

**SURVIVING SCHOOL:
A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**

by

David T. Wills

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APPROVAL

Name: David T. Wills
Degree: Master of Education
Title of Project: Surviving School: A Practical Guide for Student Success

Examining Committee:

Stephen Smith
Senior Supervisor

Milt McClaren
Associate Professor

Marv Wideen
Professor
External Examiner

Date Approved March 27, 1995

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Surviving School: A Practical Guide for Student Success

Author:

(Signature)

David Thomas Wills

(Date)

August 18 / 1994

(Date)

ABSTRACT

This project identifies and creates a pedagogical synthesis of four major elements which can have tremendous influence on the academic performance of students. A model is presented to reflect the idea that study skills, stress management, health, and motivation can work both together and independently to influence a student's performance in school.

One chapter is dedicated to each of the four elements: study skills, stress, health, and motivation. Information in each area comes in the form of quotations, anecdotes, and simple advice. Interactive exercises are included to encourage the reader to reflect on how the information in each chapter applies to him or her personally.

Each chapter finishes with a list of suggested readings, and readers are encouraged to pursue information as it pertains to their own needs and interests.

Research for the project suggests that each of the four elements discussed can have a profound influence over student performance, and that, in order to ensure consistent success, due attention must be paid to all of these areas.

DEDICATION

This work is warmly dedicated....

to my Mom and Dad - for making the right decisions along
the way, and making me believe anything is possible;

to Kathy, Doug, and Don - for your friendship, support,
and unswerving good humour;

to Lori and Zachary - for helping build a world in which
life is truly marvelous;

and to my students - past, present, and future -
for your spirit and inspiration.

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PREFACE

The idea for this guide was born many years ago. In my years involved in education, I have had the perspective of a participant in the demanding life of a student, and acted as an observer and motivator in my current capacity as teacher. In both situations, I have been intrigued by the process and factors which can lead to a positive, successful school experience. Where, as both a student and teacher I have known great enjoyment in school, there have always been others whose experience has not been as satisfying. If enjoyment of one's experience is related to success and achievement with the demands of school life - most notably academic demands - then perhaps some students were more predisposed to success than others. I wondered if there was something about my background, my knowledge, or my attitude which made it possible to find pleasure in an experience which others found difficult and unpleasant. Certainly, not all of the "problems" encountered by those who struggle with school can be attributed to the same sources. Those of us who have worked as teachers can relate to the idea that no two "struggling" students can be led to greater success by the same path. Still, attention to the background of successful students combined with an effort to identify key elements which enable their success would seem very worthwhile.

Students are faced with a great challenge in tackling this 'responsibility' called school. They are, in some ways, forced and expected to enter a tricky world and cope successfully, with little guidance. It seems to be assumed, for example, that adolescent students instinctively know how to generate good study notes, how to stay physically organized and healthy, or how to sustain motivation in completing a task. As a

professional in the education field, most notably as a teacher and boarding house supervisor in a busy private school, I have observed that students benefit by help in identifying and coping with problems which ultimately hinder success. The assembly of a reading and/or reference work should therefore be a useful way to extend my experiences, ideas, and research to students and fellow professionals. The assembly of a 'Survival Guide', then, serves as a way to offer information to which they are not always effectively exposed. As readers become familiar with the factors which can maximize success, the potential to enjoy and benefit by the high school experience is strengthened.

In order to optimize the value of the guide, attention must be paid to identifying and treating those areas which hold the greatest potential to help students achieve greater success. While it is possible to go on at length about the literal mechanics of how students learn, attention here is instead paid to the conditions under which successful learning is optimized. Reference is made in each chapter to literature concerning the learning process, however emphasis rests with drawing from this information an advisory framework.

Such an advisory framework is constructed through the kind of attentiveness paid to the particular areas of student success. The guide which follows attends enthusiastically to these areas, which by their nature hold power to be useful and enabling. Linking these areas, as well as treating them separately, can help paint a comprehensive, and pedagogically helpful picture for students seeking ways to improve.

Perhaps the easiest subject to start with is study skills. Depending on the student, these can encompass mechanical skills such as note taking and writing style, or routines such as where and when effective work can be done. One need only visit a staff room briefly to hear teachers mention the lack of basic skills which impedes the progress of some students. Students themselves can even be heard to blame their poor skills for lack of achievement. Those entering institutions of higher learning often seem deficient in the skills necessary for autonomous study. Students need skills which can help them in all courses, even when characteristics of the course work differ. Some course features - or even a study skills element within a course which can help to build existing skills - can ensure or deny development of study proficiency (Klein & Freitag, 1992; Thomas, Bol, & Warkentin, 1990).

The value of a discussion of study skills gains further support when one observes the relationship between these skills and the students' motivation. In offering advice, professionals such as Covey (1989) encourage us to take our lives into our own hands and exercise control by questioning, doubting, and investigating as we work. At the same time that students are encouraged to "focus on the positive" in their work, they are reminded to attend to strategy and method in order to optimize performance (Ames, 1990). Dr. William Glasser (1986, 1990) provides further indication of the value of a chapter on motivation when he asserts that it is somewhat more difficult to convince students to work as diligently as, say, an office worker, because office workers are paid. Perhaps, then, students can benefit from the viewpoint (and treatment) of a career in school as a job. This encourages students to

look for - and revel in - the quality in what they do. Dr. Glasser also asserts that effective motivation comes from within the individual, and this motivation is important in driving the pursuit of knowledge and the will to excel.

The close relationship between stress and physical health has been well documented. Indeed, it was many years ago that Dr. Hans Selye (1974) suggested that the role of stress in physical health problems was as important as that of any other factor. In a much more recent study to assess student stress, Darryl Zitzow (1992) concluded that student stress was indeed significant, and that it emerged from many parts of the academic environment. If we are concerned with a "complete" effort to assist students, those wishing to help must not limit their interests to academic or vocational issues.

Other sources indicate that stress can not only affect success in school directly by influencing emotions and confidence (Katz, 1989), but that an indirect effect can be seen when it interferes with physical health (Simic, 1992). Simic and others go on to argue that good nutritional habits can have a profound effect on the behavioural and study habits of students, and that much more needs to be done in promoting and monitoring good dietary lifestyle habits among adolescent students (Phlegar & Phlegar, 1979). More recently, a link between diet and performance was shown in the U.S. (Griffin, 1988), while the value of sound lifestyle habits continues to be promoted from government Ministries such as Health and Welfare Canada in the 1989 Active Health Report, to television shows such as ABC's 48 Hours and CBC's The Nature of Things.

Further information and reference to research in each of the guide's main subject areas can be found in the introductory 'Context' sections which precede each chapter.

Much needs to be done in order to make this information better known and available to students as they experience difficulties. One often sees books, such as College Basics (Lunennfeld, 1991), or Acing College (Halberstam, 1991), and resource centres dedicated to helping students at the post-secondary level, yet it would seem that high school is the level at which this material has the greatest potential to help. Indeed, if students can be better informed of success strategies while in secondary school, the need for such support beyond this level could be reduced. Most of the printed material provided for secondary school students targets a change in study skills and routines as the route to improvement (eg. Learning for Success; Fleet et al., 1990). Other sources, such as The hm Study Skills Program books (nassp, 1986) offer interactive lessons on basic study tactics. Other information on stress, health and nutrition, and motivation seems to appear either in more heavy, comprehensive works (such as The Stress Solution, by Miller & Dell Smith (1993), or Motivation, by Mook (1987)), or as small leaflets or magazine articles. The information does exist (and may even be "taught" in small units of existing science and/or health courses), but it is usually designed and written with adults in mind, and the student who does read it is left to connect the information to his or her world in a meaningful way.

Perhaps the greatest challenge lies in creating a guide which an average high school student will seek out and read (and, consequently, use). If indeed the demands on the adolescent's schedule are sufficient that they may affect academic success, then it is hardly reasonable to assume that he or she can find time for a demanding book. For this reason, every effort has been made to make the guide as "reader friendly" as possible. The chapters have been divided into smaller sections which can be read as time permits, and easy review access is afforded by the chapter summaries which follow the body of the text. These elements should allow easy return to the material should further consultation and/or re-reading be desired. The chapters include activities which the reader is encouraged to employ, thus rendering the text more engaging. Finally, attention has been paid to the style of writing. The text itself is written in an informal, conversational style - as if one were having an advisory conversation with a single, concerned student. The manner of presentation is intended to convey information in a non-threatening yet energetic way. While the ideas are not thrust at the reader with urgency, the tone is set to show that significant attention to them is very worthwhile. Finally, the addition of pithy quotations (a source list has been added to the bibliography) and anecdotes is designed to entertain and illustrate some of the guide's most important ideas.

The chapters of this project form a prototype of a guide which attempts to address these areas to the adolescent student in a helpful manner.

While informational and self-help sources certainly do exist, a guide which examines and relates:

- (i) these relevant topics, to
- (ii) the high school student, in
- (iii) an informative, readable manner

has the potential to be very useful.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Where does it all begin?"

INTRODUCTION

Don't be afraid to take a big step when one is indicated.

You can't cross a chasm in two small jumps.

- David Lloyd George

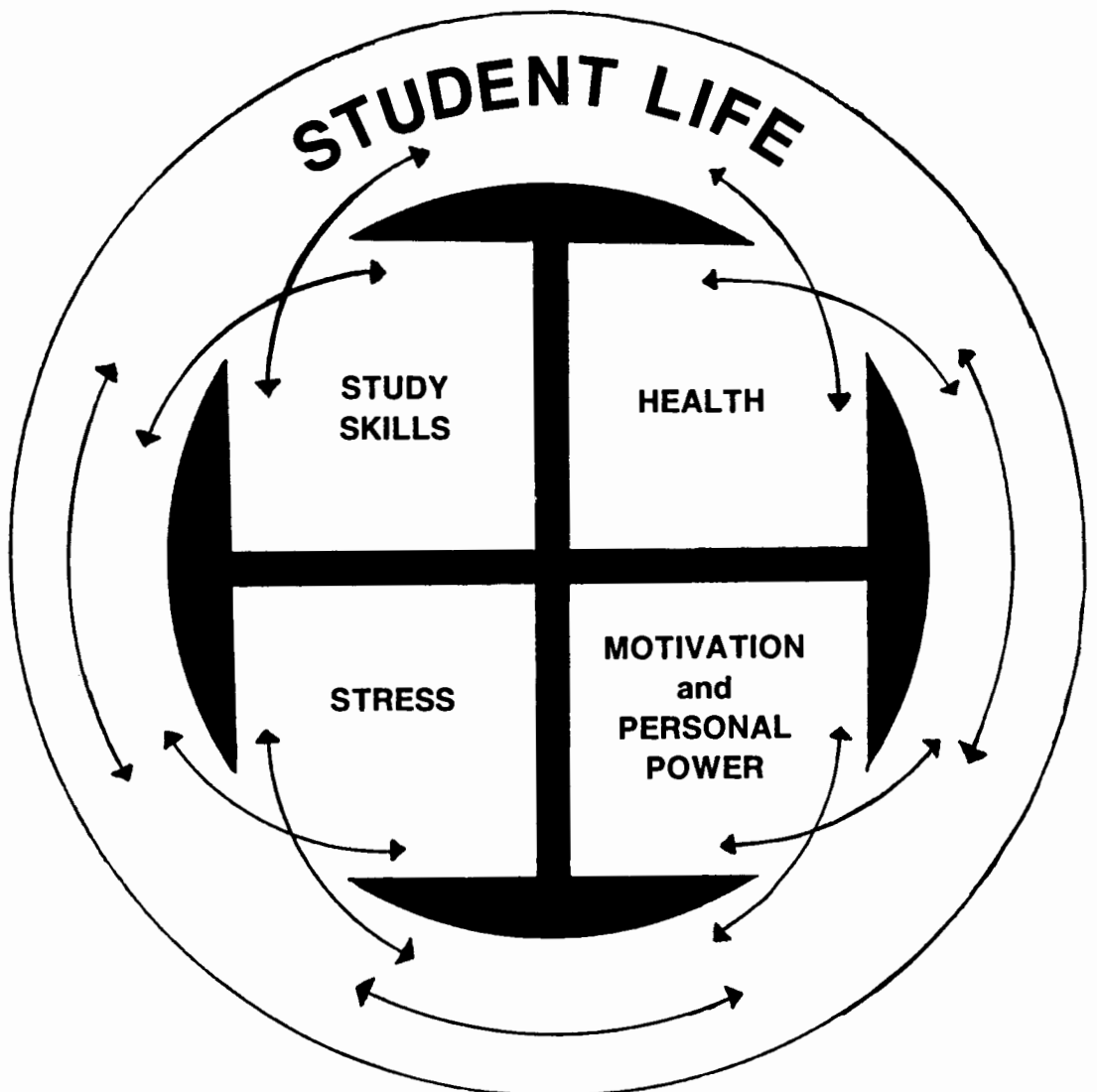
Ideally, everyone would like to make the very most of each of life's experiences. Students are probably no different in their desire to get the most from their time spent in school. Unfortunately, the life of a student is becoming increasingly busy and complex. When this complexity is combined with the many distractions outside of school, there is plenty of room for frustration and disappointment.

Ever since I began my 'career' in education and followed the path from student to teacher, I have been interested in the process and factors which make the school experience a positive one. As a student who quite enjoyed my time spent in school, I was often intrigued by the sight of peers who clearly did not enjoy theirs. I wondered if there was something about my background, my knowledge, or my attitude which made it possible to enjoy an experience which others found difficult and unpleasant.

As a teacher and adviser to high school students, I am still observing that some students' experiences are positive where others' are not - a rather regrettable situation. To make matters more difficult, it seems that more and more of the guidance and support that once came routinely from the home and family are now in short supply. More responsibility for guidance is falling on teachers, peers, and the students themselves. While there are many books and guides for coping and

personal development available on the market today, very few (if any) are aimed at isolating and solving the problems of the teenaged student.

My experience, discussions with students and colleagues, and research have helped me to identify four distinct 'areas' which play important roles in the promotion and maintenance of a sound, successful student life. Optimal physical health, stress management, study skills, and motivation each play an important part in influencing student life as a whole. The following model serves to illustrate this point.



As the arrows indicate, each area of emphasis can affect and be affected by any of the other three. A weakness in study skills, for example, can lead to poor academic results which, in turn, may take their toll on motivation. Similarly, increased stress during trying times can weaken a student's resolve to stick to a healthful diet. All four areas form a part of a bigger picture which represents the life of a student.

Each of the following four chapters is dedicated to one of the four areas identified in the model. As a reader, you are encouraged to consider how these areas influence your life as a student, and what steps you might take to improve and promote the tremendous sense of accomplishment which comes with success in reaching one's personal goals.

By writing a guide which offers ideas on how to cope successfully with the demands of student life, I do not mean to suggest that school is a miserable process or that any large number of students is doing poorly. While the experience for some may not be optimal, there are certainly many others who do gain a great deal. The purpose is instead to offer ideas which might make life in school easier, more productive, and (consequently) more fun! The experience of researchers, teachers, and even students suggests that many students who apparently should succeed in school either do not succeed or perform below expectations. Some students do not complete high school, and others attend but do not meet requirements for a graduation certificate. This significant problem deserves the attention of administrators, teachers, counsellors, health professionals, parents, and students alike. While a guide such as

this may not cover solutions to all problem areas, it is hoped that it may assist you, the student (as well as educators and parents) in seeing and solving some of the problems which can make student life less satisfying than it can and should be.

Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice.

- William Jennings Bryan

As you get to know yourself as a student, you are better able to cope with the demands of school life and produce satisfying, quality results. Most people would agree that the impact of the school system stays with us long after we graduate - so it is well worthwhile to endeavor to make the experience a positive, successful one.

The following four chapters offer information in the form of anecdotes, quotations, and simple advice. The guide is designed so that it may be used in different ways. Of course, the chapters can be read in succession, as you would read a book. I would encourage you to let this be your first approach. Once you gain familiarity with the content of each chapter, the headings provide easy access to the information when review is necessary. In this way, the guide can also be used as a source of reference.

Quotations are featured in each chapter to show what some rather well known people have said about the topics, and the built-in activities will enable you to interact with the text so as to render it more meaningful. Please do take the time to engage in these when you reach them, as they invite you to consider your own very important ideas and opinions. Each

person will have different aspirations and approaches to work, and there is opportunity for you to consider how the ideas relate to you personally.

At the end of each chapter, a number of sources of further information on the topic are featured for those readers interested in broadening their reading. If you are more ambitious still, the bibliography features all of the sources used to generate this guide, and the majority of these can be obtained through a good university library.

Following the entire guide, summaries of each chapter are offered for quick reference, should you wish to see an overview of any chapter at a glance.

An additional point to remember is that the information in this guide is by no means the "final word" in achieving academic success. The information in the chapters on Stress or Health, for instance, should not replace the assistance of medical professionals in solving serious problems. Also, many of your teachers, or your peers, or your parents, or even other books may have valuable information to contribute. Take the time to gather all of the available information to produce a winning formula for yourself.

This guide is all about your success - that is, how to achieve and maintain the degree of success you desire. In order to have maximum enjoyment of life as a student, it is important to attend to all four of the areas discussed in this guide. As you read, you will learn how each area plays an important role, and how falling short in any one of them can

upset the balance in a student's life. With that said, however, I see no reason why you should not manage to improve in some way with attention to these ideas. It is my hope that this guide, together with your ambition and energy, will enable you to establish and reach all of your personal goals. Enjoy!

CHAPTER II

STRESS and STUDENTS, STUDENTS and STRESS

"What's slowing you down?"

CHAPTER II

STRESS and STUDENTS, STUDENTS and STRESS

CONTEXT

Currently, the topic of stress is very popular in the psychological and self-help literature. There would appear to be no question that stress plays an influential role in our day to day lives, and one can easily find materials which profile causes, perils, and solutions to stress related problems.

Based on both research and personal experience as a student, it would seem that students are certainly not immune to the effects of stress, or to the lifestyle elements which set them in motion. While high school students may not be faced with 'adult responsibilities' such as raising children or contributing to a household income, there are still significant sources of stress within the demands of school life. Studies have revealed a variety of stressors for adolescents which include, but are not restricted to, the athletic, social, and academic demands of school life (Mates, 1992; Zitzow, 1992).

An effort has been made in the literature to identify two distinct 'types' of stress. It can have both good and bad forms, and pains have been taken to emphasize that stress is not necessarily an 'evil' to be avoided at all costs (Hanson, 1985). An effort to identify different types and sources of stress seems very worthwhile, as the ability to avoid negative stress is a major step in improving performance (Miller and Dell Smith, 1993).

When it comes to students, those with good coping strategies (or those who are able to develop these) often see an improvement in grades (Dubois et al, 1992). These students are able to deal directly with sources of stress and select activities to maintain a sense of well being and optimism (Jorgensen and Dusek, 1990). Those with poor coping skills, on the other hand, have been choosing avoidance tactics and coping responses such as rebellion, substance abuse, and diversions which provide little relief (Jorgensen and Dusek, 1990; Kasdin, 1993).

Strangely, students are rarely offered the idea of getting rid of stress sources or focussing on self-improvement as a possible coping response or means by which to improve (Mates and Allison, 1992). Among strategies seen as effective for students were: (i) establishing goals and priorities, and (ii) attention to the mechanics of scheduling and planning in the school routine. Control of one's time, and the perception that one has it, have also been shown to lower stress levels and improve satisfaction and performance (Myers, 1993; Macan and Shahani, 1990). The stress out sessions featured at the end of the chapter were created to give readers some idea of just how they might incorporate an element of active stress management into the daily routine.

While a student's stress level may vary with the time of day, week, or year, attention to its causes (and/or sources) and effects can not only improve one's ability to identify and cope with stressful situations, but the benefits of greater self-awareness may very well "spill over" to offer advantages in other areas as well.

STRESS and STUDENTS, STUDENTS and STRESS

"Everybody has it, everybody talks about it, yet few people have taken the trouble to find out what stress really is."

(Hans Selye, 1974)

The word STRESS means different things to different people, so it can be very difficult to define. According to Dr. Hans Selye, a noted stress expert, stress is "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it". This definition may not seem specific enough to be helpful, but it does show us that it is not important whether the situation is pleasant or unpleasant..... what counts is the intensity and demand for adaptation.

Some people see stress as a reaction to strictly negative things - like a bad test score or being "grounded" at home. But other seemingly "happy" events - like a surprise party or a family vacation, can be just as stressful.

There exist, then, two different forms of the same thing. There is "positive stress" (or EUSTRESS), which is associated with things that you look forward to; and "negative stress" (or DISTRESS), which is associated with problematic situations. It is basically impossible to eliminate either form of stress, but you need to tip the balance in favour of Eustress, and *manage* Distress.

There is little doubt that stress is a prevalent and tricky element in day to day life. Many of the changes you experience - such as physical changes, changes in your family and friends, even changes where you live or in places where you spend time can act as powerful sources of stress. What is it that makes dealing with stress such a challenge? To put it simply, it is the "nature of the beast". Stress is so troublesome because:

- it is "invisible"
 - you don't exactly 'see it' or feel its presence.....
 - it can 'creep up' when you're not looking.....
- it is "flexible"
 - it can come and go at various times, and even do so at predictable times in your life.....

The Effects of STRESS

Uncontrolled stress is a bad thing, pure and simple. It can create health problems, or worsen existing ones. It can also change the way you behave or respond in certain situations. When you are confronted with a stressful situation, your body is forced to respond. This is often called the 'stress response' or the 'fight or flight response'. When this occurs, the body releases the hormones epinephrine and norepinephrine, which speed the heart rate and constrict blood vessels. In simple terms, the body is getting ready to deal with a difficult situation. Physically, the heart races and blood pressure rises, and a change in mood may lead to feelings of tension or irritability.

When I think back to my days as a high school student, I realize that I was often under a great deal of stress, but I didn't know it then. I would

often say or do erratic, unpredictable things when the pressure was on. Many an embarrassing moment or poor performance might have been avoided had I known how to recognize and control stress. As a teacher, I often see signs of uncontrolled stress in my students. These range from physical illness to emotional outbursts to very poor performances on tests. Some students have become very frustrated after they have prepared diligently for a test and then scored poorly. They often look for fault in their study technique, when the real problem may have been in dealing with stress. Because I have spent time living with students in a boarding school residence, I have also seen stress-related changes in things like sleeping habits, eating habits, and relationships with peers and authority figures.

Stress can be a nasty force. Not only can it have direct effects on your health, it can also weaken your willpower. Personally, I find it easy to tell when I am under a lot of stress, because I find myself reaching for snack foods (especially sweet ones!) more often than usual. Normally these are not on the list of foods I eat, but when the stress level is high they are very difficult to resist! Can stress be eliminated? Probably not - indeed, almost certainly not. But that is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, having some stress in your life is not only a reality, it may even be helpful. (We'll discuss this point a bit later.)

Being a victim of stress is like being in a prison cell with your bad habits - you may want to get away from them, but stress has formed really solid bars to keep you in. When the stressors in your life are great and your skills for dealing with them are weak, those bars can seem incredibly

strong. But there is a way to deal with the situation. Learning to recognize and avoid stressors, and learning to deal effectively with those that you do face can "weaken the cell bars" and enable you to break free and stay out of that confinement with your bad habits.

Here are 2 things to consider:

- 1) Most people don't know how to recognize the signs of stress. Sure, they can usually tell that something is wrong, but they tend to blame the wrong source for their problems.
- 2) Most people don't have the 'know-how' (or make the time) to deal effectively with stressful situations. Yes, they do try things, but these are often not the best approaches and they can even make things tougher in the long run.

What you really want to do, then, involves two steps: First, you have to identify stress - where it comes from, when it appears, what are its symptoms, etc.; and second, you have to learn to control stress - to reduce it if need be, or to harness its effects and use it to your advantage.

IDENTIFYING STRESS

By now, you probably have your own ideas how you can identify both the sources and signs of stress in your life. You may even have created a mental list of these things (and, hopefully, thought about ways to deal with them!). Before we go on, I'd like you to stop for a moment and try to put some of these ideas down on paper.

Take any old scrap of paper and make two columns like this:

STUDENT STRESS	Sources - where it comes from	Signs - how it shows up
	1)	1)
	2)	2)
	3)	3)
	4)	4)
	5)	5)

Now briefly fill in one item for each point. If you can, try to keep the ideas school-related. Take a moment to think about it, and really try to fill in all the blanks.

Were you able to fill in all the blanks? If so, that's excellent. Taking a moment now to consider where stress fits into your life will make it easier to identify and deal with. As you read on, keep your answers in mind. You may want to modify or add to your list as you consider new ideas.

YOUR PERSONAL REACTION TO STRESS

It is quite possible that many of you have discussed stress at some point. You may have seen lists of stress factors - things that can cause stress in your life. In late 1992, Darryl Zitzow produced a list of stressful situations and events commonly experienced by students. They are listed in order, from "most stressful to least stressful", and an indication of the percentage of students surveyed who had actually experienced these

"stress items" was also given. Take a look at the items in Table 1 below and see where you fit in:

TABLE 1
Rank Order of Stress Items for High School Students

Rank	Stress Item	% Experienced
1	Death of a brother or sister	7.9
2	Death of a parent	13.8
3	Being responsible for an unwanted pregnancy	16.4
4	Being suspended from school (or probation)	17.0
5	Having parents that are separated/divorced	21.8
6	Receiving a D or F on a test	78.4
7	Being physically hurt by others while in school	24.6
8	Giving a speech in class	82.3
9	Feeling that much of my life is worthless	56.5
10	Being teased or made fun of	45.5
11	Feeling guilty about things I've done in the past	92.3
12	Pressure to get an A or B in a course	48.4
13	Pressure from friends to use drugs or alcohol	88.4
14	Fear of pregnancy	29.4
15	Failure to live up to family expectations	62.4
16	Feelings of anxiousness or general tension	78.8
17	Pressure to have sex	83.6
18	Feeling like I don't fit in	86.4
19	Fear of being physically hurt by other students	72.4
20	Past/present sexual contact with a family member	10.8

Note: The number of students surveyed was 1,460.
(From: Zitzow, D. Assessing Student Stress: school adjustment rating by self report. The School Counsellor, Sept. 1992.)

This list is very interesting because it can demonstrate to students that they are probably not alone in dealing with some of the stress factors in your life. Notice, too, that not all of these "student stress factors" have to do directly with school. Students do indeed lead complicated lives!

But more than just identifying some of the things that can "stress you out", it is important to think about your reaction to stressors. There are lots of different ways that you, as a student, might show signs of stress.

Here is a short list of some symptoms I have observed.....

How often do you:

- make lots of animated gestures when you talk
- get impatient and/or irritated when you have to wait in a line
- tap your fingers, bounce your knees, or otherwise have trouble sitting still
- speak out sharply and quickly (often regretting afterward that you didn't stop to think first), or using foul language more often than usual
- overemphasize winning and being better than everyone at everything
- measure your success by numbers - like a test score, or how many games your team has won, etc.

The learning experience can be very stressful, and at times you may change your routine in response to the many academic stressors. You can become obsessed with the control of time and scheduling, and feel overwhelmed by trivial and unimportant tasks. Does this sound familiar to you?.... if so, you might want to go back and revise your list of stress signs.

Remember too that stress can build up. There are signs of built up stress - like fatigue, back pain, headaches, and many others which can be problems that nobody connects with stress - so watch out for those!

What we have seen are only a few of many subtle changes which can occur with stress. If you found that several of them apply to you, please don't get overly upset. Many young (and old!) people are subject to these kinds of reactions, so you are certainly not alone. What is important is

that you have now become more aware of stress as a factor in your life, and you know more about how to recognize its presence. With some of the ideas in this paper, you should be able to avoid and control stress more effectively. Adopting good habits will help both now and in the future.

HOW CAN STRESS BE GOOD?

Before we move on to look at the ways in which stress can be managed, we should pause to examine the "positive" side of stress.

Depending on the circumstances and the manner in which it is handled, stress can be a good thing. To demonstrate why, I will refer to two different examples:

First, stress can be helpful if a stressful situation is seen as an *opportunity* instead of a burden.

Imagine for a moment that two students, Diane and Kathy, are riding a bus on the way home after a tough day at school. If we could read their thoughts, we might discover that they are tired and not pleased about the huge amount of homework they have yet to do. They probably feel frustrated as they look down at the heavy book bags on the floor.

Suddenly, the bus skids violently and crashes into a hydro pole. There is no damage to the bus (or passengers), but the pole has fallen and sparks are flying everywhere. The driver urges everybody to stay seated, and,

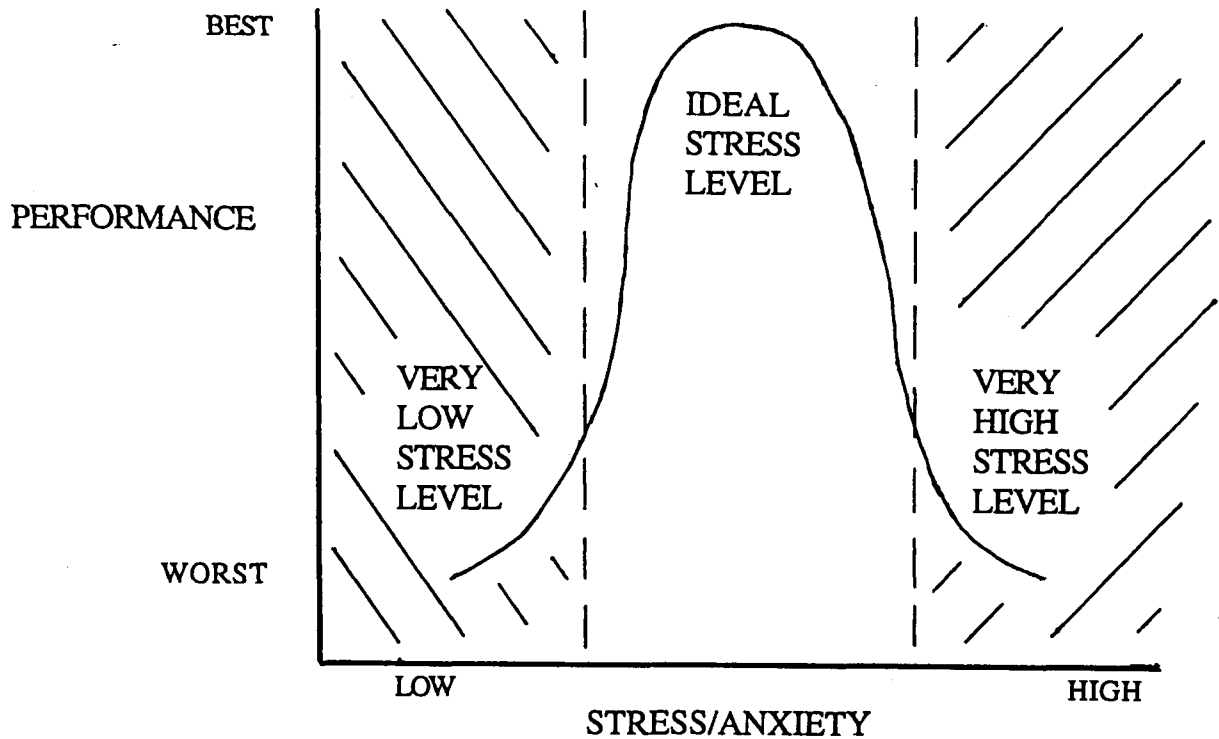
soon after, a police officer informs the passengers that they will have to stay on the bus until all reports are complete and it is safe to exit. It could take quite a while.

This is bad news for both students. The already long night may have just become longer. Diane begins to panic and is obviously frustrated while looking out the window and waiting... waiting..... Kathy sits down and decides to use the unexpected time to do some reading.

By the time they are able to leave the bus, the two students are in very different frames of mind. Diane is stressed and worried that tonight's work will never get done; Kathy is comfortable knowing that there is less to do now than before the bus trip started!

Situations like this imaginary one can be very common. Students often face unexpected changes in their daily plans. Successful management of these situations involves seeing the change as an opportunity rather than a stress-laden burden. When handled properly, a stressful situation can be turned and used to your advantage!

My second example of how stress can be friendly involves an old friend, the "Inverted U Performance Curve". You may have already seen the graph which follows, but I want to encourage you to take a close look and think about what it is telling us:



(adapted from: Roediger et al; Psychology, 1991.)

The graph is very crude and simple, but I think it shows well that having a very low (or very high) stress level is not helpful (you can see how the performance line drops sharply in the regions of very high and very low stress). There is, however, an ideal range, where some stress can benefit performance immensely. If you consider this, then some amount of stress can definitely be seen as friendly and helpful. The ideal amount of stress will vary from individual to individual, and you must strive to find your own comfort level.

What is important now is how stress is managed - so as to keep it in the ideal range!

MANAGING STRESS

To put it simply, there are many ways you may choose to deal with stress - both good and bad..... mostly bad. Actually, perhaps a better word for "bad" might be "ineffective", because you may engage in activities which seem, on the surface, to provide stress relief, but which really only act as diversions. Let's have a look at these first:

My experience shows that students tend to "run from" stress rather than try to face it and manage it. Avoidance tactics can include such things as:

- procrastination - finding little, unimportant tasks to occupy your time.....
- diversions - such as sports, music and T.V., shopping, taking a shower , or having a nap.....
- rebellion - "getting even" with stressors by doing what you want instead of what you are forced to do.....
- substance abuse - which includes the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other controlled substances such as marijuana, cocaine, LSD.....

Aside from the obvious dangers involved in some of these activities, they are simply ineffective because they do not allow you to address the actual source of your stress, nor do they enable you to deal with the stress directly.

Applying some of the ideas presented earlier in this paper can make quite a difference. Identifying and addressing stress symptoms and sources directly, as well as emphasizing the positive effects of stress, can lead to much greater satisfaction and efficiency. If you are able to combine good coping strategies with the support of friends and teachers, you will usually see an improvement in both grades and satisfaction. Those who

manage their time effectively find that feeling "in control" is an excellent way to reduce stress levels.

Finally - taking time each day to relieve stress is a wonderful habit which very few students have acquired. It is one which can be of value at any time in life, yet it is usually not until we reach the "working world" that people are supposed to need some form of stress relief.

As you read about the STRESS OUT Session, consider how it could be of value to you. Think about when you might best add such a session to your daily schedule. It takes only minutes to enjoy, and, after a short time, I am sure you will find it a valuable part of your daily routine.

THE "STRESS OUT" SESSION

Taking time each day for a STRESS OUT session is important for two reasons: first, and most obviously, it will help you control and relieve stress. Doing this on a regular basis, then, is not just a good idea - it is critical; and second, the STRESS OUT session helps you to keep in touch with your feelings, level of stress, and the factors that are currently making your life a challenge.

Most of the people I have spoken to find that taking time out each day to relieve stress is a very easy routine to manage - one which they really look forward to. I suggest you try to get into a regular routine where you take a few minutes at about the same time each day. Some prefer the middle of the day, but most find the late afternoon to be the time when a STRESS OUT Session is of greatest value. Suit yourself.....

To begin, you need to find a place which is reasonably quiet and free from interruptions and distractions for about 30 minutes. You will need to find a comfortable spot to sit or lie back (lying down may not be a good idea unless you have enough time for a nap!). Your position is not too important as long as you are comfortable, relaxed, and well supported.

Start by focussing on something small and simple (a shirt button, fingernail, a mark on a table or wall, etc.), and take a few slow, deep breaths. As you begin to relax, your eyes may gently close, and this is fine. Concentrate on your breathing..... feeling the air escape as you exhale. The breaths should remain long, slow, and relaxed. Feel the subtle movements of your body as you breathe - especially your stomach as it rises and falls. Notice how your limbs begin to feel heavy and loose as you breathe. This is a good sign. Stay focused on your breathing - on the movement of the air and the calmness of your body. Until you get accustomed to this exercise, your mind may tend to wander. If it does, calmly return your focus to your breathing. Try to do this for 10-20 minutes in each session. As the session comes to an end, slowly open your eyes and sit up. Some people like to stretch a bit while their muscles are nice and loose. You are now ready to ease yourself back into your routine.

Some more advanced ideas:

As you become more comfortable with your STRESS OUT routine, you may want to change your focus from your breathing. Using your imagination to create images while relaxing can be wonderful..... even memorable. Some hypnosis techniques rely on the ability to conjure up

familiar images. While I would not say these STRESS OUT sessions constitute any form of self-hypnosis, adding your imagination to the formula can be enjoyable..... for example:

..... imagine your stress is like a thick, warm liquid which fills your body. Your skin is like a big, loose membrane which holds the liquid. As you relax, you make a small hole at the end of each finger and toe, and the liquid stress slowly drains from your body. Feel the liquid drain away as you become relaxed. At the end you are only a limp, flat membrane.....

..... imagine you are on an elevator. As the doors close, you push the 'down' button. As the elevator moves slowly downward, each floor brings you to a new level of relaxation. If you like, open the doors and explore a peaceful place before you return up to the ground floor at the end of your session.....

..... imagine you are lying face down on a cloud. You are able to look down and see things below you as you drift along. Pretend you are able to steer the cloud as it floats ever so slowly along..... where will you go?what will you see?

These are only a few simple ideas. There are surely many more which will work beautifully. What's important is that you enjoy your current session and look forward to the next one.

The 60 Second Stress Buster

But what about those days when you can't find the time or place to enjoy a STRESS OUT session? These are the situations when you need to regulate your stress the most, because the times are usually pretty hectic. Rather than skipping any kind of stress management opportunity, I suggest you take a 60 Second (or so) break to slow the pace down a little.

To do this.....

- put down your pen, pencil, or calculator and turn off your computer monitor,
- close your eyes, take a deep breath, and relax your face, neck, and shoulder muscles.

then.....

- try to think of the middle names of all your family members.....; or
- picture an animal you like. Create the details in your mind... size, colour, surroundings.....; or
- remember the name and face of someone nice you met on your last vacation.....; or
- think of a colour, then try to come up with 5 things that are that colour.....; or
- try to decide what is absolutely your most favorite food.....; or
- pick one muscle group in your body and enjoy 2 slow, relaxing 30 second stretches of that area (refer to the chapter on STUDENT HEALTH for more information about stretching).....; or
- (develop your own ideas for a 60 second stress buster!)

These routines are by no means the final word on stress relief. They are merely intended to give you a better understanding of what stress feels like and how you can take steps to manage it.

As your understanding and ability to deal with stress grows, any negative effect it might have should be significantly reduced. Stress is a factor which can not only affect you on its own, but in conjunction with other elements of your daily student life. Not coping with stress successfully may lead to trouble in managing a demanding study routine; you may be less prepared to take proper care of your physical health; or you may have problems maintaining a motivation level necessary for peak performance. The presence of stress in the everyday life of a student is a reality you face, but, with the help of information and a positive attitude, it is an element you can easily control and use to your advantage.

Suggested Further Readings

The topic of stress has become more common in health oriented books and magazines. It is not unusual to see sections of self-help books which are dedicated to causes and/or solutions of stress and stress related problems.

Two good resources to get you started might be:

The Joy of Stress

by Peter Hanson

(Andrews, McMeel & Parker Books; 1985)

Though this book is slightly older, it offers an excellent look at the basics of stress. Dr. Hanson introduces the topic in a simple way, and includes information on stress as it relates to nutrition, weight control, and your heart.

The Stress Solution

by Lyle Miller and Alma Dell Smith

(Simon & Schuster pocket books; 1993)

This is a newer book which focuses on management of stress in your life. Many survey-type questions help you determine your own stress profile, and offer ways to focus on personalized changes.

CHAPTER III

STUDENT HEALTH

"Fuel for the fire"

CHAPTER III

STUDENT HEALTH

CONTEXT

The topic of student health was a rather clear choice as the third of the five guide chapters. In my experience, students are usually provided with information and an opportunity to learn about health and health related issues, but the weight of these seems to focus on the avoidance of serious illness and disease rather than on ways to maximize individual health and performance. It is not that students do not care about their own health, it is just that they (and/or their teachers, and/or even their parents) may not appreciate the significant effect poor health - and specifically dietary - choices can have on performance.

In his work Eat to Succeed, Dr. Robert Haas (1986) suggests that the pursuit of 'maximum performance' is not just a matter for concern of elite athletes, but that success in any activity can depend on how and what people feed their bodies. In examining the relationship between diet and performance in school children, Phlegar & Phlegar (1979) observed and reported significant changes in students' school performance and behaviour with changes in diet. They point out a great gap in knowledge about nutrition and the relationships between nutrition and physical and mental health. More recently, Lewis (1990) found that there is still evidence that adolescent students are in poor health and/or making poor dietary choices.

Clearly, there is value in presenting a 'nuts and bolts' look at the elements and values of a sound diet and healthy lifestyle. Some of the individual subsections of the chapter are given their own spots because of the emphasis they have drawn in the literature. In the case of caffeine, for example, one study indicates that students have been led to believe - often by their peers- that the use of this drug will help in educational pursuits, but that this use most often does little more than lead to caffeinism (Bradley & Petree, 1990). A second study suggested that students were not aware how much caffeine they were using, and that poor recognition of its effects led to over-use (Johnson-Green, 1988). Two larger reference sources designed for students and educators continue with mention of the overall importance of physical health, the effects of excess sugar in the diet, and the benefit in knowing what, when, and how much to eat (Lewis, 1984; Campbell, 1984).

Finally, in his book Underachievers in Secondary School, Griffin (1988) emphasizes that optimal health improves one's ability to cope with the demands of student life. He points out that problems such as mis-eating (eating the wrong foods in the wrong amounts for the wrong reasons), and insufficient rest immediately limit the effectiveness of students work and, consequently, the potential of their teachers. He enthusiastically offers the idea of closer attention to diet and physical health to those students who wonder how they might promote better performance in school.

It would seem that Physical Health- as influenced by dietary, sleep, and exercise habits - can have a profound influence on the performance of

daily tasks. There is more to health than simply being free of disease. If all students care about is staying free of colds and the 'flu', then it would seem that their standards are set much too low. Aiming at a goal of optimal health can go a long way in directly and indirectly improving both comfort and achievement in the lives of students. And my bet is that the efforts will be both enjoyable and fruitful!

STUDENT HEALTH

The doctor of the future will give no medicine but will interest his patients in the care of the human frame, in proper diet, and in the cause and prevention of disease.

- Thomas Edison

In my opinion, very few things can have as strong an effect on your academic capabilities as your physical health. Strangely, though, most of the sources I have seen discuss academic success strategies without ever mentioning the health of you, the student. It seems ironic to suggest how you might improve school performance without first ensuring that you are in good health.

All of the body's systems have a hand in supporting the efficient work of the mind. At the most basic level, the brain is fueled by glucose and oxygen. These are made available through the respiratory and digestive systems and delivered by the circulatory system. Other systems can have indirect influence on the effective delivery of these vital nutrients, and so it becomes apparent that proper academic function relies on the sound operation of the body as a whole. As a student, your exercise, sleep, and dietary habits can combine to have a significant effect on performance.

Fortunately for all of us, the body is like a very resilient machine. It can withstand a great deal of abuse without showing any serious effects. When I discuss aspects of health - such as diet - with students, I often hear "oh, I eat tons of junk food and skip breakfast a lot, and I never

have health problems". It is true that, while most of the so-called bad choices will not confine you to a bed, they can make subtle differences in your abilities to cope effectively.

The purpose of this chapter is not to dwell on the basics of nutrition and exercise - by the time you reach high school, you have probably already been bombarded with this information. Instead, we will examine the often overlooked values of sound lifestyle choices and look a bit more closely at some of the subtle ways many "normal" habits can affect you.

"The health of people is really the foundation upon which all their happiness and all their powers as a state depend."

- Disraeli

Each of the sections in the chapter will examine some of the ways you can optimize your day-to-day health choices and really *ensure* a strong, successful performance when it is most needed.

DIET and HEALTH

Whether or not you can consider yourself healthy as a student is determined by your ability to cope with the demands of student life. The pursuit of maximum performance should not just be a concern of elite athletes. Success in school can be influenced by how and what you choose to feed your body.

*"Let thy food be thy medicine,
and thy medicine be thy food."
- Hippocrates*

Some features of healthy students might be that they are well rested, alert, and generally willing and able to focus on the tasks of the day. If you are not healthy, it immediately limits the effectiveness of your work and, consequently, the potential effect of your teachers as well.

Now, I do not mean to suggest that you, the student are entirely to blame when things go wrong. With diet, as with anything, there may be circumstances which make the achievement of peak health a bit difficult. Still, we are all ultimately the ones who control what we consume and how our diet affects our performance. And, if this is true, you must then accept responsibility for your own health - which is hugely influenced by how you choose to fuel your bodies.

Statistics show that people are now living longer. If indeed we can expect to enjoy life longer than our ancestors, it becomes increasingly important that we care for our bodies so that we can enjoy the extra years fully.

*"Like medical doctors, educators have been slow to realize
how often there is a direct relationship between the
kinds of foods kids consume today and their behaviour
and academic achievement."
- Fred Phlegar*

Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that many adolescents are in poor health and making poor dietary choices. I still have a vivid memory

of a recent trip to the gas station to fill my car. As I arrived, I noticed a young man standing proudly next to a sports car as he filled the tank. I don't know how old he was, but he appeared to be no more than 20 years or so. The care and attention he gave to the car led me to believe that it was his own, and he was filling it with the best quality gasoline available. He carefully cleaned the windows and went inside to pay. When he came out, he was carrying his gas receipt, a can of cola, and a bag of potato chips. It seemed strange to me that he would use only the finest fuel for his car, but then choose such poor quality fuel for his own 'engine'. After all, the car may not be around in 15 years, but his own body is expected to last 4 or 5 times that long!

In discussing the ideal diet for students, it is not my intention to review the basics of proper nutrition. By the time you reach high school, you have probably had more than enough of "the 4 basic food groups", "food pyramids", and the like. Instead, I will dwell on some of the pitfalls of the dietary makeup and habits of the average student.

"You don't have to be sick to get better"

- McWilliams

Many students do think about ways in which they might make themselves different. You may wonder what you could change or regulate more effectively to promote improved school performance. In response, my first suggestion is to consider WHAT, WHEN, and HOW MUCH you eat! If you think this is an unusual suggestion, you're probably right. Consider the following dialogue:

STUDENT: Mom and Dad, I'm not doing very well in school these days.

PARENTS: Really? Well you must not be eating right. Let's take a look at your diet.....

I'm betting this type of conversation has not happened very often. Of course, there are many factors which can influence school performance, but all too often the effects of a poor diet are ignored in the search for potential problems.

Eating the wrong foods in the wrong amounts for the wrong reasons can have devastating effects on school performance. Directly, it can change how you feel while working at school related tasks; and indirectly, it can weaken the foundation of health which you rely on for support while you study. To avoid problems, please consider the following ideas:

- Eat regular meals at regular times.

Keeping to a regular schedule allows the body time to deal properly with ingested food. And eating at regular times each day will allow the body to devote the time and energy necessary to get the most out of your food.

- Avoid over-eating - especially prior to important study or physical activities.

Aside from causing obvious physical discomfort, large meals draw heavily on the body's energy and blood supply, making other activities awkward and difficult. It is for this reason that athletes are advised not to eat

much before training, and business executives never schedule important meetings right after lunch.

- Eat breakfast.

This sounds simple, but many people choose not to take time to eat in the morning (usually because sacrificing breakfast means an extra few minutes of sleep - a poor trade!). After going without food for as many as 10 or 12 hours, a simple meal (including fresh fruit or fruit juice and whole grain cereal or bread, for example) can be very valuable. The benefits will more than compensate for the small time 'sacrifice' as the day begins.

- Pay attention to the quality of your diet.

As much as possible, select whole fresh foods instead of highly processed or refined ones. Whole grain products and fresh fruits and vegetables provide nutrients, energy, and fibre which will replenish depleted stores and enable you to perform at your best longer and more often.

Despite the great volume of nutritional information available today, there are still many students who believe that "food is food". They feel that, as long as they satisfy their appetites, the type of food they eat makes little difference. Nothing could be further from the truth. While refined foods (many high in fat, salt, sugar, and/or caffeine) may be pleasing to the taste buds, they do not go far nutritionally. Taking the time to develop and stick to a sound diet will make a big difference before, during, and after school.

Caffeine

The word 'caffeine' is a familiar one to most people. Everyone, it seems, is aware of its existence. But, strangely, most people pay little attention to its consumption and effects. Caffeine is perhaps the most used (and abused) drug in North America. It is used by many people, many times per day, in many forms. The most prevalent of these forms is hot beverages such as coffee and tea; but other products such as chocolate (and cocoa products), soft drinks (especially, but not exclusively, colas), pain relievers and some antihistamines are also ready sources of this powerful drug.

The vast majority of adolescents are exposed to caffeine on a daily basis. Most don't really know how much they are using, and many use far too much without knowing it because they are unable to recognize the effects of the drug.

Caffeine is a highly addictive stimulant. While many would argue that a little bit of caffeine contained in a beverage will not have much effect, there are certainly some internal changes which are usually noticeable when we look more closely. Caffeine acts as a stimulant to the nervous system. While this may make users feel more "alert", it can also lead to a more nervous "jumpy" feeling. Moodiness and irritability have also been observed among heavy caffeine users. The drug will also stimulate the heart, leading to stronger beats and an increase in blood pressure. A third effect is that of a diuretic, which can lead to an increase in urination and feelings of dehydration.

As a student, you may be well aware of your caffeine consumption. You may start the day with drinks like coffee - to act as a "pick me up" and to help you stay alert through the morning; or you might have some later in the day before a study session. The easiest way to issue a warning for this type of caffeine use might be with the old saying "what goes up must come down". Because caffeine exacts a toll on the nervous system, the feeling which follows once caffeine is eliminated from the body is usually one of fatigue. This level of fatigue often leaves you worse off than you would have been if you had not consumed caffeine in the first place! This feeling of fatigue usually leads to another cup of coffee or can of cola..... and so you can become dependant on caffeine.

"The first wealth is health."

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The subject of caffeine addiction (or caffeinism) brings to mind the story of a high school friend. He would start each day with a large mug of tea - the equivalent of at least two regular sized cups - to help him "face the day". At some point in the morning, he would usually wander out to the nearby fast food restaurant for coffee. Very few afternoons and evenings would pass without one or two more 'doses' of caffeine from various sources.

One day his doctor prescribed medication to treat an unrelated problem. Since there was a chance that this medication might make him feel 'hyper', the doctor suggested he should eliminate caffeine. My friend willingly agreed. Since he was not really aware of the effects of his heavy

caffeine use, he saw no reason why he couldn't eliminate it from his daily regimen.

Within a couple of days, he began to feel awful. He was sluggish and irritable. He had trouble sleeping, and nothing he tried seemed to relieve his headache. At first he wondered if it was a problem with his new medication, but then he realized that he had symptoms of withdrawal. His body had been used to getting a regular supply of caffeine, and this supply had been cut off!

My friend was determined not to 'give in', so he stayed clear of caffeine. With each day he began to feel better, and by the end of one week he could not believe the difference in how he felt. He was sleeping soundly each night, and waking up refreshed and alert. His energy level throughout the day was much higher, and he didn't experience the 'highs and lows' he had become used to while drinking so many cups of coffee, tea, and cola.

The effects of caffeine can be startling. As I mentioned before, you may not really be aware of how much you consume or of the effects it is having. It is wise to consider the number of caffeinated products you consume, the time you consume them, and what consequences they are having on your performance.

The following is a short list of questions which might help in determining the extent and effects of caffeine use:

- 1) Do you find it hard to 'stay awake' in morning classes unless you have coffee or tea before hand?
- 2) When you choose a drink with your food (at a restaurant or fast food place), does it contain caffeine?
- 3) Have you ever tried to go for a whole day without having any kind of caffeine product? Did it make you feel different? Were there times during that day when you *really* wanted to have something with caffeine?
- 4) Do you often have a caffeinated soft drink to help you 'get going' after school?
- 5) Do you 'prepare yourself' for important study sessions, exams, or presentations by having a caffeinated drink?

Consider the responses you gave to these questions carefully. Hopefully the answers will give you an idea how heavily you depend on caffeine from day to day. If you have decided that a reduction in your caffeine intake is in your best interest, you would be well advised to take a tip from my old high school friend and go about it slowly. Allowing your body to adjust gradually to your new diet will make the change much easier.

Sugar, my brother, and the 'Insulin Reaction'

The subject of dietary sugar is a familiar one for me. Sometimes, after I have turned down foods high in refined sugar, I have been asked "what's the big deal about sugar?" The question is a fair one - after all, sugar is a natural substance which occurs in so many foods we eat.

While there may not be any great problem with small amounts of sugar mixed into your diet here and there, there is potential for trouble when when the amount and/or concentration of sugars in your food and drink becomes too high. Many of the foods and drinks you chose today rely on sugar - or sweetness - as their main source of appeal. It is when too much sugar is consumed over a short time interval that problems can start.

Thinking back to my own high school days, I can still remember some of the frustration which resulted from my brother's after-school eating habits. Like any typical teenager, he would arrive home hungry - especially if he had had a sports practice after school. Unable (and/or unwilling) to wait for dinner, he would head for the kitchen in search of something quick and satisfying. For him (and, I suspect, many others), satisfying meant sweet. Cookies, ice cream, soda pop and the like were easy choices. Some days, when he had a little money, the arrival at home was preceded by a stop at the local convenience store for chocolate and/or soda pop. Since he was always very hungry at this point of the day, the quantities consumed were quite large.

As you are reading this, you may be growing familiar with this scenario. If so (or even if not!), I'd like you to stop for a moment and try to predict what happened next.

For the next few minutes, my brother began to feel better. The feelings of fatigue were reduced and he had relieved his hunger problem. But then, slowly, he began to 'droop'. His energy and concentration levels fell sharply and he usually drifted off to sleep. When it came time for dinner, his appetite was poor. Following dinner, the amount of focus and concentration available for his homework was next to nothing.

Did you predict the outcome correctly? If you did, that's fine because it shows you may have seen this situation before. If you have actually had this experience, don't worry - you are not alone. This predicament is the result of 'Insulin Reaction', and it has happened to almost everybody at some point.

Insulin Reaction, also called Insulin Storm or Insulin Overshoot, is simply your body's way of coping with an unusually high concentration of sugar in ingested food. As the sugars are absorbed (quite quickly!) into the blood, the level of blood sugar rises dramatically. To compensate for this, your body releases large amounts of insulin to help clear the blood of excess sugar (insulin is the substance which helps remove excess sugar from the blood into storage for use later on when it is needed). Unfortunately, when such high concentrations of sugar are present, your body tends to 'overshoot', or put out more insulin than is necessary to remove the excess sugar. The result is a blood sugar level which drops far below normal (and can remain there for quite some time). It is this low blood sugar level which can make you drowsy and unable to concentrate well on the task at hand.

"Our bodies are our gardens..... our wills are gardeners."

- Shakespeare

Luckily, this problem is simple to avoid. The first step is to understand how your body copes with sugar as it is ingested; the second is to be sensible about the choices you make when eating. It is important to avoid foods which are high in refined sugar - especially if:

- i) it is the only food you are eating at the time (ie. it is not part of a meal); and/or
- ii) it is a time when you need your concentration and academic endurance to be at their best. This means that filling that empty "after school stomach" with candy and soft drinks is not a great idea. And neither is starting an evening study session with a chocolate bar "pick me up". That "pick me up" will probably let you down before you know it.

It is not always easy to decide what foods are "safe", and what it is best to avoid. The following is a list of foods you might want to watch out for, followed by a list of alternatives.

Some foods to beware:

- ice cream
- cookies, cake, pastries, donuts, etc.
- chocolate and other candy
- soda pop (cola, ginger ale, etc.)
- sugary fruit drinks (made from powdered mixes)

Some alternatives worth considering:

- fresh fruit (or unsweetened canned fruit) or vegetable sticks
- yoghurt; or low fat milk
- a bowl of (low sugar!) breakfast cereal
- some whole grain bread or crackers with a little peanut butter or cheese
- (unsweetened) fruit or vegetable juice

These are just some suggestions which come quickly to mind. You will find what formula works best for you. Sensible substitution for high sugar foods will leave you sharp and ready for the next task - and your teeth and waistline will probably appreciate it too! Experiment and keep track of how you feel and perform when you eat different things.

Don't forget about Water!

When you break it down into parts, much of the human body is composed of water. Water is needed to keep things running smoothly inside, and it helps to regulate the body's temperature through sweating. A tall glass of water can be very welcome after a long day - especially if the weather is warm. Sometimes water is all you need to pick you up for the next task. Drinking water is a habit the body will really appreciate, and you may find it will relieve hunger long enough for you to pause and make a careful choice about what to consume next!

PHYSICAL HEALTH

As an experienced Physical Education teacher, I was tempted to call this section "Physical Fitness", but I have seen how these words can turn people off. If I say the word *fitness*, people seem to think I am referring to the ability to run endlessly around racetracks or cross-country courses - but this is not the case at all. To me, *fitness* simply refers to one's ability to carry out an activity as well as one would like. In this sense, there are

different kinds of fitness, examples of which might include physical fitness, academic fitness, or even financial fitness (if my concept of fitness is valid, then I suppose nobody is financially fit - but we are all trying!). It is important to have the capacity to carry out day-to-day activities with the necessary energy and enthusiasm, and without becoming overly tired in the process (or requiring a great deal of time to recover afterwards). If you are able to do this, you are more than likely suitably fit.

"The only exercise some people get is jumping to conclusions"
- Baptist Courier

Before I go on, I want to caution that I am not suggesting it is alright to be at a very low level of fitness if all you do is sit around all day. Indeed, there are many people whose level of fitness is well below that which would better suit them. Regular physical activity is an integral part of any healthy lifestyle - it's just that the word *fitness* should not in itself be cause for alarm!

Physical Activity and Training

Your body is quite remarkable. It will take you where you're going, digest and process the food you eat, heal the injuries you get, and generally wake up ready for more the next day. What's more, it will readily *adapt* to changes in the demands you put on yourself. If you begin a program of weight lifting, your body responds by producing more muscle tissue in the appropriate areas to help you cope better with the demands of the

routine. In this way, you can actually use physical activity to *train* the body.

Taking time for physical activity on a regular basis allows you to keep your body in a trained state. This means that it will be able to cope effectively with the day-to-day demands you place on it. We learned earlier that an efficient circulatory system, centered around a strong heart, is vital in providing oxygen and glucose to the brain. The development and maintenance of a strong circulatory system is one of the major benefits of regular aerobic activities (Aerobic activities are generally those which involve slower, steady activity done continuously - examples of these might include brisk walking, cycling, or swimming. These activities should raise your pulse rate and keep it there for at least 15 minutes to produce a "training" effect).

If your body is trained to cope with exercise, it will handle the day-to-day demands of student life with ease and enthusiasm. It may be of interest to point out that the school subject North Americans call "Physical Education" (or P.E.) was once called "Physical Training" (or P.T.). In these classes, there was less emphasis on sports and games, and more on regimented, orderly calisthenic exercises (and even marching!). It seems they, too, saw the benefits of a trained body, but didn't think achieving it could be enjoyable(?).

Physical activity can have other benefits as well. It will burn calories and thereby help maintain a suitable body weight; the increased breathing rate will help clear your lungs of "stale air"; and it can help you relax by taking your mind off the "problems of the day".

*"It is good to have money, and the things money can buy,
but it is good, too, to check up once in a while and be
sure you haven't lost the things money can't buy."*

- George Horace Lorimer

I'm sure everyone has a different idea about the best reasons for being physically active. Take some time to think about your own reasons, and select an activity which suits your interests and your schedule. It may be more fun if you get a friend or family member involved too. Whatever activities you choose, remember to keep that body well trained, and have fun.

Stretching

A discussion of physical activity wouldn't really be complete without mention of stretching. Most people consider stretching as an exercise to be done before physical activity - as a way to "warm up" and reduce the risk of injury. While these are certainly good reasons to stretch, there are other benefits and uses for stretching which are worth mentioning. Stretching is a great way to relax and take a break from the daily routine. It can help reduce stress and let the blood circulate freely. It is easy to do anywhere, anytime. And besides, it feels good!

A Study-Break Stretching Routine:

At times, especially when I am at my desk for long hours, I notice tension and fatigue creeping into my upper back and neck muscles. I have developed a short routine which helps relieve the tension and gives me a little break from my work.

Try any (or all) of these yourself for about 30 seconds each:

- Start by simply letting your head hang loosely forward. There is no need to 'push' your head downward, just let it hang. As you relax, you should feel the muscles in the middle of your neck and upper back begin to stretch and loosen. As this happens, you may even feel your head drooping lower, and this is fine.
- Loosen the neck muscles in two steps: first, stretch to each side (as if you are trying to touch your ear to your shoulder - except don't raise your shoulder to meet your ear!); next, turn your head from side to side (as if you are looking both ways at a crosswalk). When you reach your limit to each side, try to turn just a little further and hold that position for a few seconds.
- Relieve your upper back by clasping your hands behind your back and squeezing your shoulder blades together. After a few seconds, stretch these muscles out by wrapping your arms around your chest (as if you are giving yourself a hug) and squeezing.

These are just some simple ideas that have worked nicely for me in the past. Experiment to find the things which work best for you, and practise them as often as necessary. Remember to relax as you stretch. Stretching is not a dynamic, vigorous activity - it is a slow, soothing one. Take your time and really feel the muscles as they loosen. As you establish a routine, you will become more familiar with your body and the things you prefer. Getting to know yourself better can be a terrific consequence of a regular stretching routine. Enjoy.

SLEEP (and fatigue)

Sleep. It is a familiar word, and part of our everyday existence. As a high school student, I never gave much thought to sleep. It was something I did every night, and something I enjoyed well into the warm, sunny hours of most Sunday mornings.

Once I got to university, however, I began to pay a little more attention to the topic of sleep. I had switched from a familiar home environment, where all the members of my family had similar sleep habits, to a freshman-filled residence where everyone, it seemed, had a different system. Some people existed on little more than three hours sleep per night, while others (like me) required at least seven. There were "early birds", who tried to arrange class schedules to begin at 8:30 am and hoped to be finished by the early afternoon. And there were the "night owls" (like me, again), who preferred not to start "thinking" until late in

the morning (those 8:30 classes were murder!), but could easily work effectively until well into the evening.

Of greatest interest to me were the people who needed very little sleep. There was one fellow I remember who routinely went to bed at about 2 am, then rose by about 6:30 am. "Imagine", observed a friend of mine, "how much work he can get done at night - or in the morning before we're even awake!" I tried to find information in the library - I thought maybe I could change my sleep requirements and thereby "create" a few more free hours in my day.

There was nothing I could find which showed how to accomplish this. I even volunteered for some "sleep experiments" in the psychology department. I learned many things about the patterns of my sleep, but nothing about how to change my requirements.

One professor I spoke to felt that our sleep requirements were determined as we grew up, so that, once we reached adulthood, we pretty much had our programs "set". Another professor seemed to think our sleep "needs" were psychological (ie. that we *think* we need more sleep than we actually do), but he could offer no ideas on how to limit these needs. Oh well.

In the end, it seems that individual requirements for when and how long to sleep are just that - individual; and the differences among us are of very little consequence. What remains very important, however, is that your sleep be regular. Most days of the week, you need to go to bed at a

regular time and get our full quota of sleep. It is when you fail to do this that things go wrong.

Failure to sleep properly - especially if it is over two or more days - can begin to erode health, lower productivity, and reduce your ability to deal effectively with stress. Many people find themselves very vulnerable to illness when their sleep cycles get disturbed - usually as a result of severe time demands. Your reading speed and study efficiency are hampered as you grow tired (have you ever caught yourself staring blankly at school work late at night?!), and stressful situations can create insurmountable barriers to the weary.

In order to beat the effects of fatigue, try to key in to your own sleep cycle. Determine when and for how long you should sleep, and stick to that schedule. In addition, try to plan study/academic activities for times when you will be alert and able to focus sharply on your work. Everyone has a time period which is best for study - making an effort to find *and exploit* yours will be well worthwhile.

If you are desperate to find some extra time before a big exam, my suggestion is to go to bed at your usual time and then rise early (rather than staying awake longer and then rising at your usual time). There are several reasons for this suggestion:

- first, chances are that any work you do when you would normally be preparing for sleep will not be overly productive anyway;
- second, it has been suggested that the first section of your usual sleep period is more important than the last; and

- finally, getting up early to study will help ensure that you are alert and "in tune" with your work prior to the exam.

*"At six a.m. I always feel I should be
up and doing something productive."*
- Arnold Schwarzenegger

This topic brings to mind the way a university friend used to "buy herself" a few extra hours for exam study. She would go to bed at her usual time, then get up after only about 3 hours of sleep. She would then turn on all the lights in her apartment (to simulate daylight), and carry out her usual morning routine (shower, breakfast, etc.). In her words, this would "trick her body" into believing it had had a normal, full night's sleep. It worked for her.

Whatever system you use, be sure not to use it too often or rely on it too heavily. Keeping a schedule which ensures enough rest is a valuable habit. It still surprises me when I hear a student say "I was going to do such-and-such last night, but I was too tired". The student was too tired to engage in a simple activity - and this, I think, demonstrates that the student thinks it is important to be well rested in order to participate or perform at full capacity. Yet the same student will later freely sacrifice sleep time before a vital academic task such as an exam!

Recently, one of my professors revived for me the old maxim that "the single most important thing a student can do before a big day at school is to get a good night's sleep". Making every effort to establish and

maintain a regular sleep routine will help ensure steady performance, no matter what the day holds in store.

Self-Profile Exercise

Now that you have read through the chapter, why not consider your present health routine? The following exercise is meant to encourage you to think about your habits and how you might change them for the better.

Diet:

a) In order to better regulate my diet, I need to take the following first step:

b) Three foods/drinks which I should consume LESS frequently are:

i) _____ ii) _____ iii) _____

Three foods/drinks which I should consume MORE frequently are:

i) _____ ii) _____ iii) _____

Exercise:

a) The first step in modifying my exercise habits for the better will be:

b) The area of my body which will most benefit from a relaxing stretching routine is _____

Sleep:

I function best on about _____ hours of sleep per night, and the best time to turn in is around _____ o'clock. If I have sufficient, regular sleep, I am at my best (for study purposes) at the following time(s):

As this chapter draws to a close, I want to re-emphasize the need to stick to your healthy routine, even when the going gets tough. As a teacher and student, I have seen many students maintain a wonderful system for an entire term..... until the exams started. At that point, here's what happened:

- a schedule of regular meals was traded for foods high in fat and /or refined sugar, eaten at all hours of the day;
- exercise (physical activity) was discontinued;
- many hours of sleep were sacrificed for more study time; and
- the consumption of caffeine increased dramatically.

Students of this type will often do well academically throughout the term, only to falter miserably at term's end. While the difficulty of examinations can be responsible for some portion of this problem, a drastic change in diet, sleep, and exercise habits does little to help!

Changing and maintaining new lifestyle habits is not easy. Resolve to use the courage and self-discipline necessary to say NO to bad habits which destroy energy and health. A well rounded lifestyle which combines sound diet, sleep, and exercise will allow natural, enthusiastic development of your full potential.

According to George Campbell, editor of Health Education and Youth, the University of Salerno in Italy was probably the first centre of learning to be established in Europe. From one of its early medieval publications comes a wonderful quotation to close this chapter:

Si tibi deficiant medici, medici tibi fiant
Haec tria, mens hilaris, requies, moderata dieta.

(or, translated:)

"If you haven't a physician,
these three things will do instead -
Happiness of disposition,
Sleep sufficient in your bed,
Moderation when you're fed."

Suggested Further Readings

There are several topics covered in this chapter, and it is difficult to find reading sources which deal with everything. I would invite interested readers to try the books on the following list - but not to be shy in looking around at the many valuable resources in this area.

Medical Makeover

By Robert Giller and Kathy Matthews
(Warner Books; 1986)

This New York Times bestseller is quite a book. The authors have essentially created a program to put the reader on the road to great health. It is easy to read, and discusses such topics as caffeine, sugar, nutrition, exercise, and stress control.

Eat to Succeed

by Robert Haas
(Onyx Books; 1986)

This is written by the same fellow who wrote the famous book 'Eat to Win'. While some of the suggestions are aimed at high performance athletes and busy executives, there are enough similar features in the lives of students to make this worth a look. Dr. Haas discusses many ideas for sensible eating, and many recipe/food ideas are included.

The Caffeine Book

by Frances Sheridan Goulart
(Dodd, Mead & Co.; 1984)

This book is slightly older, but it is the first one which really got me interested in the subject of caffeine. It offers a look at the many sources and effects of this drug, as well as alternatives and tips for those who need to cut down.

Stretching

by Bob Anderson
(Shelter Publications; 1980)

An old standby, this book is still the most comprehensive and reader friendly stretching guide I know of. There is a discussion of reasons for stretching, exercise and eating advice, and illustrated routines for just about any activity.

CHAPTER IV

STUDY SKILLS

"Tools for the trade"

CHAPTER IV

STUDY SKILLS

CONTEXT

In order to accomplish any task, it is vital to have a grasp of the skills necessary to carry it out. While this may be obvious for activities like sports and work in the trades, it is every bit as important for success in an academic course of study. Unfortunately, it would appear that little emphasis is placed on teaching and learning the skills involved in coping with the academic demands of student life. It seems that many students, (and their teachers, and even their parents) assume that study skills are somehow learned as students go along and, consequently, that when they reach high school the 'tools for the trade' will have magically appeared 'in their belts'.

In a project to examine students' study deficiencies as they approached post-secondary education, Thomas et. al (1991) found that students were deficient in the skills necessary for autonomous study. They needed skills which would work in all courses - even those whose characteristics differed. An effort has also been made to dispel the rumour that academic success depended on the natural ability and volumes of time spent at a desk (Douglas, 1985; Pfeifer & Ogloff, 1990). Safram et. al (1990) also observed that some of the most painful memories of former students' high school experiences revolved around the frustration of not being able to cope with academics.

In other cases, students seemed to have some idea 'how to study', but were unaware of how the mechanics of their own individual study routines were (or were not) unique and effective. Making students aware of their own personal systems and needs seemed pivotal in increasing the rate of frequency of success (Entwistle and Kozeki, 1985; Archambeault, 1992). By increasing self efficacy and awareness of metacognitive skills, younger students have also been shown to improve basic academic skills (Carns & Carns, 1991). It would appear that an understanding and enhancement of students' attention processes (Sylvester & Cho, 1992), and questioning themselves about their own effective habits (and even those of others!) can be key in helping students become better learners (King, 1989; Dart & Clarke, 1991).

While students do seem aware of the kind of study environments conducive to effective study, the actual act of seeking out and exploiting such places needs to be encouraged (Trigwell and Prosser, 1991). This, it would seem, can help to erode the frustration and resentment which often comes with doing homework, and enable more attention (and better recall) to be dedicated to the important elements of the task (Teson & Bradbury, 1990; Reynolds et. al, 1990).

'Study skills' refer to more than just the mechanics and routines of study. While task rehearsal (doing practice problems in Mathematics, for example) can facilitate successful performance on exams, (Leal, 1987), students must also perceive control of their time, the way it is used, and the effects their activity will have on their success (White and Greenwood, 1991; Hoff, Macan et. al, 1990).

The Study Skills chapter is written with a view to exposing the reader to the many sides of an effective study routine. While the dynamics of a successful routine may seem overly complex from a distance, a closer examination of the basics should promote confidence in any student's ability to acquire and use the "Tools for the Trade".

STUDY SKILLS

People in school today can expect a lifetime in which knowledge itself will radically change - not only in its details but in its structures; so that the mark of a truly educated man will no longer be how much or even how variously he knows, but how quickly and how competently he can continually learn.

- Richard Kostelanetz

Study Skills. This topic is probably very familiar to most any student. Whether you have noticed it or not, you have probably been bombarded with study skills information since you began your school career. Parents tell you when and how to study; you may watch and consider the study habits of your peers; and, of course, your teachers are always ready to point out what you are doing wrong. Learning involves very many factors. While natural ability is certainly important, it is joined and influenced by forces such as experience, motivation, and even personality.

There are literally dozens of books, guides and pamphlets available to help students improve their study habits (see the reference list if you would like further reading!), and each has its own strong points. One thing which my experience has taught me is that no two students learn in exactly the same way - so there is no single studying formula which will ensure success for every student. An important part of your studying is an awareness of how you learn - this means knowing what you do, why you do it, and how to make changes when necessary. We will discuss this concept (known in research terms as 'metacognition') shortly.

In this chapter, I have assembled some of the ideas and techniques which I hope can make a positive difference for students at all levels. The chapter is divided into sections which deal with some of the different 'areas' where problems can occur. While I would encourage you to read each section in turn, as an individual you may find some sections more helpful than others. Feel free to put emphasis (and/or review) on the areas which seem most relevant to you personally. As you read, you may notice that some themes tend to repeat themselves - and this is all the more reason to make special note. Not every student has the ability to make 'straight A's' all the time, but you DO have the ability to maximize potential - and this is the key to improvement and satisfaction!

Introducing..... METACOGNITION

These days it is hard to read education articles about Study Skills without coming across the word 'metacognition'. This frequent sighting is justified because metacognition is an important component in the learning process. Briefly, a student's metacognition refers to a knowledge of his/her own learning and the ability to regulate it. The concept and significance of metacognition emphasizes that it is not only important for you to practise effective study skills, but that you also know which ones are effective and why. (It also follows, of course, that it is not enough to simply know *how* to study effectively, you must *do it!*)

Know thyself.

- Socrates

Ideally, you will understand and determine which study strategies and routines work best for you personally. Once you gain a sense of control over your own performance, you can successfully choose strategies to adapt to different situations, courses, assignments, etc.

Successful strategies vary with each learner. As you encounter ideas in this chapter, think about which ones might work best for you.

For Starters.....

Most of the students who have asked me for information about study skills share a common trait... they are in a rut. This always seems like a terrible fact to face, but it is not really all that bad. First of all, it is a problem shared by many. Second, getting out of these ruts is about the hardest thing learners have to do - once you break out of the restrictive bad habits, the rest of the journey is relatively easy. Getting rid of old habits can be tough because it involves change (refer to the chapter on Motivation!) - but once positive changes take place, there will be great savings in both time and frustration.

We can learn something new any time we believe we can.

- Virginia Satir

Study Skills deal with more than just the mechanics and routines of study. They also encompass attitude and approach to work. The performance of most learners is determined by a combination of DRIVE

(or ambition) and HABITS. In order to have steady results, then, it is necessary to have adequate amounts of *both*.

Mark Twain once said "all you need in life is ignorance and confidence and the rest is sure". In this day and age, I'm not sure his words ring true every time. There are, however, some myths about what it takes to succeed in school which need to be dispelled. Many students believe that a good academic performance: a) takes lots of time; b) is NO fun; and c) requires tremendous amounts of natural intelligence. Fortunately for all of us, this just is not true. It is entirely possible for anyone to produce satisfactory work without studying 24 hours a day or giving up enjoyable activities. As a student, you DON'T need tons of time or intelligence . You DO need a well developed system for study and a willingness to stick to it.

In terms of attitude, there are a couple of areas where I have noticed many students may be "off the mark". Firstly, school performance seems to have fallen sharply on the average student's list of priorities. As recently as when I was in grade school, my studies were a very big part of my life. If I wasn't doing well in school, nothing else really mattered. But, in recent years, the priority held by school work has changed.

OCCUPATION: STUDENT.

To address this priority problem, I would encourage you to remember that going to school is an occupation. When you fill out a form which asks for your occupation, you write in "student". Being a student is your "job", and, as such, it deserves priority and attention. People in the

working world also have a job. They have to be qualified to get it, and they have to do it well to keep it. If their work is below standard, they run the risk of being fired. As a student, you are fortunate that you can't really be "fired" from school for poor performance, but you can lose your annual promotion (to the next grade) if things go badly. If you want to improve and succeed in school, be sure to remember that it is your occupation, and give it the attention and priority it deserves.

A second problem area for students has been with the focus or purpose of their work. If you ask a student why he/she goes to school, a typical answer might be "to learn", or "to get an education", or "to prepare for the future". The answer will NOT be "to get high marks". Yet, despite this reality, most students choose to approach their work with marks in mind. It is as if they are thinking "as long as I get a good mark, whether I learn anything is of no consequence".

If you are a student who relates to this orientation, I would encourage you to rethink your strategy. A preoccupation with marks tends to draw you away from the real reason (and value) of attending school. Good study habits are of little value (and difficult to maintain!) if you focus only on the outcome and not on the process of your work. Ironically, it is the students who focus on learning who usually end up with the nice report cards. Stay focussed on learning, and the results will take care of themselves!

In Class

*I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.*

- Chinese Proverb

If you break down the total amount of time spent "being a student" (ie. doing things like homework, tests, assignments, going to class, etc.), you'll probably find a significant portion of your time is spent IN CLASS. Yet, with all this time spent in contact with a teacher, very few students seem to know how to conduct themselves so as to really reap the benefits of class time.

To start - class time is extremely valuable. These sessions offer a structured environment, an opportunity to learn about and discuss important material, and a chance to clear up any problems or questions you may have. Despite these seemingly obvious facts, many students treat classes like a tedious ordeal. They pay little attention, choosing instead to daydream or socialize. The following is a brief look at some ideas to help maximize the benefits IN CLASS.

The first point is simple: ATTEND. This point may be of greater importance for university students (where attendance at class is not usually monitored or mandatory), but it is also a useful reminder for some high school students. It may be possible to get notes or hear a report of the activity of a missed class, but neither of these will effectively substitute for being there. So, please, *go to class*.

A second point: while you are in class, choose a seat which is in a comfortable spot (this may be different for each student) and which will enable you to focus clearly on what is going on. Listen. Listen actively. Try to listen so carefully that you can actually "feel yourself" listening. Paying attention to what happens in class is not only a good idea (and a polite, considerate gesture!), it will enable you to draw from the teacher the information he/she has prepared. And isn't that the reason you attend class in the first place? It still astounds me the number of students I see sitting in class who are not at all in tune with what is going on.

My third point to consider extends nicely from the second: make every effort to get involved in the class. Participate. Doing so will help you stay focussed. You don't always have to be talking out loud - you can just as easily participate quietly: consider how what you hear relates to you and/or the course; or think of a question about the topic at hand - and *ask it!* Considering and questioning the material can help you to remember and understand it longer, and it helps you stay 'tuned' to the important ideas of the class.

The fourth and final point concerns taking notes. In some classes there is deliberate direction as to how and when to write things down, but, in most cases, you are "on your own" when it comes to writing notes. Effective note taking is an ongoing problem for many students, but it really needn't be so. You have likely been exposed to lessons on note taking many times over - so it would not be prudent to review the routine

here. I will instead discuss a few fundamental goals of note taking and propose a simple system which might help you meet these.

Whether you are dealing with a lecture, a video/audio tape, or a book, good notes:

- should enable you to organize and make sense of the information. You should not only benefit from them after they are done, but also while you are writing them.
- should enable you to determine easily what the main ideas of the subject are, and where the emphasis of the topics lies.
- should be easy to consult after the fact, and, even if the reader has not seen the notes for quite some time, they should make sense.

Most students simply write notes on topics as they come - writing out one line after the next down the page. This system is easiest - it requires little thought - but it is not very effective. A much better alternative is to isolate main topics or ideas and separate them visually from supporting details. This can be accomplished by drawing a vertical line down the page and writing down major ideas to one side and supporting details to the other. Also, I strongly believe in the benefit of isolating a section at the bottom of the page for your own questions and extensions of the material. There are often very important 'extra' ideas which come up as you make notes, and these deserve a special place on the page. The following diagram presents an example of how this method might look.

TOPIC		date
main idea ①	detail 1 detail 2	
main idea ②	detail 1 detail 2 detail 3	sub detail
main idea ③	detail 1	

Notes + Q's

- idea ② is very important relative to idea ③
- remember that idea ① ties in with the readings
- Q - where does idea ③ fit in to the big picture? Is it really important?

This is, of course, a fairly crude example - but I think it demonstrates how nicely information can be organized to make it meaningful and easy to work with. Notes like this are easy to review, and it is not difficult to go back and look up a main idea from past notes. Of course, individual learners may wish to modify the format to their own personal style - and this is fine (some of my friends like the main ideas on the right side of the page - they say it makes the notes easier to review later; others like the "notes and questions" section at the top of the page). It is up to you!

I hope this section has given you some ideas about how to get the most out of your time spent in class. Remember that making the effort to use class time to your advantage can make life much easier outside the classroom.

DOING HOMEWORK

Homework. It's a word which can produce feelings of frustration and resentment. Many students regard homework as a tedious, time-consuming chore. It's a part of school students love to hate; *but* it is also considered an essential part of school life, and can even be factored into grades for some courses.

Make the work interesting and the discipline will take care of itself.

- E.B. White

My advice about homework is simple: try to make the work interesting and enjoyable. There are many reasons why homework is not a bad thing - and I am convinced most students know this - it's just that homework is very easy to hate. In this section, we'll look at some simple ways to remove the burden and make homework "work" to your advantage.

The basic question to ask yourself about your homework style concerns your strategy: Is your purpose simply to get the work done and out of the way? If so, you are not alone, Unfortunately, though, yours is also not the best approach. In my experience, students who attack their homework assignments with the sole purpose of getting the work done produce poor quality work from which they gain very little.

To read without reflecting is like eating without digesting.

- Edmund Burke

If homework is to have any benefit, it must be completed with attention to accuracy and thoroughness. In other words, the purpose is not just to "get it done", rather, it is to *get it done right and learn something from it in the process*. Homework may not always be fun, but it *will* always be valuable. As a teacher, I am well aware of the benefits of the time and intellectual effort used to ensure that homework is done properly!

With that said, let's look at some strategies for approaching this task. You probably have your own preference as to how, where, and when to approach homework assignments. Yes - everybody knows 'how to study' - but you may not be aware of the little things which make your own habits unique. An effort to determine and focus on what works best for you can make the process more comfortable *and* improve performance.

The first thing to consider is WHERE you study. What location works best for you? - do you work best at home, say, in your room? Maybe you are more comfortable in a classroom or library. Some people also work comfortably outdoors (think of the people you've seen reading under a tree!). While no single place is perfect for every learner, it is important to find your ideal work space and establish a routine which will take you there on a regular basis.

WHEN you choose to study can also have a big effect on your work. What time of day is best for you? Do you prefer the afternoon? - say, just before dinner; or is the late evening a better time? My experience suggests that students work best at times when distractions are at a minimum. If you are interested in after-school activities (like sports,

clubs; etc.), you may be better off working later in the evening once things have "calmed down". The opposite may be true if you enjoy evening family activities, socializing, or television; in this case you may prefer to tackle school work much earlier in the day.

From day to day, you should have a special time set aside and used exclusively for studies. Also, be sure to set aside time each week to work on long term projects and general review. The weekend is a good time to catch up and prepare for the new tasks to come.

Perhaps most important is the ENVIRONMENT in which you choose to work. Here again, different things will please different students. It goes without saying that your surroundings should be comfortable and well lit, and that a decent chair and writing surface are essential. Levels of 'noise and activity', however, will vary from person to person. You may, for instance, work best with other people and 'activity' going on - like at the kitchen table; or you may be better off in silence and solitude.

There is also some debate over the desirability of music during study. Some believe that music represents a distraction which interferes with effective work (have you ever heard a parent say "turn off that music and get to work!"). Others argue that music helps cover up those extra noises (a car drives by, somebody sneezes, the phone rings, etc.) which would otherwise be very distracting. If music is used during study, it should be familiar, relatively 'soft', and played at a tolerable volume.

So are you getting a feel for some of the features of your own ideal study environment? In order to determine your own ideal study set up, take a minute now to answer the following questions as they apply to you:

(A) The best PLACE for me to study is

because _____

(consider: home? if so, which part? at school? if so, what room?
indoors/outdoors?)

(B) The best TIME for me to study is

because _____

(consider: time of day? before or after other activities? big projects?
weekend work?)

(C) The best ENVIRONMENT for my studies is:

because _____

(consider: comfort? lighting? noise? privacy? music?)

In addition to these considerations, you might want to try starting study sessions with your more difficult subjects first. Set time limits for each task, and stick closely to these as you move through your work.

As you work, don't allow yourself to "switch off". Too much down time between tasks can make it very difficult to start up again. Of course, you should allow yourself time to relax, but make sure these periods don't extend beyond a reasonable length. It may help if you try working more frequently for shorter periods of time. Your focus may be sharper if you work 10 times for 1 hour than if you work 1 time for 10 hours, even though the total time is the same!

In the end, my advice is to experiment with the "WHERE, WHEN and ENVIRONMENT" of your study routine. Establish a system which works best for you, and return to it on a regular basis to do your work. Working in a regular, comfortable routine really *can* make a significant difference in the outcome of your studies!

THE ASSIGNMENTS

The word 'assignment' represents a very broad category. In this section, assignment means an academic task which is larger and more time consuming than the usual daily homework. It could be a set of math problems, a science laboratory report, or, of course, a written essay.

In this area, my suggestions really fall into two categories: organization and approach.

First, when it comes to getting an assignment done, setting up a schedule for its completion is vital. When I say this to my students, they roll their eyes and produce an expression which says "yeah, yeah, I know that", but so few of them ever bother to do it. This always surprises me, because I know from experience that taking the time to establish dates, order, and priority of tasks for an assignment can make this process much less stressful.

Here's an example of what I mean:

ASSIGNMENT: Project (+presentation) on Black Holes

DUE DATE: May 10

SCHEDULE:

by April 18 - locate and gather info sources
(books → library, videos? other sources?)

by April 25 - read/view and make notes on materials
set up outline for project and poster

by April 30 - finish draft of project and proof read
(ask parents for opinion), get poster stuff.

by May 9 - put finishing touches on project + poster
- final rehearsal for presentation

on May 10 - presentation and submit project!

The example is very crude and simple, but even a little schedule like this can make life very much easier. Using a schedule of this type can be helpful because it breaks one large task down into several smaller ones.

The smaller tasks are easier to complete and provide a nice sense of accomplishment. Also, since students who plan this way are not rushed to complete their work, the quality of the final product is invariably better! Notice that the schedule says "by May 25" - it is quite alright to finish ahead of schedule. You may also have noticed that there is one week between dates - this was done on purpose, since most students I know like to assess their progress on a weekly basis.

This type of schedule is by no means "the final word", so by all means use your own system for planning. Remember, though, that a simple schedule can make life easier - and results better!

A second strategy in dealing with assignments concerns the approach. The most effective way I know to approach an assignment is to treat it like a "composition". This is especially true when it comes to the written essay. Let me explain: when painters want to make a great painting of, say, a dog, they will not simply open a book to a picture of a dog and "copy" it. Instead, they will seek out several pictures, probably of different colours and breeds of dogs. They may spend time with dogs, or maybe talk to dog owners. Once they have gathered enough information, they will begin to compose a painting based on all his information.

The same system should be used to compose assignments. Information must be gathered from a number of sources if the work is to be meaningful to the writer and the reader, yet so few students seem to understand this. It is much more common to see them open one large source (the favorite is usually the encyclopedia), and proceed to write out

what it says. This approach is not only risky (because care must be taken to avoid plagiarism!), it denies the student the value of doing the assignment in the first place!

One today is worth two tomorrows.

- Benjamin Franklin

One final point to remember is to be honest with yourself about procrastination. I have seen and heard some incredible excuses to avoid (or suspend) work. To get back down to work, remember that the 'pleasure' you get from your accomplishments is usually far stronger than the 'pain' from working. Try setting short term goals which you can reach in less time - meet them - then take a break or offer yourself a reward!

So, when it comes to assignments, try to set up (and stick to) an organized schedule, and allow yourself the privilege of composing as you work. Both you and your readers will benefit!

Preparing for (and taking) Tests and Exams

Tests and Exams. You may feel that these represent the most stressful, difficult aspect of student life. True, test writing does make you vulnerable - there is always a risk of poor performance, or, worse yet, failure - but tests can also be an opportunity for triumph. This section deals with some ideas which can help take the fear out of test and exam writing, and help you produce more consistent, satisfying results.

To begin, the whole idea of preparing for a test is worth discussing. You may see preparation for tests as an isolated, closed event which takes place in a limited time frame shortly before the test (eg. "I will prepare for Friday's test from 8pm to 10pm on Thursday"). Getting rid of this idea will bring quick reward. Proper preparation for tests and exams is not isolated - it is *on-going*.

Good preparation happens from day to day, and takes the form of good class notes, careful attention in class, and diligence with homework. Still, many students I have known (myself included, of course!) have always been in the habit of "cramming". This means desperately trying to "cram" huge quantities of information into our heads shortly before a test in hope that we will retain it long enough to scribble it out for high marks. Unfortunately, you may find that this system can lead to disaster. Not only do you tend to "lose" parts of the material on the test, but any long-term use of it (one of the basic reasons for attending school in the first place - remember?!) is practically eliminated.

Discussing this idea brings to mind two successful students I have known. The first was a girl in my high school class. She was a terrific math student who offered to help me with some material I had missed. I remarked that she always seemed to do well with exams, yet she never seemed to do any 'extra' studying. She explained to me her very simple system: with each assignment, she entered any new and important information on a separate, coloured sheet - which she kept neatly in the back of her binder with others of this type. When it came time for an exam, her work was mostly done. All she had to do was review the ready-

made sheets and 'rehearse' by doing some practice problems. Her system was infinitely more simple and effective than mine!

The word 'review' leads nicely to my second success story, which features a young man I once taught. He was (justifiably) proud of his success with exams, so I asked him to explain why he thought things went so smoothly for him. His response was quick and simple: "Basically", he said, "I try to have all my studying done *before* the exam period begins. Then all I have to do while exams are on is review". Wow. There was no stress, no cramming at the last minute, and he always slept well the night before an exam. I was impressed.

When you are preparing for a test, it is very important to know (or, if you don't know, to determine) which elements of your material are important. If you are aware of and focussed on the important elements of your material, you are likely to devote more time and attention to them. This accurate attention focus will usually lead to better recall at test time!

Also, you may find it helpful to go over material from your previous study sessions as part of each new one. It will boost confidence and bring you "in tune" with the subject matter - so don't just start where you left off, even if you think you 'know' all the previous material.

As you review, try not to let reading be your only study activity. Write things down. Do practice exercises. Make diagrams, sketches, or maps. THINK while you work. Before a test, try to think of a few probable questions, then compose and answer them.

Memory skills (or a lack of them!) is another important area which you may wonder about. These refer to the little "systems" you use when you need to remember a quantity of basic facts - like a set of dates for history class or a trigonometry formula - in order to apply them in the classroom. It is admittedly tough to enter an exam room with confidence if you're not sure you can remember everything you need to know. There are many publications which list strategies for improving memory. I will not discuss these in detail here, but I would encourage you to check your school or community library if you would like to read more about them. You may also find that it is interesting to ask your teachers or classmates for advice on this topic. Most everyone has a special strategy which helps them remember things. You may be surprised to find that others use very valuable strategies which could be every bit as useful to you. Experiment with some of their suggestions!

Having once decided to achieve a certain task, achieve it at all costs of tedium and distaste. The gain in self-confidence of having accomplished a tiresome labour is immense.

- Arnold Bennett

When it comes to writing tests and exams, there are literally dozens of little 'tips and ideas' which will be effective for some and not for others. My experience has shown that, aside from getting a good night's sleep before any test or exam, there are two strategies that work for almost

anybody. The first is that training (or practice, or rehearsal) can make test taking much easier. After all, it is much easier to do something after you have already done it a few dozen times, right? This holds very true in school, especially with subjects like math, science, and languages. Yet, strangely, most students opt not to spend a few extra minutes to rehearse writing an answer to a problem. Try to improve your rehearsal habit. It will make a big difference in the speed and confidence with which you deal with the "real thing" on tests.

A second strategy is to be sure to use your time wisely as you write. Before you begin to write, take a moment to read the question paper and assess your task. Consider the value of different questions and determine time limits for each area appropriately. Allow yourself a period to re-read and inspect your work carefully after it is complete (this activity itself can change a final mark quite a bit), and never quit or leave an exam early.

It is true that tests and exams can be very intimidating. But careful preparation and sound writing strategies can make them a rewarding confirmation of your skill. I would encourage you to approach them with success in mind.

Outside of Class Time

Before you begin to read this section, please take a moment to re-read the heading: Outside of Class Time. What do you expect will be discussed in this section? Take a moment to consider this question before you read on.

Did you come up with some ideas? The reason I asked you to do this was to demonstrate one of the simplest and most effective ways to improve school performance before a class begins: *think about what to expect*. From there, you can easily extend to read or otherwise prepare for what is to come. We do this sort of thing in other areas of life: we check if there is enough gas in the car before a long trip; or we look out the window to see if we need to wear warm clothes. Surprisingly, though, most students are content to simply wander into class and wait passively for something to "happen". Taking an active approach can make a difference in performance and enjoyment of time spent in school.

Next, I would like you to try a small exercise. As a student, each of us has encountered a classmate who seemed to do everything right. He or she seemed to have some secret or strategy which ensured success. Take a moment to identify one such student you have encountered, and jot down the name on a piece of paper. Next, try to write out the reasons why you feel this person was able to do so well: what habits, systems, or secrets do they have that make them different? Take a moment to think as you write.

This exercise brings to mind an experience I had with a classmate when I was just starting high school. This fellow had just recently arrived in

our country (and our school), and I was anxious to help him adjust wherever I could. Before long, he had established himself as an excellent student. I noticed that, at the end of each school day, he took home all of his books - every single one of them! This surprised me, but I said nothing for a few days. Finally, with the best of intentions, I informed him that this practice wasn't necessary. On that particular day, we had only been assigned homework in Math and French, so he could leave the rest of his books in his locker. He nodded, and obediently replaced all but his Math and French books.

Have you guessed what happened? I ruined him. By the end of the term, his average had fallen by about 15% overall. He was in the habit of reviewing all of his courses each day. If time permitted, he would also read ahead to help him prepare for the lessons to come. He had been using a system which worked very well for him, but I put a stop to it because it was different from what I thought was normal.

Luckily, he was not angry. We remained friends and he soon regained his old form. I did, however, learn an interesting fact: often it is not what good students do during class that gives them an edge, rather, it is how they deal with their work outside of class.

So how did you do with your exercise? Were you able to come up with some details about what made your chosen person different? I would encourage you to consider how other students have achieved success and take steps to modify your own style for the better.

Once you have some ideas, then determine your objectives. Without a clear idea of what you are trying to accomplish, it is hard to work

purposefully. Set goals for yourself. Check to see if you are meeting them on a regular basis. If you are not, try to determine where the problems lie, and take steps to improve. If you are truly stumped over the cause of a problem, seek help. Teachers can be a great help in this area. Asking for help sounds obvious, I know, but most people don't bother.

To tie this section up, I'd like to mention some ideas about after-class activities. Just as there are wise ways to prepare before a class, so there are equally worthy after-class strategies.

Firstly, it is wise to go over material soon after the class is finished. A quick re-read can instantly clarify things that were not so obvious during class. In seeking opportunities to review, be sure not to waste 'found time'. If you suddenly discover a block of free time, don't let it go to waste. Take the opportunity to review, get ahead in a course, or catch up on a neglected assignment. On *your* time, you are free to read and work at *your* pace - a real advantage if the class was a bit 'hectic'. Second, while you read, make an effort to make the new material relevant to *you*. Consider how it relates to material you have already covered. How does it build on your interests? Consider how it may be of value both now and in the future. Thirdly, follow up on the material where necessary. Don't underestimate the value of the work you do outside of class. The way you handle this aspect of school life can make a tremendous difference.

From day to day, try to make clear divisions between your activities. Many students I have known (myself included) have trouble keeping activities separate. For consistency, have fun when you have fun; study when you study; don't mix the two. You may also find it helpful to involve your family in your study activities. Many family members, parents especially, may not be aware of what you are doing to succeed in school. Involving them can mean additional support and encouragement!

Finally, if things do go wrong, don't simply accept them and move on. Take some time to examine what you might have done differently, and take the steps necessary to get it right the next time!

Many former students have told me that, if they could change something about what they did in school, they would change their approach to academics. Most of them felt that there was so much more they could have accomplished if they had found the right information and applied themselves. There is an old saying which states "Education is not received, it is achieved". Be sure to take and maintain responsibility for your own learning. Remember that, if you are like most people, your progress will be slow but steady. Enjoy your small successes as you improve, and never stop looking for the route to the next one!

Suggested Further Readings

Information on study skills is readily available in everything from books to single-page pamphlets. Some students still find the best way to pick up study tips is by talking to teachers or classmates. Whatever your strategy, two worthwhile sources for further information are:

The hm Study Skills Program texts

written and edited by David Marshak (revised edition)

(The National Association of Secondary School Principals; 1986)

This is a series of study guides produced by the NASSP. They are aimed at both junior high and high school students, and cover a wide range of skills and strategies useful to any student. The guide is interactive, with many exercises to help the reader focus on areas for improvement. There is also an accompanying Teacher's Guide for each level.

Learning for Success

by J. Fleet, F. Goodchild, R. Zajchowski

(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1990)

Laid out in a simple, easy to read format, this book discusses many topics of student interest. Main areas of emphasis include organization, memory systems, dealing with procrastination, and writing skills.

CHAPTER V

MOTIVATION and YOUR PERSONAL POWER

"Getting the job done...."

CHAPTER V

MOTIVATION and YOUR PERSONAL POWER

CONTEXT

With school, as with any task, the motivation level of the individual is a key element in the generation of a successful performance. As well prepared as any student might be in terms of stress level, physical health, or study skills, there is little one can accomplish without a decent amount of drive and desire.

In his book entitled Motivation, Mook (1987) states that how we behave is not only affected by what is, but also by what we believe. In examining motivational behaviour, it is sometimes necessary to examine the sources of beliefs and to extend this examination to encourage those which are most positive and valuable. In this regard, students need to acquaint themselves with the parameters of their tasks and the background information necessary to succeed. There can be a reciprocal boosting effect between positive beliefs and self concept, and academic achievement (Wigfield and Karpathian, 1991).

As students begin to assume responsibility for their own learning and performance, they are better able to clarify their tasks and focus. Each task has its unique, interesting elements, and these can be found and used as motivational assistants. The willingness to focus on the strategies and processes of school work (rather than the outcomes)

enables students to see the positive elements of their work and enjoy sustained motivation (Corno, 1992; Ames, 1990).

Glasser (1986, 1990) suggests that power is a universal drawing card, and that knowledge is a superb way to gain it in increments. Students need to be shown how to sustain motivation from within to gain power by excelling and gaining knowledge in school. As they grow and progressively take their lives into their own hands, they can begin to exercise control by questioning, doubting, and investigating the things to which they are exposed in schools (Friere, 1985). Robbins (1991) extends this and encourages the act of checking the standards, beliefs, and methods by which goals are being pursued. Successful learning requires continuous motivational attention and fine tuning.

The STAGES OF COMFORT RANGE AND DEVELOPMENT model was developed to illustrate how some of the smaller, more restrictive things encountered in day-to-day life can (and should) be eliminated. It seems that the 'comfort zone' includes habits which are familiar and repeated often (McWilliams & McWilliams, 1991a). The model serves to demonstrate that, while moving outside this zone can cause discomfort at first, the zone can be 'moved' to encompass a more positive, productive routine.

While sustaining motivation to succeed and improve is paramount, it is important that the roots of this motivation be intrinsic (Deci et al, 1991). Each person has the power to select and follow those motivational forces which he or she chooses. An effort must be made to

down-play those negatives which often come from external sources, and concentrate instead on the positives which can be developed from within each individual. External motivation is only good in that it can inspire one to become internally motivated. Motivation that is initiated and sustained by the individual holds more power and lasts longer (Helmstetter, 1982).

The willingness of the individual to take the initiative also plays a role in maintaining motivation. Initiative, such as interpersonal involvement with teachers, promotes the idea that students are themselves responsible for the outcome of their work (Skinner and Belmont, 1993; Covey, 1989) Students are prone to fall into the trap of attaining success by avoiding failure. They need to be encouraged to see that errors are part of learning and academic growth (Stipek, 1993), and that they need not be afraid to look for a better way to solve problems. (Carlisle and Murphy, 1986). Those who extend themselves to reach beyond a perceived intellectual grasp can enjoy the privilege of learning from their mistakes (Clifford, 1990; Dantonio & Beisenherz, 1990).

The Motivation chapter is designed to compliment the preceding chapters, to complete the factors which can contribute significantly to success in school, and to offer a starting point for those ready to make some changes in the ways they approach the demands of student life.

MOTIVATION and YOUR PERSONAL POWER

- getting the job done -

*If you don't like what you've got,
why don't you change it?
If your life is all screwed up,
rearrange it!*

- Trooper

The words from this popular song, entitled "Raise a Little Hell", strike a meaningful chord for many people - especially those of my generation who were journeying through adolescence when the song hit the airwaves. While it may be wrapped in a tune which sounds complex, the message is surprisingly simple and is as meaningful today as it ever was. Finding the reasons and solutions for problems in school can be a challenge. Ultimately, motivation plays a large role in helping students find and tackle problems, and in setting and meeting goals.

I have chosen the sub-title of this chapter for a specific reason. It is a phrase which describes in a simple, general way what students are trying to accomplish in school. When I speak to frustrated students about their progress in school, many will answer "well, I've tried this and I've tried that, but I just can't seem to get the job done". Some of my fellow teachers have described students by saying "I can't quite put my finger on the problem, but he's just not getting the job done". This chapter, then, is a means by which to identify and promote the factors which motivate us, to tap into that well of personal power and find a reliable, consistent way to get the job done!

The following subsections are designed to help isolate a few of the 'themes' in promoting the drive and desire to achieve success in school.

CHANGING YOUR VIEWPOINT

Before you can get successfully involved in promoting motivation and progress in school, it is important to look at some of the ideas prevalent among today's students. The first, and most easily overlooked idea is the perception of school - of learning in general - as a *chore*. Now, I realize that you might willingly tell me "yes, I know school is good for me and I'll be glad I went later on"; but how many of you really believe it? Most of the students I have come across seem to feel that school is just a 10-15 year (minimum) exercise which they must endure before they can get on with the rest of their lives. They frown and use expressions like "I *have to go to school*" as if there was some great force putting them through agonizing torture. For reasons I will point out later, I want to emphasize that this idea is simply not true. What's more, it can be very destructive. Going to school is not a chore. If you are going to get the most out of any experience, you must adopt the viewpoint that it is a *privilege* and a *great opportunity*. Spending time in an environment filled with energetic peers and teachers is something you will not always be able to do (some people never get that chance), and you can increase your productive energy immeasurably if you treat the experience as a *positive opportunity!*

Another expression I often hear is "good enough". Some people say it before they attempt a task: "what kind of performance will be good enough?". Some say it afterward: "well, it wasn't what I had hoped for,

but it's good enough". The problem with saying (or thinking) "good enough" is that it focuses us on the *minimum* instead of the *maximum*. Besides, "good enough" usually isn't.

"Things do not change; we change."

-Thoreau

As you read this, you may be headed for a new school year or semester (or maybe you're just starting a new topic), and you are quietly determined to make things different this time. But how is it that you are hoping things will be different? If you are like many students I have encountered, you are saying things like "well, if I don't get that useless teacher, I'll do fine", or "things will go better if we don't have to continue with that lousy textbook we had last year".

There is a big problem with ideas of this type. While these variables may influence your success, they are things over which you have no real control. You are hoping that something or someone *outside* will change for your sake, and this may not happen. What if you end up with that useless teacher *and* the lousy textbook? - are your chances for improvement over last year eliminated?

Do you see the problem here? Your positive improvement is dependent on something over which you have no control. You are at the mercy of the schedule setters and textbook selectors of the world, and they are difficult to change.

It is not very constructive to dwell on factors we can't change. It is much more constructive to accept and deal with them positively. Accepting things you *can't* change, however, doesn't mean accepting the things you *can*. Things in the past are good examples of what we can't change. If you get a bad mark on a test, you *can't* change it - it's history; finished. But all hope is not lost, because you *can* focus on the future and improving things yet to come.

Acceptance of the things you can't change allows you to focus our energies on the things you can. It also helps you to relax. Relaxation, the freedom from stress and tension, makes learning easier. It is hard to learn new things when you are wound up tightly. So relax and dwell on changes that will guarantee improvement in any conditions.

"START & STOP" - start taking responsibility & stop blame

If changing a viewpoint of education is the top priority in leading students to greater success, then "start & stop" runs a very close second. Anyone who spends time talking to students about school life will find there are many things on which they blame poor performance. "It was the wrong time of day", or "the test covered some things I didn't know about", or "I had too many other things to do" are some of the many, many things I have heard. Of course, there's always the teacher, and there are times when he or she may be seen as the source of a problem. But dwelling on these ideas (whether they are right or wrong) is really not the most sensible approach.

There are two reasons why this popular student habit can be particularly destructive. The first is that it is just not valid: the source of difficulty is rarely found in the teacher, the test, the book, or the time of day.

Second, and more importantly, this type of thinking can draw your attention away from the real source of the problem. It is only after you have accepted responsibility for your performance that steps can be taken to improve.

To get you started on the road to solid academic performance, you will need to eliminate blame. You must stop looking *outside* for the source of your problems, and start looking *inside*. Taking responsibility for your own learning and performance will help to clarify the tasks you attempt, and enable sharp focus. It also helps to stay focussed on *learning* and not on *outcome*. 'What you know' is more important than 'what your mark is' - however , if you *are* concerned with marks, take heart in knowing that if you take care of the *learning*, the marks usually take care of themselves. Let good marks be the result of schoolwork, not the purpose.

"A problem is a chance for you to do your best."

- Duke Ellington

There is little doubt that accepting total responsibility for school performance will be a challenge, but this challenge will enable (maybe even cause) you to take a step up the performance ladder. A challenge will help you reach beyond your current intellectual grasp and enjoy the privilege of learning from your mistakes. Working at a level of moderated

difficulty will also be great for your persistence, for your feelings of competence, pride and satisfaction.

But what about the teacher? Although I have already touched on this idea, you may still be asking this question out loud. Here I am talking about all the things you can and should do to promote success; but how can you overcome the burden of a tough teacher? What good is a new & improved attitude if his/hers is still terrible?

Admittedly, there are some negative, sour teachers in schools - just as there are such people in any line of work. But I would encourage you to remember two things: first- a negative teacher cannot override a positive you. How you perform is up to you, so don't let a negative teacher dampen your positive spirit; and second - don't be afraid to approach teachers with ideas. I've never met a teacher who would completely ignore a student's idea - and you'd be surprised how much a positive student can affect a negative teacher.

Ultimately, you are the one who controls you. You determine how you do. Don't forget that. Please.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS REQUIRE?

"I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by conscious endeavour" - Thoreau

As you read this, you may be thinking of a course, subject, or academic task on which you would like to improve. What could your goal be? - Is it to achieve a certain average for a term's work?; to improve your standing by a certain percentage?; to review the quality of a writing assignment in order to make it really clear and powerful?; or maybe to earn a high score on an upcoming exam?

It might be a good idea to take a moment right now to think of a task you would like to set for yourself. It doesn't have to be monumental - just something a little challenging that would make you feel good. Once you have identified something, you need a plan of action.

Here's a challenge:

- write down your idea (for example: "I will take the steps necessary to earn 85% on my next term paper"). Try to be specific; you can review and revise details later on if necessary.
- write down why you have chosen this. The achievement of this goal should be important to you, not to impress or satisfy someone else.
- write down what you will have to do in order to accomplish your new goal (refer to information on Study Skills if necessary), and commit yourself to this plan.
- do it.
- celebrate/review the results. What happened? Why? What needs to be changed or improved?

Just about everybody is familiar with the word Motivation. Those who are "motivated" always seem to accomplish wonderful things, while the "unmotivated" stand by and watch. In Education, the word motivation pops up with great frequency as teachers look for ways to bring about good results in the classroom. Bradford (1981) identified motivation as something "caused by a need or desire that forms within a person" (p.32). According to Maslow, the need for self-actualization represents the highest of all needs. People who are self-actualized tend to see the world in a very positive light. This need might be more commonly called the need for success, and if success is defined as "the favourable termination of a venture" (as it is in Webster's dictionary), then we might conclude that motivation is the key to satisfying an inner need to achieve favourable results.

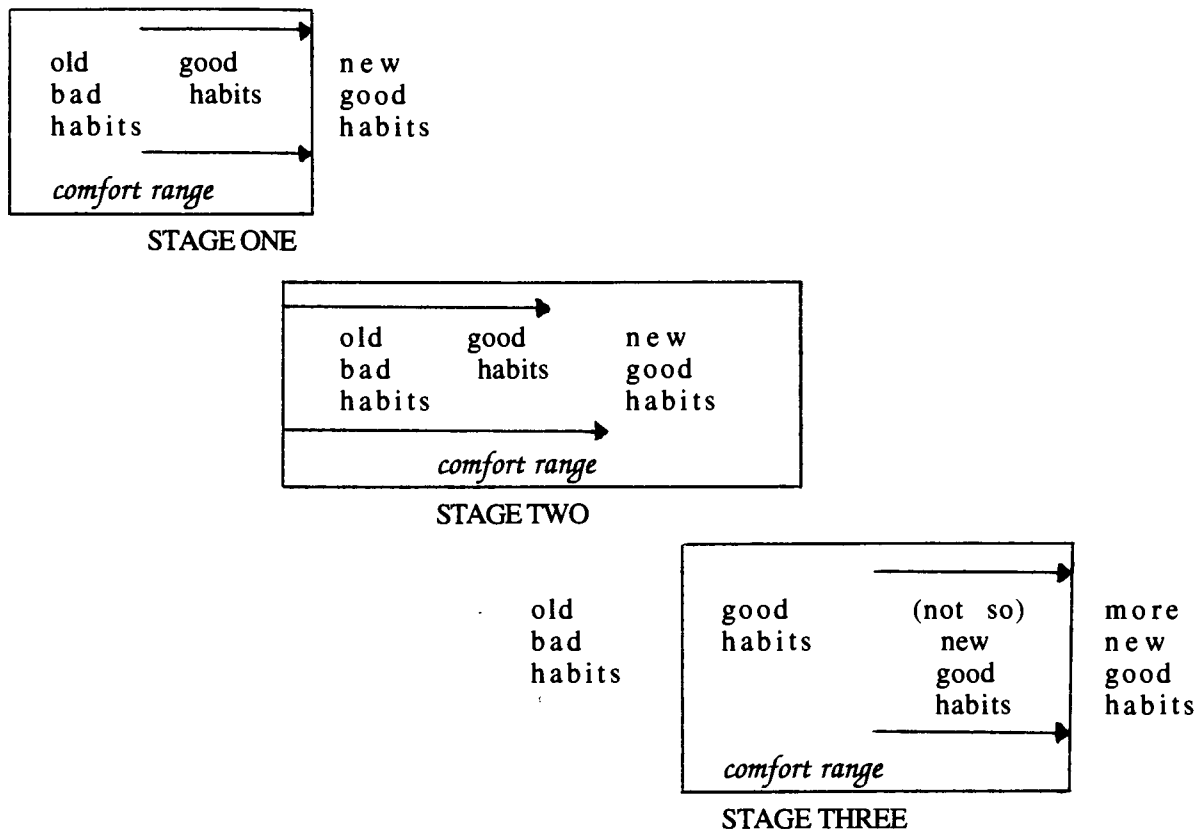
About the most prominent point I have drawn from my dealings with motivation is that the most powerful form of it is drawn from within. Other people may demonstrate why or how to get motivated, but it is ultimately up to the individual to initiate and sustain motivational momentum.

One of the greatest pitfalls can occur when you experience a lack of success. Everyone has a basic self concept, and performs frequent self-evaluation. If success does not seem apparent, a condition of lower (or non-) motivation may result. The problem here usually lies in dwelling on the things that go wrong instead of those that go right. Remember, if

teachers want you to be motivated, they must show you how to be successful and highlight the ways in which you *are* a success - if you want to motivate yourself, you must do the same!

So, if we are all aware of what we want to accomplish and what it takes to get there, why aren't we all living - or at least pursuing - our dreams? The answer, for most people at least, seems to lie in the issue of comfort. Like everyone else, you have your own level of comfort. You feel comfortable doing things that you have already done many times. Moving outside of this comfort range can evoke fear and discouragement - or, in short, DIScomfort. In order to progress from what you are currently doing to what you want to do, it is necessary to extend beyond the range of comfort. While working outside this range may be tough at first, it doesn't stay that way. By working outside the range, you can actually expand your comfort zone, and the "new" activity will become a part of it. Figure 1 shows how "pushing" out of a comfort range (STAGE 1) can help make new and improved habits a part of a regular, comfortable routine (STAGE 2). What's more, I believe that if the new habits are practised often enough, the old ones will slowly be eliminated from the range (STAGE 3).

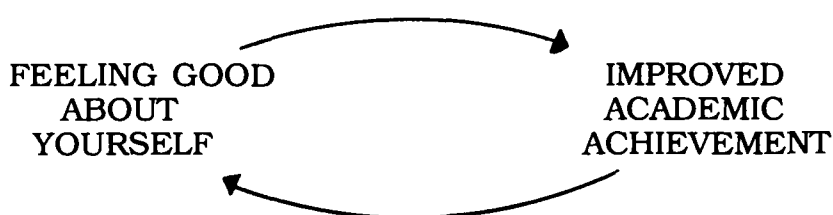
FIGURE 1 - STAGES OF COMFORT RANGE DEVELOPMENT



This idea fits well with the principle of associating comfort (or pleasure) with the things that will help you reach your goals, and discomfort (or pain) with those that will hold you back. The stages do not imply that everyone should "jump in at the deep end" - each person has a preferred speed and range of comfort - but you mustn't let a small comfort range restrict movement. Also, it is important to keep working on the comfort range. If you don't work to move and expand it, it can only shrink.

As you improve, remember to use short term goals and focus on strategies rather than outcomes. Ask yourself what you are doing, if it will be beneficial, and why.

When faced with a new task, acquaint yourself with its parameters and the background information necessary for success. If there is some choice involved in the task, explore the possibilities to find your interest. Some students see choice as a burden instead of an opportunity; you should seek a way to make what you do interesting to *you*. As you progress, stay focussed on the task and don't be put off by minor setbacks (I don't think any project worth completing ever went smoothly from start to finish!). If something is a complete success, remember and acknowledge the steps you took to make it so; if it is a partial success, dwell on the aspects of success and consider what you did to promote it. These are the factors which will be useful tools in the future. As you begin to see more and more success in what you do, you will also see a change in your academic achievement. Improved achievement in turn leads to feeling good about yourself, and so the cycle continues to spiral:



*"We are what we repeatedly do.
Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit"*

- Aristotle

Knowing what to do and how to do it - combined with the reasons you want to do it - will help form and maintain the winning habits which lead to consistent excellence.

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

"I think I can. I think I can. I think I can...."

- The Little Engine that Could

What you believe can have a profound effect on how you behave. When you examine your motivational behaviour, it is sometimes a good idea to consider where your beliefs come from. I will always remember an experience I had in my early days as a teacher. I was working with a grade 10 Science class. These students were a nice group, although I had been warned that they were "not the greatest" academically. By about the fourth day, we were well into the new unit on cell structure. At the end of a class, one of my students stopped to speak to me as she was leaving. "Mr. Wills", she started, "don't expect too much from me, OK?, because I'm dumb". I was thrown by both the bluntness and the content of her statement. I didn't know exactly how to respond, but I knew I didn't want to simply accept her words. In a somewhat desperate attempt to keep the conversation going, I responded: "That's an interesting comment", I said, "who told you that?" Now it was her turn to be thrown. "whaddaya mean who told me? Nobody told me - I'm just dumb, that's all". "You seem quite certain of this", I observed, "but how can you be so sure? Did a friend tell you? Maybe a parent? or a teacher? I mean, you must have heard it from someone!" I could see her starting to wonder about this. Where did this idea come from? "Well, I dunno". "You know what?", I continued "I've never had any reason to think you're dumb. In fact, I'm sure you're not. How 'bout if we work together this term to try to show whoever it is that you're not dumb?"

When I think back to the beginning of this conversation, I'm sure she would never have imagined it would lead to this. "Um, OK", a timid response, "I'll try".

Within a few weeks, I had seen a gradual change in this student. No, her marks did not immediately shoot straight up; but they did improve significantly, and so did her work habits and enjoyment of the course. A true story.

Unfortunately, students such as this are not uncommon. Many feel that, for some reason, they are destined to do poorly in some (or all) aspects of school life. Fortunately, though, we know that this really isn't true.

What are the things that can be done to overcome this problem? The first, and perhaps most important step is to stop accepting negative ideas. They are among the most destructive forms of influence. They are things you hear from others, and sometimes even yourself. Most of them begin with "I can't...", or "I'm not good at...", or "If only..."; you know the type. You probably have a tendency to accept these far too often. After all, it is easier to deal with failure if it is what we expected in the first place, right?

I firmly believe that your human brain can do anything you want it to, as long as you tell it often enough for it to remember. At first, this may sound depressing - I mean, think of all the negatives you hear from day to day!

But wait. This may actually be a great opportunity. Since you are the one who is ultimately in control of what your brain hears and concentrates on, you can replace the negatives with positives. You can change beliefs about yourself, and these can be reflected in how you behave. At various times in the school year, the things that motivate you to do well in a task can change. Don't forget those factors which motivated you in the past. Let them lift you and reduce discouragement. Think of the possibilities!

"Success is simply a matter of luck. Ask any failure."

- Earl Wilson

What you believe about your potential to succeed can be influenced by many things. Your environment or events around you can be distracting; and your knowledge about yourself and results from the past can have strong effects on your emotions. At this point, it is important to remember that motivation can stem from two sources. Motivation from OUTSIDE sources (such as your environment) is very common, but does not usually inspire you for the right reasons. The primary benefit of OUTSIDE motivation is that it leads you to become motivated from the INSIDE. The inside source represents reasons to get the job done for your sake. INSIDE motivation lasts longer because you initiate and sustain it yourself.

This would probably be a good point to stop and try an exercise to examine your beliefs about how you succeed and fail in reaching your goals:

- On a sheet of paper, write down 5 beliefs (or thoughts or ideas) that you think have slowed down past efforts to reach your goals. They might be things like: "I didn't see the point", or "I might look silly in front of my friends", and so on. Go ahead and write your 5 ideas. Take your time.

How did it feel to examine some of the things that slow you down? For some people, these beliefs have had an effect for quite some time - and learning to eliminate them will produce quite a change!

- Now I'd like you to create a second list. This time, write down 5 beliefs that will support you in reaching your goals. They might be: "doing well in this area will boost my confidence and open doors in the future", etc. Again, take your time.

Were you able to complete the list? You may have noticed that most of the items on the first list represented OUTSIDE sources of motivation, while the second list featured INSIDE sources. This is not unusual. Consider what these lists have shown you about the things which influence your performance. What are the things that are important in determining your ultimate success?

Society's values can affect your actions, and even determine your attitude toward the action itself. But by far the most powerful influence on your actions is the belief in your own potential. Once you create positive beliefs, the actions you take can produce fantastic results. This satisfaction can further enhance your beliefs.... and this cycle can repeat itself over and over! Your goals may be as complex as your imagination permits.

As you leave this section, make a mental note to check up on your progress:

- CHECK your standards. Are they high enough?
- CHECK the beliefs that promote (or limit) what you do. Are they appropriate?
- CHECK how you are going about your task. Are your actions carrying you toward your goal?

Take it beyond "what you would like if...." to what you are determined to do. Set a standard and never drop below it. BELIEVE.

ACT ! - don't react

Some of you may be familiar with a famous little story which identifies 3 distinct types of people. I'm not even sure who first related it, but it goes something like this: "There are those who make things happen; those who watch things happen; and those who wonder what happened." The message it carries urges us to be the types who make things happen in life, not the ones who stand by and watch.

The reason I like the story is because it reminds me that what is important is that you ACT - that you take initiative. If you stand idle until something happens before you react, then your course can be determined by the outside world instead of yourself. In his book Control Theory, Dr. William Glasser takes this idea even further. He suggests that we, as people, must act, because it is basically impossible to react. Everything we do is a deliberate action on our part; something we choose to do. His point is a very good one, because it emphasizes that, no matter what the reason, we must accept responsibility for what we do. We cannot blame circumstances or conditioning for our behaviour, it is

our own to produce and deal with. From an education standpoint, Dr. Glasser's idea is also valid because it emphasizes that unless we act on our own, nothing will happen. When we take our education into our own hands, we begin to exercise control. People who ACT look for alternatives, they exercise control, and they make choices. Nothing good will occur if we do not take initiative and ACT.

So what about you? Do you act or react? In discussing this idea with some of my students I have discovered that, while they are ready and willing to take the initiative, they are unsure where to start. The following paragraphs are designed to provide suggestions on how to ACT:

- Listen to the way you talk - especially to yourself. What do you say? Are you negative? Do you ACT or react? Think about a past situation in which you responded poorly. How would you do things differently if it happened again? (It is good to be aware of the relationship between how you regulate yourself and the outcomes of your work). Think about a problem over which you now know you have more control than you once thought. Imagine the first step toward improving that problem, and take it!

- When dealing with academic tasks, pursue your own answers. Don't be afraid to take steps to follow up on your own ideas. Don't be guided only by what happens in a class or by what a teacher says; and don't be afraid to look for a better way.

- Get involved. Ask questions and don't be afraid to bring your teacher in on any problems you may have. Use this resource. You may have noticed that a positive teacher can really affect students' attitudes. I think the reverse is also true: as a teacher I eagerly respond to positively engaged students. **ENGAGE!**

- Record your progress. If you had an idea about how to do something, did it work? Keeping track of your progress helps you to stay focussed and re-evaluate your goals if necessary.

- Spend time with people you think you can learn from. Collaborating with peers has often been associated with the process of gaining knowledge. Working with peers is not only a means by which to get raw academic information, it is also an opportunity to exchange viewpoints about strategies necessary to gain success. Find people who do things the way you would like to. Observe them, talk to them, ask for feedback. Working with peers is a quick way to avoid problems and find new ideas. **COLLABORATE!**

This chapter has covered several strategies on how you might make the most of your educational opportunities. The life of a student affords many fantastic opportunities for learning, success and growth. Dedicate your efforts to the power that is within you - your personal power - and never stop trying to learn, succeed, and grow!

Suggested Further Readings

There are literally dozens of books on the market for those who wish to find a way to reach their full potential. The self-help section of any book store will offer a wide variety of choices, and a trip there to browse may be well worthwhile. If that's not possible, either of the following works would be a good place to start:

Unlimited Power

by Anthony Robbins

(Fawcett Columbine Books; 1986)

This is a very well known book, and the author has been seen on T.V. as a motivational speaker. In the book, Mr. Robbins offers sensible, easy to read ideas on how we can reach our potential. There is also some valuable information on physiology and how good eating habits can help us maintain high energy levels.

Do It!

by John-Roger & Peter McWilliams

(Prelude Press; 1991)

This book is part of the 'Life 101' series, all written by the same authors. In it they offer brief, easy to read ideas on such things as overcoming obstacles and breaking bad habits. It is entertaining reading with many valuable messages built in.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The following pages offer point-form summaries of each of the preceding chapters. You may find these useful for quick review or a refresher of the topics discussed in each section.

Also, review reading may highlight one or more areas which you wish to return to for a second reading. Please use this section in whatever way is most beneficial to you.

I'd like to sign off with one last thought:

*School is but one step in life's long journey,
but it can and should be an enormously
positive and memorable one.*

Never stop trying to make it so.

D.

CHAPTER II - Stress and Students, Students and Stress

Some of the highlights from the chapter include the following:

- There are both positive and negative forms of stress. We need to *emphasize* the positive form, and *manage* the negative form.
- The effects of stress can be hard to manage. It can take its toll on both physical and emotional health.
- In order to avoid the negative effects of stress, we must first recognize it, and then apply proper strategies to control it.
- Stress can show itself in many ways. Learn to recognize how your behaviour and health can change when your stress level rises.
- Try to view unexpected, stressful situations as opportunities - and use them to your advantage.
- Some amount of stress is actually good. We perform worse when our stress levels are either too high or too low.
- Try not to 'run from' stress by using avoidance tactics. Instead, make an effort to manage it by using good organizational strategies and seeking support.
- Take time each day to relax and relieve stress (review the STRESS OUT Session section of the chapter if you like). Even the best of us need a little 'down time' each day!

CHAPTER III - Student Health

Some health-related reminders to help you stay at your best:

- **Eat properly.**
 - take care to consume healthy foods in modest quantities at regular times, especially breakfast, and don't overlook the effects of diet in a search for potential problems.
 - help ensure a stable blood sugar level by watching that you do not consume excess refined sugar.
 - restrict the amount of caffeine you consume, and be aware of its effects.

- **Exercise.**
 - staying physically active helps keep the body ready and able to deliver much needed oxygen and nutrients throughout the body.
 - take time to enjoy a stretching session now and then. Don't restrict stretching to times when you exercise. It can be a welcome study break or a great way to relax.

- **Get to know your own sleep cycle.**
 - learn when and how much sleep is best for you, and use these as firm guides.
 - schedule important work for times when you know you will be sharp and productive. Leave less important tasks for the 'down' times.

- **Keep your spirits up!**
 - keep an eye out for situations which can 'zap' your good mood or distract you, and steer clear of them. When problems are getting in the way of productive work, take the steps necessary to resolve them.

CHAPTER IV - Study Skills

Here is a quick refresher in the ideas from this chapter:

- Metacognition refers to an awareness of how you learn, why you learn, and how to make changes when necessary. Competent metacognition can facilitate effective study strategies.
- The performance of most learners is determined by a combination of DRIVE and HABITS.
- The idea that good academic performance: 1) is tedious, and 2) requires huge amounts of time and intelligence is completely false. What is required is a well developed system and a willingness to stick to it.
- Right now, being a student is your job. Be sure to give your profession the attention and priority it deserves.
- Don't overemphasize marks. Overemphasize learning!
- Go to class; think, pay close attention, act, and participate.
- Develop (or choose) and USE a sound note taking system which works for you.
- Determine where and when you study most effectively, and include these variables in your study routine.
- Use schedules for assignments.
- Use many sources to contribute and help you 'compose' assignments.
- Preparation for tests and exams is on-going.
- You will always remember things better if you understand them well.
- Take the time to practise doing the types of exercises you will see on tests and exams.

CHAPTER V - Motivation and your Personal Power

Remember:

- Education is an opportunity!
- "Good enough" usually isn't.
- Accept what you can't change; focus energy on the things you can.
- Take responsibility; end eliminate blame.
 - *you* control how *you* do
- Look *inside* for sources of problems and ways to improve.
- Powerful motivation comes from within.
- Focus on what goes right.
- Work on your comfort range. Expand it to include good new habits and move it to eliminate bad ones.
- Believe in your potential. Don't accept negatives.
- ACT, don't react
 - look for alternatives
 - exercise control
 - make choices
 - listen, ask, engage, record, collaborate.

CONCLUSION

The guide prototype serves well in achieving the goals laid out in the preface. For student readers, it is intended to present an informative, non-threatening look at some of the main factors which can contribute to an enjoyable, successful school experience. The text aims to speak, as a teacher, to as many different students as possible about what is necessary in order to reach their full educational potential. It is hoped (and expected) that students will make valuable discoveries while being exposed to the broad picture which shows the relationships and influences of the four main topics. Others may have backgrounds which make smaller elements of the individual chapters valuable in rounding out their knowledge. The activities built-in to the text are intended to clarify ideas and enable the readers to see by demonstration the value of a close, interactive examination of their approach. The guide is written with a style and content which is not so overly long or technical as to "frighten off" an unambitious reader, and it attends to those factors which research helped identify as contributors to successful coping with the demands of student life. It is also hoped that the sectioned lay out of the chapters and the abbreviated chapter summaries will enable readers to return to especially meaningful parts of the text for review.

Academic readers, especially those who are also teachers and/or parents, can gain insight into the areas which research has shown play a major role in students' ability to cope successfully with the demands of school life. Studies from a wide variety of education (and education-related) journals have been combined with current books to produce a comprehensive picture which examines valuable elements of all of these

sources. Parents and teachers can extend the ideas offered as they interact directly with current students.

The preparation of the guide was demanding in that it involved researching and relating both the most valuable "components" of student success and the individual parts which made each of these components valuable. Research involved reading, extending, and reviewing personal and reported experiences in the lives of both students and teachers, in order to capture a sense of what is most vital to students' success. Beyond this, the text must not simply distill that which has been revealed, but also render this information in a language which can be used successfully in advising students.

Much of the writing in the guide applies to the experiences of students, and every effort has been made to write in a way to which students can easily relate. Still, an extended research effort might be undertaken in the future to more accurately pinpoint effective success strategies from a current student's perspective. This would also shed light on perceived differences between those students who are "already successful" and those who are not yet.

On a similar note, it would be logical to follow the creation of this guide with a field test among current high school students. While the presentation of the text was certainly developed with care and attention, there would be no better way to examine the effectiveness of the style and content of the guide than to draw upon feedback from the population for which it was written.

As a teacher, I have gained great respect for the fact that students learn in different ways. Ideally, one would be able to work personally with students in an effort to convey the information in this guide. The benefit in the sheer number of students who can share the information once it is "on paper" is tempered by the loss of flexibility in its presentation. Conveying information in written form often requires that the reader deal with ideas in a more abstract way. In writing, efforts were made to incorporate scenarios which students could easily relate to; and the activities in the text help to make some of the ideas more concrete and as inclusive of student perspectives as possible. Still, perhaps there could be additional exercises to demonstrate some of the ideas and allow readers to create self-profiles. More information could come in the form of detailed descriptions of study skills techniques - with demonstrations of their use and an opportunity to practise. Simply adding such activities to the text would make it physically longer, and could distract readers from the main body of the text. However, a separate, referenced "workbook" could be created with exercises to complement each chapter.

As the nature and demands of the high school experience continue to change, it is hoped that both students and those who support them will become and remain aware of those factors which can influence success. Exposure and attention to sound fundamentals will continue to be paramount in enabling students to reach their full potential.

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a) D. Ellington D.L.George	<u>Life 101</u> McWilliams & McWilliams, 1991.
b) E. Wilson	<u>Do it!</u> McWilliams & McWilliams, 1991.
c) Disraeli Shakespeare	<u>Unlimited Power</u> Robbins, 1986.
d) Hippocrates	Diet and Schoolchildren Phlegar & Phlegar, 1979.
e) G.H. Lorimer	Health, Education, and Youth Campbell (ed.), 1984.
f) T. Edison	<u>Eating Alive</u> Matsen, 1987.
g) A. Bennett W.J. Bryan E. Burke R. Kostelanetz V. Satir E.B. White	<u>The Teacher's Quotation Book</u> Lincoln & Suid, 1986.
h) Aristotle Thoreau	<u>The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People</u> Covey, 1989.