manage his weakness.
As you look over your top five talent themes, you may say to yourself, "These descriptors make sense. I know that I think this way but I didn't realize these trends were actually useful." Many people are unaware of their own greatest talents (and the talents of others).

College is the perfect place for students to discover, develop, and apply their talents to become successful individuals. You will have many opportunities to explore, learn, and experiment in ways that prepare you for a career, and for life in general. Your strengths have the potential to shine in academic settings as well as during interviews, in relationships, as part of teams, and when dealing with difficult circumstances. This is why knowing your talents and building your strengths is particularly important in stress management. You will feel more confident in your ability to handle tough situations when you know how to use your strengths.
Consider how many relationships you have as a student: with parents, group members, professors, siblings, roommates, friends, teammates, and others. What if you knew the top five talent themes of all these people? Would that change how you interact with them to create more effective communication and pleasant relationships? Often times, we grow irritated or frustrated with others because their behaviors are different or unfamiliar. A common example might be that impatient or angry feeling that you get when a group member seems to always want to take charge of projects. Interpersonal stress is common but can be managed. When conflicts like this arise, understanding others’ strengths and differences can serve as an opportunity to find common ground.
Chip Anderson, author of *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*, challenged people to look at their relationships through "strengths-colored glasses." In other words, what strengths does the other person bring to the relationship, what strengths do you bring and how can you make it work? In what parts of the relationship are your talents most needed? Believe it or not, healthy relationships start with self-awareness and being comfortable with who you are. College students who engage in self-exploration and reflection are likely to gain a lot from a strengths approach to their education and their relationships.

At some point you will need to work with others to reach a common goal. For example, a group project and the associated tasks could be broken down based on the group members’ talent themes. Depending on your talent themes or strengths, you may be better at mapping out the project, seeing the big picture or following a punctual timeline. It can be helpful to put each individual’s talents on a team talent map to help visualize a group’s strengths. Group members perform more effectively, feel more satisfied and create a much better final product when their individual talents are successfully utilized.

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Image 1: Sarah Keene @ Rothenberger Institute

Activities and Exercises [here](http://www.strengths.umn.edu/faculty-staff/resources/activities-exercises?tid=17)

StrengthsQuest Team Map [here](https://www.strengthsquest.com/home/leadership.aspx)
You can continue to build your talent themes into strengths through the choices you make in class selection, activities and interactions you take part in, and jobs or internships you apply for. Often times, you have some choice when it comes to what courses you take. For example, if one of your talent themes is Restorative (adept at dealing with problems, figuring out what is wrong and resolving it), you may benefit from choosing classes led by a professor who focuses on defining problems and identifying solutions in which you learn and practice problem-solving skills. If your courses provide opportunities for you to use your signature themes, you will feel more engaged as you build your talents into strengths, regardless of the course's content.

Your strengths can also help guide you in making decisions about your field of study and career path based on what you enjoy and what you are good at. If you pursue an area of study or field for which you are passionate and you are able to utilize your strengths within your role, you will experience greater and more frequent successes.
You may find yourself in a position or role that simply doesn’t match your talents. Or, your talents may conflict with the expectations of your position. It is important to remember that your talents should never be used as a crutch to avoid academic or job responsibilities. Additionally, having a certain set of talent themes does not pigeonhole you into a specific academic or career track. You can find ways to use your strengths in any field or role. The strengths-based approach is not meant to be limiting. It is meant to assist you in achieving goals. Your talents will empower you to reach your potential.

There may be parts of your role that are more difficult than others but you can thread your talents into almost any task. For example, a data entry employee who finds her job unchallenging could use her “Futuristic” theme to create and propose more efficient processes. Some people find it difficult to apply their themes when they don’t see how talents will help them achieve their goals. If this is true for you, do a little research to gain a better understanding of your top five. Talents are always valuable but often need to be cultivated and applied in imaginative ways. Ask others -- friends, family members, supervisors and academic advisors, for example -- to help you consider how you might apply your talents in your current role.
You may find yourself in situations where others feel threatened by your talents. Some may criticize you for having talents they wish they had. This could lead you to mistakenly conclude that your signature themes are weaknesses. However, your talent themes should be considered a source of pride, no matter what they are. Consider this example: One of David’s top five talents is Discipline. Having a structured routine benefits him by consistently leading him to focus on the task at hand and meet deadlines. Unfortunately, David’s coworker, Jack, interprets David’s Discipline theme as being rigid and uncompromising. This may be because Jack personally lacks the organizational skills and self-sufficiency derived from Discipline, or because he fails to recognize or understand David’s strengths.
On the flip side, a talent theme can be expressed in extreme or unhealthy ways. If David applies his Discipline theme in an attempt to control others, it could lead to conflict. He may grow frustrated with Jack or other colleagues who do not work with the same level of predictability and be very hard on himself when he makes mistakes. As you can see, when a strength is expressed in an unhealthy way it can result in a challenging situation.
Strengths can sometimes lead to conflict if they are misinterpreted or misunderstood. However, your strengths can also help mediate tension. Conflict is inevitable and confrontation should always be in the interest of maintaining and developing the relationship. It is important to assess your conflict style. Do you withdraw, collaborate, compromise, submit or compete? Is your style working for you; does it lead to successful solutions? Once you have reflected on your conflict style, consider how your top five talents fit into these situations.

Consider this example: A student with strong themes of Harmony and Responsibility often finds herself taking on extra work when involved in group projects. These two themes create a sense of agreeability and a desire to "do things right." However, she finds herself overwhelmed with the extra tasks and frustrated with her group members. In this situation, her conflict style is not working and she feels stuck with more than her share of the project responsibilities, leading to additional stress. She needs to challenge herself to take on only her fair portion of the tasks (preferably those she would be best at) and use her other talents to elicit good work from the other group members. For example, she could proactively use her Analytical theme to volunteer for just the research portion of the project -- instead of taking on too many tasks -- and her Developer theme to praise her group members' hard work. In the end, she'll feel more balanced, and her group members will likely feel better about their contributions, too.
You may have noticed that some people seem to handle stressful situations better than others. Another key to successful stress management is building resilience. What is resilience? According to the American Psychological Association, "Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that anyone can learn and develop."

It may be helpful to visualize Albert Ellis' simple ABC diagram to explain the role of resilience. Picture this: A is the Activating Event, B represents your Beliefs, and C is the Consequence.

An activating event takes place (e.g. receiving a low grade in a class). This event interacts with your positive and/or negative beliefs and interpretations (e.g. "I'm an idiot. I'm never going to get this." Or "That was a hard test. Now I know how to prepare next time."). The consequences are the feelings or behaviors that result from your interpretation of the event (e.g. feeling sad, stopping studying or increased motivation to study, or finding a study group). As you can imagine, if you decide to stop studying for math you will likely find yourself receiving even lower grades, and the cycle continues. But what if you were to intervene at B with your strengths? Think of it as a means of creative problem solving. When faced with a negative activating event, you can use your strengths to impact the outcome and resulting consequence. Using this strategy can turn a downward spiral into an upward spiral!

* Image 1: Sarah Keane @ Rothenberger Institute

Developing your talents into strengths can have tremendous stress-management benefits. Your self-awareness and self-acceptance will increase along with your confidence. You will be more engaged and successful in your work. You will be better able to maintain successful professional and personal relationships. Imagine if you felt certain you could handle any curve ball life throws your way -- and there will be curve balls, for sure. You can try to maintain a positive outlook and rely on your strengths to help you navigate whatever challenges come your way.

Additionally, using your strengths is energizing! If we enjoy what we do, there is an emotional pay-off. This pay-off can serve as a stress-buffer. Think about how you can incorporate your strengths into stressful situations or activities you don’t particularly enjoy, or perhaps find a partner with strengths that complement yours to team up with.
This course is designed to help you recognize, successfully manage and reduce stress. But it's also designed to challenge you to take a fresh look at how you perceive, think about, and handle life. This first lesson gave you a taste of what is to come throughout the course. We hope that we can provide you with some practical, relevant advice for navigating the challenges of college and that you find some strategies that work for you and fit into your life. Stress is a very individual thing, as is coping with it. So, think of this course as a "toolbox" full of options and you have the luxury of picking and choosing just what tools work best for you!
Congratulations!
You've reached the end of Lesson 1: Why You're Here.
Please review the resource links below from this lesson for more information about lesson-related topics.

Next Lesson:
Why not continue with Lesson 2: Stress: What is it?
It's 34 pages long and will take about 35 minutes

Continue (/Viewer/Course/Main?LessonId=4&CourseId=3&LocationId=2)
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APA Practice Central (http://www.apapracticecentral.org/update/2011/06-09/building-resilience.aspx)

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