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

- Define stress
- Describe the stress process
- Refute common myths about stress
- Identify role-related stressors
- Explain the increase in stress complaints
- Illustrate the role perception plays in the experience of stress

*Image 1: Charlie Balch @ sxc.hu*
When you ask people the question, "What is stress?" you’re bound to hear a wide variety of responses. Some people will name a stressful event, like getting married, starting a new job, or going on a first date. Others will identify an aspect of their lives as stressful, like going to college, living in the city, driving to work, or living in the dorms.

Some individuals will even name other people such as a roommate, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a professor, or their parents or family members. Other times, people will describe how stress feels. They’ll say things like, "Stress is when my heart races and I sweat." Or, "Stress is when I can't think straight." "Stress is when I get frustrated and angry.

When you begin to look for more comprehensive definitions, you realize that stress is so much more than these events, situations, people or how stress feels. It’s also much more than our response to these things. Stress is actually a multi-faceted phenomenon. In fact, as we’ll soon explain, stress is really a process.

- Image 1: Charlie Balch @ sxc.hu
We can’t always control what happens in life, but we can control how we respond. Different people respond differently to some of the same events. For example, all college students have to write papers and take exams. Approaching midterms and finals can be an extremely stressful period of time, but some students manage that stress better than others.

How you manage your stress depends on a variety of things, including the stressors you encounter, your perceptions, and the resources you have to deal with those stressors. It’s really helpful to think of stress as a process that can be modified, rather than an overwhelming, dark cloud hanging over your head!
Thinking of stress as a process gives us a greater sense of control over it. If we feel we’re more in control, we often feel better about our situation and our ability to handle any conflicts or problems resulting from it. You have the ability to interrupt the stress process at any point, thus preventing stress from getting to you and wreaking havoc in your life. To help you gain a greater sense of understanding of all of this, let’s explore the different parts of the stress process.
The first part of the stress process is identifying stressors. Stressors can be defined as objective conditions in the physical or social environment. In this instance, you can interpret objective to mean neutral. In other words, an important thing to remember about stressors is that they have no meaning until we give them meaning. Stressors actually aren’t stressful, unless we decide that they are.

This simplistic thinking may not work very well with all events that happen in life, as some things are pretty much stressful for anyone, such as the death of a loved one or an accident, but, if we’re completely honest with ourselves, we can usually see that we often make a bigger deal out of some things than we need to. Will the world stop turning if you have a bad hair day? Is it really all that horrible if your roommate is a bit messier than you? Maybe yes, maybe no.

One other thing to note about stressors is that they can be divided into two basic groups: life events and daily hassles. Life events are the big things that happen occasionally such as graduating, moving, starting college, getting married, or experiencing the death of a family member. Daily hassles are everyday, smaller things that can drive us crazy. For example, roommates, traffic, work schedules, assignments, or running late. Both daily hassles and life events can be stressful, but once again, we get to decide how stressful each actually is. This brings us to the second part of the stress process, perception.
As we’ve said before, how stressful something is depends on our perception of it. Most of us have much more control in this area than we realize. How we think about things can do a lot to moderate our stress. In fact, changing our thinking about things can often stop stress right in its tracks! This works for big life events, as well as the daily hassles.

For instance, we’ve probably all known someone who’s experienced some sort of tragedy and has been able to look for the good in that tragedy. Maybe you know someone who lost his or her job. At the time, it probably seemed devastating. However, maybe that situation caused the person to take a new career path, which ultimately led to more satisfaction with work. It’s like the old adage: “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.”

Similarly, you might also know someone who seems to never get his or her feathers ruffled over the little annoyances in life. Why is this? Maybe it’s because he or she chooses not to perceive the small stuff as worthy of a stressful reaction. Think about the last time you saw someone get really mad while driving in traffic. Was the person’s response -- yelling at other drivers, pounding the steering wheel - helpful? Was it proportional to the magnitude of the stressor? Or, did the chosen response cause even more stress?

The next time you feel yourself getting stressed, ask yourself if you can change your perception of the situation. If you can, you might just be able to stop the stress process before it even starts. Changing your thinking about something is called “cognitive coping.” We’ll cover this in more detail in a later lesson.
It is important to recognize that some things really are stressful and do deserve to be perceived as such. When this happens, we move to the third part of the stress process, strain. Strain can be defined as short-term responses to perceptions of stress. In other words, strain is how you feel when you get stressed out!

Strain has physical, as well as mental and emotional, symptoms. Physically, your heart rate, breathing rate, and blood pressure all increase. Additionally, your muscles tense and your body rushes fats and sugars into your blood stream. You are getting ready to "fight or flee from" the stressor. Mentally, your thinking might become more focused – or scattered. And, emotionally, your responses will probably be more intense and you might become irritable.

Strain is a universal response and, with some stressors, it can be a life-saving response. In fact, the stress response has been vitally important for the survival of humans throughout the ages. If, for instance, you are being chased by a lion, a tiger, or a bear, you do need all these physical responses! However, most of the stress in today's world comes from things that we can't necessarily physically fight or flee. For example, your professor gives you a pop quiz. This stresses you out and you start to experience strain. It really wouldn't be appropriate to jump up and run from the class—flee. Nor would it be appropriate to hit your professor – fight. In fact, we'd really discourage you from doing either one of these things; neither action will solve your problem and, in the end, they would cause more stress. As a result, our symptoms of strain often have no outlet. And, with no outlet, strain can lead to all sorts of long-term health outcomes. These long-term outcomes are much more likely to occur if you're constantly experiencing strain. Do you know people, for instance, that seem to always be stressed about something? If they are always stressed, they're probably also in a constant state of strain.
Constant or intense strain that goes unchecked can yield some less-than-desirable effects. Research has shown that uncontrolled stress and strain can play a role in developing high blood pressure, muscle tension, headaches, anxiety, and even depression.¹ Social relationships can suffer as well, given our tendency to become irritable and short-tempered when we’re experiencing stress and strain. These are all potential long-term outcomes of stress. The word potential is important here; these outcomes don’t have to occur. We can do a lot to prevent them. Sometimes, even when we perceive things as stressful and we experience strain, we can reduce the likelihood of long-term outcomes by choosing to exercise, taking a break to calm down, or using relaxation techniques. Unfortunately, many people don’t realize that they can moderate the stress process; they continually let themselves become stressed, experience strain, and ultimately, suffer the negative consequences. You can choose another option: coping.


* Image 1: Simon Cataudo @ sxc.hu
Coping resources, or buffers, are things that you can employ to help you moderate the stress process. Coping resources can work at any point in the stress process and are individual-specific. In other words, what works for one person might not work for another.

You might like to relax and read a book when you are feeling stressed, whereas your roommate may want to talk things through. Either tactic is fine. The important point is that you get to decide what works for you. It all depends on the situation and the person. Sometimes, changing your perception might do the trick. Other times, you might need to walk away from a situation or hit the gym to regroup. There might be other times when you decide to remove the stressor completely.

One final note: the coping resources you choose should always work to reduce your stress, not create more! This might sound obvious, but it's amazing how many people choose to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes, for example, when they perceive stress. The drinking and smoking may seem to relieve stress initially, but they often end up causing more stress later. Choosing a different resource would be a good idea in this case.
Before we move along much further, we should probably identify and refute some of the most common misconceptions or myths about stress.

**Myth 1: All stress is bad!**

This is most certainly not true. As you probably already know, some stress actually results in positive outcomes, such as enhanced awareness and improved performance. Ask any athlete about this and they will often tell you that a little bit of stress before a big game or match can actually be a motivator. This positive stress is called eustress. It actually helps prepare the body to meet a challenge.


* Image 1: Michal Zacharewski @ sxc.hu
Myth 2: The goal of stress management should be to eliminate all stress. It's probably not realistic or feasible to try to remove all stress from life. And, a stress-free life would probably be pretty boring! As we said earlier, some stress is motivating and makes us more productive. The key is finding the right balance. How much stress is motivating and how much is overwhelming? Given that life is constantly changing, your answer to that question will no doubt change as well.
Myth 3: Everyone’s stress is the same. One very important thing to keep in mind is that all stress is not created equal! What stresses out one person may be no big deal to another and vice versa. Research has shown that we all have different “optimal levels of stress,” the tolerance range within which we feel healthy, productive, and satisfied. Just as we all have different favorite colors or foods, we also have different preferences for stress. This is critical to remember as you seek to find ways to manage your stress, but it’s also an important variable to consider when you’re thinking of career and life choices.

2. Eldin, G. & Golany, E. (2010). Health and Wellness. 10th, Jones & Bartlett Learning, LLC.

* Image 1: Felipe Horst @ sxc.hu
Myth 4: Some people thrive on excessive stress. Some people are like the hare. They move at a fast pace and like to have a lot of activity in their daily lives. For these individuals, inactivity might actually be a big source of stress. Other people are like the tortoise and a slower, steady pace works best for them. The key is figuring out our own preferences and then trying to craft our lives around them. One thing that is true, however, is that no one thrives on excessive stress. Even if someone likes a faster, more animated pace to life, he or she won’t cope well if overwhelmed. None of us are programmed to live a constantly highly stressed life. This is another reason to stop and evaluate your values and priorities. Know that it is sometimes appropriate and necessary to say no to things.
Myth 5: A person can always successfully adapt if he or she tries hard enough.

It's easy to get the impression that we can adapt and successfully manage all of our stress if we only try harder. Many of the messages we get from the popular press reinforce this. There are all kinds of self-help books you can buy or workshops you can attend to learn how to juggle more. Keep in mind though, that if a situation is overwhelming, sometimes it's just not possible to adapt and that's OK.

We all have our limits; we need to acknowledge those limits and live within them. For instance, one student we knew registered for 22 credits in a semester, also working. That might sound OK to some of you, but for the vast majority of us, that's an extremely heavy load! Just a few weeks into the semester, this student could see that her grades were starting to suffer, as was her work, social life, and health. She kept saying, "I'll be OK if I just try harder." The problem was not the effort the student was putting forth; rather, it was the fact that she had overloaded herself to begin with. Trying harder was only continuing to zap her strength and resources and eventually made the problem worse. This student ended up failing 2 of her courses and barely passing some of the others. Looking back, she now says it wasn't worth it. Her GPA took a huge hit - as did many other areas in her life.
Myth 6: Some people live perfect stress-free lives. Maybe you know some of these people. They appear happy - always - and seem to be satisfied with their lives. Do they have stress-free lives? No, probably not. No one has a stress-free life. It is likely that these people who seem to be stress-free actually experience stress, but maybe they cope in ways that are more effective and efficient for them. Or, it could be that they view things through a more positive lens and thus, appear to have less stress.

- Image 1: Micah Burke @sxc.hu
**Myth 7:** Physical exercise drains time and energy that otherwise might be used to cope with stress.

Exercise is actually one of the best ways to cope with stress. Remember the stress process? Exercise can be used at several phases of the process. When you perceive something as stressful, for instance, taking a break and going for a walk or doing a few stretching exercises can help you calm down and re-focus. Similarly, when you are stressed, exercising can help you expend some pent-up energy and then help you relax afterwards. Finally, exercise can also help you ward off some of those long-term effects of stress by helping to keep you healthy. So, when someone tells you that they don’t have the time or energy to exercise, remind them that time spent exercising will re-energize them and help them cope!
Myth 8: Meditation is pure nonsense!

When someone says the word “meditation,” what comes to mind? Do you picture a person sitting on a rug, legs crossed, eyes closed, hands on knees, chanting? That could certainly be a depiction of meditation, but you don’t have to assume that position to meditate!

Meditation calms your mind and relaxes your body. Ideally, it involves sitting or reclining comfortably in a quiet place for 10 to 20 minutes. However, you can meditate in a much shorter amount of time - in a variety of settings. We’ll get into details in later lessons, but, for now, keep in mind that taking a break - even for 5 minutes - is often a good, healthy thing to do.

People who practice meditation claim that they feel re-energized and better able to focus. They also say they feel less stressed. Research studies support these claims. And, given that we know there’s a connection between stress and health, if meditation helps reduce perceptions of stress, it can also help improve your health!


• Image 1: michael lorenzo @ sxc.hu
We all seem very aware of the feelings we get when we are in the middle of a stressful situation; this is often referred to as current stress. But, many people don't realize that stress can occur before or after an event as well.

Anticipatory stress is the perception of stress before an event actually takes place. The mind and body are preparing for change, crisis, or a challenge. This can be helpful if the anticipatory stress actually increases your motivation and preparedness; this is often true for athletes as they prepare for a big game or match, or musicians and actors as they prepare for a show or audition. However, anticipatory stress can also result in less-than-positive effects, especially if you lack confidence about the situation, or if you worry excessively about what might happen, as opposed to what probably will happen. One of the keys in managing anticipatory stress is to view upcoming situations from a realistic (rather than pessimistic) perspective. Excessive worry and anticipatory stress can lead to procrastination, which is generally not a helpful habit. We'll talk about procrastination in greater detail in a later lesson.

Stress that occurs after an experience is called residual stress. Again, just as with anticipatory stress, residual stress can be either helpful or detrimental. The key, as stated before, is a realistic view of things. When you worry and ruminate excessively about what should or could have been different, you really expend a lot of valuable energy. It's always good to learn from our experiences and mistakes, but it's also good to be able to move on eventually, too. A very severe form of residual stress is post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD), which is a clinical condition requiring professional intervention.
Often, you play multiple roles at the same time. Right now, you might be fulfilling some of the following roles: student, volunteer, intern, roommate, son/daughter, sister/brother, friend, girlfriend/boyfriend, employee or employer, among others. Stress can result from various aspects of these roles, and being aware of these tendencies can help you avoid that potential stress.

Role Conflict occurs when the expectations of one role make it hard to fulfill the expectations of another. There are two types of role conflict.
The first, within-role conflict, happens when you’re playing one role, but you have multiple people who have expectations of you in that role.

A good example of this is the role of student. As a student, you have multiple courses taught by multiple professors. Each professor has high expectations of you as a student and expects you to put his or her class first. If you’ve ever had a crazy week when you had several tests and papers or projects due all at once, you’ve experienced within-role conflict!

The second type of conflict, between-role conflict, occurs when the demands of two or more of the roles you’re playing conflict with each other. For example, maybe your role of student conflicts with your role of friend or employee. Your friends want you to go out on a Thursday night, but you can’t because you have a big test on Friday and need to study. Or, maybe your boss wants you to work a shift when you’re scheduled to be in class. Both situations involve between-role conflict.
Dealing effectively with role conflict involves several strategies. First, don't accept more roles than you can comfortably manage. Learn to say no, or pause before saying yes. Think through your values and priorities, and ask yourself, "Will this additional activity add to my life in a meaningful or positive way?" It IS OK to say NO to things! Protect your time and allow yourself to make commitments only to those things that are priorities. Secondly, when role conflict arises, develop a plan of action. Deciding what needs to be done for each role, when it needs to be done, and how much time and energy it will take is essential in minimizing the conflict – and the potential stress!
Role ambiguity occurs when you're not quite sure what your role entails. In other words, your "job description" isn't quite clear!

This can happen in any role. Have you ever been a student in a course where the expectations haven't been clearly communicated? What about relationships? Sometimes, it’s hard to tell what our friends or family members want us to do in a given situation, or what they might need us to say. After all, we cannot read each other’s minds.

In any role, ambiguity leads to confusion, uncertainty, and, ultimately, stress. The best way to prevent role ambiguity is communication. If you're unsure of the expectations, don't hesitate to ask questions! Tell the other individual about the ambiguity. If you don't tell them, they may never even realize that you were experiencing this uncertainty. Usually communication goes a long way in helping solve the problem. Some things may remain ambiguous, but situations usually improve.
This brings us to difficult role relationships. These situations occur when one of your role partners continually presents challenges in the relationship. Role partners could include professor to student; friend to friend; roommate to roommate; or supervisor to employee. Let's be honest: sometimes it is just hard to get along. There are difficult people in this world and we all will run into them at some point. Again, assertive and effective communication can help find a solution. Other times, just being aware of the difficulties and finding a way to work through or around them is the trick. You might even find that in some situations, it's best to end the role relationship for the health and sanity of all involved.
Role overload is probably exactly what you think it is: too much to do! You might be overloaded in a role if the "to do" list is simply too long.

You might feel this in your job, or maybe you've felt that way in a demanding class. Another form of role overload occurs when the expectations of the role are impossibly demanding. Often, the expectations come from others, but sometimes, they may come from you. To combat role overload, you need to work with your role partners to establish reasonable and feasible expectations. We hate to sound like a broken record, but, again, communication is the key! Others won't know you're feeling overloaded unless you tell them. If the unrealistic expectations, such as "I have to get straight A's," come from you, challenge them! Apply a little realistic thinking to those expectations and ask yourself why are you pushing for them and what would be the worst thing that would happen if you didn't meet those expectations? The world would probably still turn, the sun would come up, your friends would still like you, and . . . well, you probably get the point!

The opposite of role overload is role underload. This happens when a role doesn't provide enough challenge or motivation for you. Have you ever had a boring summer job that you felt like you could do in your sleep? Or, have you had a semester of easy classes and felt a little "lost" because you haven't had enough to do? Both of these are good examples. With role underload, people complain about feeling unmotivated and apathetic. This can, in turn, lead to poor performance in classes or at work, unhappiness, and dissatisfaction. Having too little to do can be stressful, just like having too much to do. The key, as we've said before, is finding the balance that works for you and communicating effectively with the other people in your life.

The world today is, as you know, vastly different than the world was when your parents were your age, in many ways!

And, while much has improved, we must admit to ourselves that some of the aspects of our current reality actually contribute to our perceptions and experience of stress. Consider the following points:

We live in a society of "overchoice" that's never before been experienced. Whether it's buying a car, declaring a major, planning a trip, scheduling classes, or shopping at the grocery store, we are bombarded with choices in every area of our lives. While having many options is often seen as a good thing, it can also cause us to feel overwhelmed. If we have too many options, the sheer magnitude of those options can be bewildering!
The pace of our lives is largely due to overscheduling but technology plays a role as well. When the pace of our lives increases, the number, variety, and the intensity of our stressors increases, too.

Because we are always connected -- by computers, smart phones, mp3 players, or iPads -- we can never really get away from it all! Also, this constant connection makes us think we should always have immediate information and responses from others, which can lead to stress when we feel delayed. Finally, all of our technical gadgets are nice, but when they malfunction, we experience a huge disruption in our daily routine because we’ve come to depend on them to such a great extent.

The increasing pace of our lives and the abundance of choices in so many areas lead to the experience of more daily hassles. You’ll remember that daily hassles are the everyday events that have the potential to cause stress in our lives. Examples could be traffic, conflicts with roommates, a slow internet connection, inoperative websites, even accidentally leaving your cell phone at home! Experiencing a great number of daily hassles generally equates to the experience and perception of more stress.
The change in available technology cannot only add to daily hassles but can detract from face-to-face conversation and connection with community. Social researchers tell us that we are experiencing a general decline of shared core values and expectations of appropriate behavior.¹ The result of this is a lack of respect for others, lack of concern for the well-being of others, and a lessened sense of community. We can see the results of this in road-rage incidents, identity theft, bullying on the Internet, and even discourteous behavior. None of these issues are positive and they, in fact, erode our concern for others and general sense of social support. Isn’t it strange how we can be so connected while simultaneously disconnected?

As our pace of life increases, so do our opportunities for transitions. Again, compare your life to that of your parents or grandparents. You are most likely more geographically mobile than they were. It is likely that you will move more often and longer distances than they did. You also have more educational and career opportunities. Because of this mobility and these opportunities, you likely experience change quite often. Change is not a bad thing in and of itself. But every change requires transitions and adjustments because your roles, relationships, and daily life change as well.

- Image 1: J. Henning Buchholz @ sxc.hu
Much stress research has been devoted to the study of life events. Life events, as we’ve already mentioned, are the big events in life. Examples of life events could include graduating from high school or college, getting married, the death of a loved one, moving, starting a new job, or having a baby. Some of these events are happy and some are sad, but they all cause significant changes in our lives.

Events, in and of themselves are not necessarily stressful, but we often perceive them to be so. Some research has indicated that clusters of life events—experiencing several in a short period of time—can increase perceptions of stress and experiences of strain. Becoming a college student is a great example of one of these clusters—you have graduated from one school, started attending another school, perhaps moved from one home or apartment to the next, and experience ever-changing friends, roommates, jobs and activities. How we cope with life events is obviously the key to moderating the effects they have on us. In this course, you will learn a variety of healthy and effective coping strategies.

At this point, it's important to mention the fact that we often have much more control over our perceptions of stress than we think. While you may not be able to always control what happens to you, there is choice in how you think about what happens and how you react.

Some of our perception is influenced simply by our own personality and experiences. We know that people who view life more optimistically and who feel more confident about their abilities tend to report fewer perceptions of stress. How you think about things really does matter.

Your culture and environment can influence perceptions as well. Men and women perceive, react to, and cope with stress differently. Generally, men often want to attempt to solve issues, while women might be more inclined to discuss them in the process of finding a solution. People from various cultures also handle stress in different ways. In some cultures, the norm is to hold stress in and not react to it; in other cultures, it's okay to react to stress in a passionate and energetic manner. There are benefits and consequences to all of these approaches. However, it's critical that we embrace our differences and then recognize what is helpful and healthy in each unique situation.

- Image 1: Svilen Milev @ sxc.hu
There are many factors that influence the way we perceive stress and we’ll try to explore most of them this semester. We hope this lesson has piqued your interest in these issues and has given you a new perspective on stress and coping!