

# STRESS, ANXIETY AND THE NEW ABNORMAL

**Concern about the ongoing pandemic is just one of the ways stress and anxiety have become a fixture in our everyday lives.**

Marisa Kever, a senior with a double major in Spanish and psychology, was swamped trying to keep up with the demands of her classes last year, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced classes online.

"I was constantly checking course websites, and always felt like I was missing assignments, or that I was missing an announcement that was posted," she said. "I was very burned out and tired, and I also had a really hard time staying motivated and positive. I did it, but it was tough to keep my stamina up during those times."

TRENDING

By **Chris Quirk**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK HUFFMAN

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Keever spent the summer away from Bradley, in her rural hometown, working in an arts center and recharging. "I'm really excited to go back to in-person classes. With remote classes I had to study twice as hard to do well. But with the COVID pandemic still going on that is inflicting another kind of stress.

"It's exciting to have some normalcy, but it's a post-but-not post-pandemic period, and I'm feeling very conflicted."

**Dana Rawoens '21**, who earned her bachelor's degree in psychology in the spring and returned to start her master's in clinical mental health counseling this semester, also reported skyrocketing stress levels during the peak of the pandemic.

"If I had to rate it on a scale of one to 10, it would be an eight," she said.

Besides Rawoens' demanding academic schedule as she worked toward graduation, her brother had become seriously ill with COVID-19. Her brother recovered, but Rawoens said it was an extremely difficult time. While preparing to return to Bradley, she cast a wary eye on the Delta variant.

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## THE NEW ABNORMAL

It wasn't supposed to be this way. As vaccination rates steadily increased, and infections, hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19 declined, it appeared for a time the country was finally getting the upper hand over the disease. A return to normal seemed imminent.

Now, with COVID infections resurging and the more dangerous Delta variant becoming prominent, uncertainty reigns in a moment when we were supposed to be clear of the worst of the ravages of the pandemic. It's a new abnormal, with its own kinds of stresses and anxieties.

The American Psychological Association called the rates of stress in the U.S. a national mental health crisis in its 2020 survey, warning the exacerbating effect of the pandemic could have serious long-term social and health consequences. The report found 78% of those surveyed noted increased stress due to the current health crisis.

In particular, Generation Z (adults from 18-23 years of age) reported the highest stress levels of all generations, more than 20% higher than average for all adults, with turmoil and unrest as major factors.

The national political situation was another driver for increased stress overall, as well as racial tensions and fears of climate change. In short, stress has become an all too familiar part of everyday life for many, and the APA issued a call to action to curb the potential damage of escalating stress in the coming years.

## THE STEALTH FACTOR

Understanding stress and anxiety and how they manifest is an important part of dealing with them. Stress is a natural part of life and can be triggered by events from the trivial to the traumatic, according to psychology professor Amy Bacon.

"Stress can come from something as small as running late for an appointment and hitting red lights on the way, and of course it can be as significant as experiencing a trauma or a threat to your physical health," she said. "There's a lot of range of stress and it obviously affects us differently across that range."

Bacon said many COVID-linked stresses come under the category of anxiety, stresses that may not have external triggers, often having to do with worries about the future and things we can't control.

"Whenever we have something like COVID, there's a lot of uncertainty and unpredictability of, am I going to catch COVID? Are my children going to catch COVID? What's going to happen in my workplace? Will I be able to have holidays with my family at Thanksgiving and Christmas?"

"Whenever you have that unpredictability and uncertainty, your mind is trying to solve that problem, and there's just no solution."

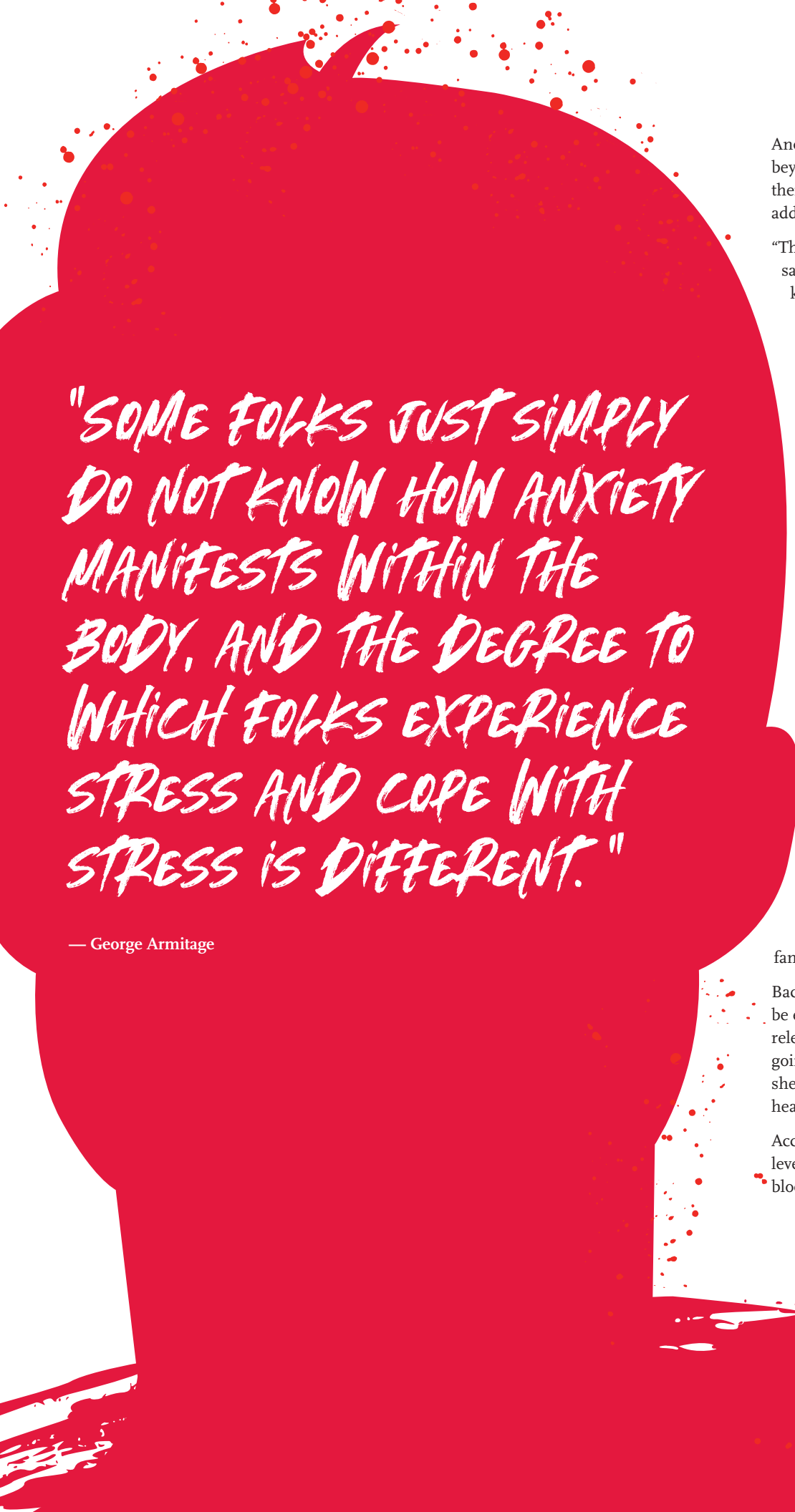
One of the more insidious aspects of stress can be its stealth. Those suffering stress may think they're fine or be loath to admit it.

"When folks say that they don't feel stress or anxiousness, I tell them, well, you actually do but it's a matter of degrees," said counseling professor George Armitage, who also has a clinical practice. "Some folks just simply do not know how anxiety manifests within the body, and the degree to which folks experience stress and cope with stress is different."

"If someone thinks they don't have stress, they're probably not trying to cope with it effectively. That itself can lead to more problems and it can become very cyclical."

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Another factor in identifying stress that goes beyond the everyday to the problematic is there are no clear signs indicating it's time to address it.

"Think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs," said Bacon. "At the very foundation is just keeping your body alive. And so we want to do things that keep our bodies safe and healthy and functioning the way they should."

Persistent sleep or appetite issues, or problems concentrating that affect your work or study, are indications it's time to address stress, but there are many individual variances.

"My stressors are not necessarily going to be your stressors, and that's one of the big issues that we've noticed in COVID. We're all in the same storm, but we all have different ships."

Beyond the harmful psychological impact of stress, Armitage believes it's important to remember the deleterious physical and interpersonal ramifications.

"Stress is psychosomatic," he said. "It's a psychological phenomenon, but it has somatic underpinnings, and many times these things can manifest physically or externally more than mentally, with things like muscle aches, headaches, conflicts in interpersonal relationships with parents, family, significant others and so forth."

Bacon noted the neurochemical effects can be extremely powerful. "Stress can cause the release of hormones, like cortisol, that are going to impact our entire physical system," she said. "That can mean issues with your heart, eating and digestion, and more."

According to the Mayo Clinic, high cortisol levels can also put people at risk for high blood pressure, stroke, and memory loss.



## TAKING TIME OUT, SETTING BOUNDARIES

Dealing with stress can involve simple steps like taking a five-minute time out or reaching out to a health professional for assistance. In the clinical field, the concept is called stepped care, which refers to escalating measures by degrees, depending on the severity of the issue.

“With stress or anxiety, most people are going to experience a relatively mild level, a small number of people are going to experience a moderate level, and a smaller number still are going to experience at a severe level,” said Bacon. “So whenever we’re making these kinds of recommendations, we want to make the fastest, cheapest and least invasive suggestions first. If those people need more help, we pull out some additional kinds of therapeutic interventions.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends talking about your feelings with trusted friends or family, maintaining connections with others, establishing a routine for rest, eating and exercise, and contacting a professional if you believe your stress isn’t manageable.

“A lot of the best advice for stress is simply what an MD would tell you to improve your physical health,” said Armitage. And while the advice sounds simple, putting it into practice under adverse conditions can be a challenge.

“I think as a society, we have probably the worst sleep patterns, the worst dietary patterns, and just the worst overall boundaries with regard to social media and devices that we’ve ever had.”

Bacon concurred. “Things like exercise and sleep and eating well — those may seem like small things but they’re not simple.”

During the pandemic, Keever and Rawoens fashioned their own self-care and scheduling strategies to help keep them on track.

“I would just break down my days and create time slots for everything,” said Rawoens. “If a paper was stressing me out, I’d dedicate two hours to focus on it and write, and do that for all my tasks. Sometimes though you have to just turn everything off and take time for yourself, and not feel so overwhelmed.”

Keever landed on meditation as an effective self-care technique. By giving herself 10 minutes to rest and focus on her breathing, she was able to lower her stress.

“Between that and positive affirmation, I was surprised to see the result,” she said.

## "IT'S OK NOT TO FEEL OK"


With the increased attention paid to stress because of the pandemic, Bacon hopes stress and psychological issues generally become destigmatized.

“It’s important to normalize stress and its negative effects,” she said. “It’s OK to be fearful and sad and frustrated about some of these experiences. But whenever emotions like anger and sadness and frustration start to have negative impacts on your life that may be the point where you might want to seek out additional care, and know that it’s OK to feel not OK in these times.

“I’ve been encouraged to see some of these conversations surrounding mental health in the sports industry recently, with people like Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles and Michael Phelps acknowledging they’re experiencing significant stress as part of their careers, and making the choice to step back for a bit. And it seems like those choices have been fairly well accepted.”

On campus and among her friends and peers, Keever noted more conversations about anxiety, stress and mental health, and the actions of premiere athletes haven’t gone unnoticed.

“I’ve seen people sharing posts congratulating these athletes on taking care of their mental health,” she said. “Society’s



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view of them is sometimes that since these athletes are so determined they should tough it out, but taking care of yourself isn't selfish, and they are setting a great example, especially for the younger generation."

The unpredictability of the current moment — beyond any more tangible factors such as health or changes in the workplace — is in itself contributing to greater stress.

"As a term it's the new fad, but there are a lot of folks in therapy and counseling right now thinking about how are they going to deal with the new normal, and how to transition to that," said Armitage. "Clients will say something like, 'We used to do that in the before times. We don't do that in current times. Maybe we can do that at a later time.'

"We're all dealing with the situational trauma of the pandemic. We're all dealing with isolation and depression from lockdowns and not having the freedom to do all the things that we want to do, and there's also the grief for the loss of a former life."

While psychologists typically focus on the individual, Bacon has found herself stepping back to look at the bigger picture and thinking about the foundations of society that can impact mental health.

"Self-care is important, but we can't self-care our way out of some of these broader problems in society," she said. "If you're not able to get childcare or if you're not able to keep your job, you're not going to self-care your way out of those situations. We do what we can for the individual, but to go back to

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people need to be fed and they need to be housed. So we have to be thinking about expectations at work, childcare opportunities, job training and all of these bigger societal factors that can make a significant impact." **B**

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