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Dealing with Stress During Finals Week

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — As finals week descends upon Illinois Wesleyan University, students may find themselves struggling with stress. IWU Staff Counselor Bob Rogers offers students some tips on getting through the week.

Set goals and reward yourself:

With projects coming due and multiple tests looming, students can easily lose sight of what is important, said Rogers, who works with the University's Counseling and Consultation Services. "The best thing a student can do is to plan and organize," he said, noting students should think about the "the Ps": prioritize, plan and protect. "Students need to identify what their top priorities are, understand how much each project or test is worth, and make sure they understand what needs to be studied or done," said Rogers. Creating a plan of attack when it comes to finals can help. "Decide the best time to focus on each topic, and then stick to it and protect that plan," he said.

When students do meet goals in their plan, Rogers advises them to reward themselves. "If you've set a goal of studying for two hours, or finishing typing several pages, then reward yourself," said Rogers. "Just make sure the goal precedes the reward. Goals should be realistic and achievable and can often give people a much-needed sense of direction."

Take care of yourself:

It sounds like an easy idea, but during finals week, health is an early casualty, said Rogers. "Sleep is usually one of the first things students sacrifice, which makes studying tougher because it is difficult to function or retain information on limited sleep," he said.

Though finals week may make the sales of Red Bull rise over the nation, Rogers advises students to watch what they eat and drink. "When students get stressed out, they may find themselves drinking a lot of caffeine to stay awake and study, or skipping meals and then eating a greasy snack late at night," he said. "Students may think this helps in the short term, but although caffeine and carbs give a quick boost, it is followed by a big crash, which means students will not be feeling their best when they wake up the next morning. Take care of your body – eat well, sleep enough and exercise to burn off excess stress and energy".

Give yourself space:

When it comes to studying, Rogers suggests a quiet space where students can focus. "Think about where you are studying. Will there be distractions like phone calls or friends stopping by? Or would you be better off in a quiet nook of the library?" he asked.

Cramming for finals may be a time-honored tradition for college students, but Rogers said it may actually cost students valuable study time. "Students who try to cram in a semester's worth of knowledge in five hours will probably find they have only been able to truly focus for an hour and a half," said Rogers. "The rest of the time will have been wasted." Instead, he suggests an hour of studying with short breaks in between. "Give your mind time to process everything, and give your body time to relax," he said, even if it is just a quick trip for a healthy snack.

Face reality:

One of the toughest things for students to see during finals week is the big picture. "Students are not going to be successful if they exaggerate the situation. You can't do well if you look at a test and say, 'If I fail this test, I will not get into graduate school.' That's too much pressure for anyone," said Rogers, who said if students have done well in a class throughout the semester, they will most likely do well on the final. "Worrying and panicking is not helpful, and will only hinder students in their overall goals. Practicing techniques that help you relax is also very important."

The best defense against panic during finals week is to locate a middle ground. "The key is finding a balance of work, rest and play," said Rogers. "Try to be happy with a less than perfect performance from yourself. All you can do is your best."