Help, I’m a College Student!
How to Deal with Stress – For Finals and Beyond
by Amanda Halliburton

College can be an exciting time, especially at Virginia Tech. There are lots of interesting classes to take, new friends to meet, and fun clubs and activities to try. However, from time to time, you may find that you need to take some time for yourself—because you’ve got a project due in three days and an exam next week, and you’re too stressed to even know where to begin! You may think that the best plan is to lock yourself in your

Continued on 4

Art Therapy
Learn a little about a new form of therapy using an old idea

Page 2

Insider for Internship
A graduate student shares some of his experiences on how he found a summer internship and gained research experience

Page 3

Now What? Ask Alums
Find out where some VT psychology alumni are now. Feel free to contact them!

Pages 5 and 6
Imagine you are a four-year-old who has just been diagnosed with cancer. Suddenly your life is turned upside down - you now have many trips to the hospital, you may lose your hair, you are told to participate in painful procedures, and you miss a lot of school and time with your friends. What is this thing called cancer? Your parents keep saying all these complicated words about procedures and treatments that you don’t understand! One day, an art therapist comes to the hospital and asks you to draw this thing people keep referring to as cancer. You decide to draw a big, green, scary monster. Talking about how angry and mad the monster makes you feel seems easier than answering questions about this elusive term called cancer. The therapist asks you what you want to do with your monster. You tell her you want to put it in a box and hide it under your bed so that you can go play with your friends.

What is art therapy?

Increasing one’s ability to discuss and process painful emotions and experiences illustrates just one of the many possible benefits of art therapy, a mental health profession in which trained therapists help individuals of all ages improve or restore their functioning and overall wellbeing through various art techniques and practices. As implied by the name, art therapy combines the knowledge of visual art skills and practices with a psychological perspective in therapeutic techniques and exercises.

Art therapy is used with individuals who are experiencing illness, trauma, and various mental health problems. Art therapy can be practiced in individual or group sessions, which may occur in a variety of settings including hospitals, schools, wellness centers, crisis centers or private practice. It is generally recommended to use art therapy as a supplement to other therapies.

How do you become an art therapist?

Before you can become a professional and licensed Art Therapist, you must first obtain a master’s degree. The American Art Therapy Association (AATA) recognizes and accredits institutions offering degrees in Art Therapy. Then, you can receive your credentialing by the Art Therapy Credential Board, Inc. (ATCB).

The ATCB provides three levels of credentials:

1) Registered (ATR) - received after completion of Master’s program

2) Board Certified (ATR-BC) - received after passing a written examination

3) Certified Supervisor Credential (ATCS) - received after demonstrating substantial supervision qualifications

For more information, please visit http://www.arttherapy.org.
After I concluded my sophomore year as an undergraduate, I realized that I definitely wanted to go to graduate school to study sensation and perception. This led me to research what it would take for me to get into a program. It was at this time that I learned most students who got accepted into graduate programs had previously worked in labs and also had internship experience. While this was a great moment for me, it was also problematic because I had no internship or behavioral research experience. Realizing that my chances of getting into a graduate program would be significantly reduced if I didn’t attempt to do something fast, I took it upon myself to become more proactive as an undergrad and think creatively about the resources that were available to me. Below I’ve outlined some lessons about summer internships and research labs that I’ve learned along the way.

1. You can’t always get (exactly) what you want.

During that summer I searched for any and all possible agencies that were offering internships to psychology students, regardless of whether or not their interests perfectly aligned with my own. Eventually, I stumbled upon and took an internship as a mentor at a homeless youth shelter called Project Lighthouse. Admittedly, I was initially disappointed with my first summer internship because the mission of the agency and the population they worked with didn’t appear to parallel any of my research interests. However, the opportunity to be a part of a facility whose existence genuinely benefited the community by ensuring the safety and security of our youth still gives me great pride and satisfaction.

2. Use your experiences to tell a story.

Sometimes we need to work at various jobs or internships in order to rule out things we do NOT want to do or study. Looking back, my experiences at Lighthouse confirmed that I didn’t want to study children and societal issues, but it also helped me obtain my future position as a mentor at NeuroRestorative, a rehabilitation facility for active duty military personnel and veterans with traumatic brain injuries, which seemed to be more in line with my research interests.

3. Where there is a will, there is a way! Sometimes you just need to get creative.

Another hurdle I had to contend with was gaining research experience. Unfortunately for me, my university had no psychology labs to work in. Initially this frustrated me, but eventually I learned that all psychology majors at my university were required to participate in a senior research class. Making the best of my situation, I saw this class as an opportunity to conduct an experiment that - if I took it seriously enough - could produce a study worthy of publication.

The Virginia Tech Psychology Department is home to many professors studying and researching a variety of fascinating topics ranging from visual perception to treatments for children with phobias to brain imaging.

4. Don’t be afraid to ask for help.

I sought out the professor who ran the research class in order to discuss with her what I could do to prepare. She instructed me to investigate what it would take to employ the paradigm that I had in mind in terms of hypotheses, statistical analyses, and what had previously been done in other studies. Taking her advice, I sporadically put time into hammering out the mechanics of my study. Along the way, I took a number of computer science and statistics courses with the goal of being able to understand and employ the set of advanced statistical analyses that I would need to perform in order to interpret the data from my study. When the time came, I carried out my study and I eventually succeeded in publishing my work.

5. Be optimistic!

Although I had a difficult time finding an internship and conducting research, in the end, being optimistic and thinking outside the box helped me get to be where I am now. Finding a summer internship can be difficult, but don’t get discouraged!

Remember: Be creative and don’t be afraid to ask for help! There is no “exact” path or formula for graduate school so make the best of your situation and keep working hard!

For a comprehensive list of psychology labs and internship opportunities check these links:
https://www.psyc.vt.edu/labs
https://www.career.vt.edu/Internships/Index.html
apartment, eat delivery for a week, and study the material until you can repeat it in your sleep—but it doesn’t have to be that way. Don’t worry; the feelings you have are common to college students everywhere, and there are lots of great resources on campus and beyond to help you deal with these really stressful times.

A quick Google search turns up some good advice for how to cope with stress. The first step is making sure that you take care of yourself, because good health is essential for making sure your brain can work to its full capacity and that you still have some energy left over for summer when the stress of the semester is over. Kayla Hedman at The Huffington Post (2013) suggests being careful about your diet (fresh fruits and vegetables have the vitamins and minerals you need to stay at your best), drinking lots of water, getting sufficient sleep, and saving some time for exercise (for instance, VT Recreational Sports offers free group exercise classes and activities from May 9-14). It can also be helpful to build breaks into long study sessions—maybe take a nap during this time, go for a walk outside, or call a friend to see if they’d like to go get a bite to eat downtown.

Even if taking a break seems like it’s not an option, you can still do small things while you’re studying to make the process easier. CollegeFashion.net (2013) encourages stressed-out students to take a deep breath and stay positive. This could involve thinking about the fun things you’ll do when the exam is over or listening to an upbeat song (I’m personally a big fan of Pharrell’s track “Happy” from Despicable Me 2).

Mindfulness meditation is also a good tool, especially if you’re the kind of person who gets distracted easily when going over material for the umpteenth time. All you have to do is take a moment to really notice things around you, like the sounds in your apartment or the rhythm of your own breath. This helps bring you back to the present moment.

Of course, stress isn’t limited to midterms and finals. You may be wondering what kinds of resources are available on campus for students throughout the semester. Did you know that the VA-MD Regional College of Veterinary Medicine offers free pet therapy through their P.A.W.S. program? These friendly folks visit Newman Library once a month to offer companionship to busy students, which is

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especially nice if you had to leave your own furry friend when you came to college. If animals aren’t your thing, don’t worry; Cook Counseling Center also offers several counseling groups for students who want to learn how to cope better with stress or just talk about it. The groups meet approximately once a week for one to two hours, and registration is required.

Well, there you have it. Don’t let college stress prevent you from having fun and enjoying all that Virginia Tech has to offer! There are lots of things you can do to make sure you tackle your assignments confidently and effectively. See the following references for more ideas:


Where Are They Now? A Look into the Journey of Virginia Tech Psych Alums by Jonathan Waldron

Ashleigh Kinch – Graduated December 2012

Prior to graduating, Ashleigh spent a few years volunteering at the Raft Crisis Hotline as a volunteer and then a Crew Chief. During her time with Raft, she applied and was accepted into internships through New River Valley Community Services (NRVCS) in the areas of substance abuse as well as anxiety and depression. She applied for jobs in September 2012, and accepted a position as a Community Support Professional for the Intellectual Disabilities population at NRVCS prior to graduation. She later accepted a position as a Mental Health Case Manager, which is where she currently works.

Congratulations Ashleigh on all of your accomplishments! Feel free to contact Ashleigh at kinch.ashleigh@gmail.com

Continued …
Where Are They Now? Continued from Page 5

Xin Zhao – Class of 2008

Xin graduated from VT in 2008 and moved to Logan, UT. He is currently in a combined Ph.D. program (counseling, clinical, and school psychology) at Utah State University. Graduate school allows him to teach, counsel other people, do original research, and develop leadership abilities and communication skills, but more importantly it empowers him to be empathetic, caring, and an advocate for social justice. He reports that graduate school is a long haul, and it takes time and dedication, but the reward is everlasting.

Congratulations Xin on your achievements! Feel free to contact Xin at xinzhaovt.edu

Carolyn Funke – Class of 2011

Carolyn graduated from VT in 2011. After graduation, she worked at NRVCS as an outpatient case manager for two years, where she was able to work with adults with mental illnesses across the New River Valley. She is currently in the Physician Assistant program at the Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke and plans to become a PA specializing in psychiatry.

Awesome to hear from you Carolyn, and glad to hear about your successes and dedication to mental health! Feel free to contact Carolyn at cfunkevt.edu

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**Tashauna Blankenship** is a 2nd year graduate student in the Developmental Science program. Her research interests revolve around the development of episodic memory during middle childhood.

**James Brown** is a 1st year graduate student enrolled in the NBP program. His general area of interest is sensation and perception, and he is specifically interested in visual neuroscience and psychophysics. He is currently researching differentiations in cognitive processing of retinally equal images projected onto screens of varying display size.

**Amanda Halliburton** is a 3rd year graduate student in the clinical science area. Her research interests focus on adolescent treatment, particularly using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in individual and family settings. She is also interested in prevention of adolescent risk behaviors.

**Tyler Hassenfeldt** is a 4th year graduate student in Clinical Psychology. Her main area of research is children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and ways to support their neurotypical siblings and family members. Additional clinical interests include anxiety, ADHD, and externalizing behaviors in children.

**Jared McGinley** is a 5th year graduate student in Biological Psychology at Virginia Tech. His research is focused on the biological correlates of emotions and empathy.

**Rachel Miller** is a 2nd year graduate student in the clinical science program. She works with Dr. Julie Dunsmore in the Social Development Lab. Her primary research interests focus on the clinical applications of developmental psychology, including parents’ emotion socialization, children’s emotion regulation, and developmental psychopathology.

**Deanna Swain** is a 1st year in the clinical science graduate program. She is particularly interested in examining the relationship between mechanisms of change in therapies and their impact on the biology and behavior of children with ASD as a method for better implementing targeted evidence-based interventions.

**Jonathan Waldron** is a 4th year in the clinical science graduate program. His research focuses on the social psychophysiological correlates of violent perpetration and victimization. He is particularly interested in understanding psychopathy and empathy relationships.

**Amber Turner, Editor**, is a 3rd year in the clinical science graduate program. She works with Dr. Brad White in the Cognition, Emotion, and Self-Regulation (CEaSR) Lab.