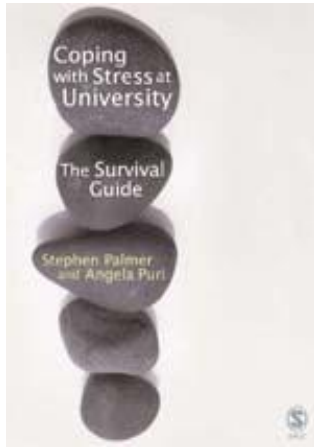***Book Review***

Coping with Stress at University: A Survival Guide
By Stephen Palmer and Angela Puri
London: Sage Publications (2010).

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Reviewed by **Zora Kostadinova**

This book is a guide about how to manage stress at university. It uses a cognitive approach to stress management and it covers the main problems and stressful situations students may encounter. It is intended for first year students, who might find the transition of leaving home and settling into new surroundings challenging. It is written in friendly language and it is an accessible read. The five parts in the book are divided into eighteen easy to read chapters. Each chapter is summarised at the end, and it offers readers the space to note learning points, especially helpful hints that they would like to take away with them. Some chapters include practical exercises which ask the reader to assess their own response to stressful situations. It also includes engaging questionnaires on personality type and the level of stress depending on the reader's behavioural patterns. It ends with a self-hypnosis technique as a "cognitive restructuring" approach to self managing stress. The structure of the book is very clear and easy to follow.

The first two parts of the book focus on defining what stress is and how to handle it. The remaining three parts discuss the problems and issues that could cause stress for first year students, such as homesickness, relationship difficulties, lack of confidence, worries about 'fitting in', financial problems, maintaining a healthy life style, dealing with assignments. It dedicates fewer than two pages on students with disabilities. Because the book was published in 2006, unfortunately it does not deal with the introduction of increased undergraduate fees in the UK in 2010, a situation that might put off many people from becoming students on a first place. It is not a comprehensive book because issues as important as the influence of personality on stress levels are not covered in great detail. However, it makes up for it by providing a list of useful resources, such as reading material and links to organisations and institutions who work on helping students. Those range from countrywide national unions for students and psychotherapists to Consumer Credit Counselling Services.

The book opens with the argument that stress is more often than not caused by how we perceive things, which is detrimental to the outcome of distressing circumstances. It appropriates the most commonly used definition of stress by Dr Richard Lazarus: "Stress arises when individuals perceive that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with threats to their wellbeing" (p.8) The authors make an interesting distinction between being under pressure and stress, qualifying pressure as something we all need "to feel appropriately challenged" in order to complete a task (p. 22) in comparison to stress, where the task ahead of us is not inspiring us to action but to inaction because we *think* we cannot handle it. A simple situation illustrates this definition. Consider losing the keys to your flat. You have two choices: you can become frustrated and start asking "why me" and delay a solution. Or, you can chose to cognize the situation for what it is and start thinking about how to get into your flat. Basically, you choose how to feel about situations

demanding actions. Our choice however, is linked to whether we hold an internal or an external locus of control. A locus of control "is used to indicate the amount of perceived control an individual believes they have in a given situation." (p.26) If control is attributed to external forces as "fate" for example, an individual has an external locus of control. An individual with an internal locus of control would believe that they can influence and control a situation. To return to the lost key scenario, thoughts "things like that always happen to me" would mean you have an external locus of control, where "this could happen to anyone" would mean you have an internal locus of control.

The authors make the point that our perceptions to distressing situations are mostly a result of our deeply rooted patterns of behaviour - often a result of our personalities - but do not venture into much detail. Whether we have developed an internal or an external locus of control is dependent upon upbringing, for example. However, behavioural patterns that influence our reactions to stress are not easily changed with one exercise. A similar impression is noted when discussing the angry, assertive and passive behaviour and how these determine stress management. For example, one of the ways to "managing your stress levels" is by acting assertively. If you are assertive, it means that you will "avoid misunderstandings and reduce the possibility of being exploited" (p.62), whereas passive/aggressive behaviour could denote you as a pushover or a bully, respectively. Both of these are bad for your stress levels. The "How assertive are you" test asks questions such as: "Do you accept compliments easily" or would you "Readily ask for clarification if you do not understand something?" If your answer to these two questions is "No" then you ought to start thinking about increasing your level of assertiveness.

Like "locus of control", one's personality type cannot be easily altered. However, the value of this book is that it has chosen everyday situations, seemingly simple questions and illustrative examples to draw the reader's attention to how their personalities can play a role in responses to stress. This is already a good point of departure for personal change. It is further encouraged by some of the questionnaires: Internal/External locus of control; the life stress questionnaire; as well as the various useful exercises such as: how to recognise negative and unconstructive thinking which often underlines stress. The authors rightly argue that mindfulness is the first casualty when under trying circumstances. This is why some of the tips on how to recognize stress (they list psychological, physiological and behavioural effects) and techniques we can apply to become calm are very practical, and provide a hands-on experience. For example they suggest using relaxation imagery and self-hypnosis, as a first step towards lessening anxiety. The rest of the book discusses: leaving the family, finding accommodation, how to stay healthy, how to manage your money, how to prepare for examinations, how to cope with relationships, how to socialise, how to avoid drugs and alcohol.

As a former undergraduate, I sympathise with how hard it can be to leave your familiar surroundings, and to adapt to a new lifestyle. On this point, the authors reiterate the importance of keeping your eyes on the goal ahead, and seeing university life as a chance of gaining education which will lead to more independence. Many of the issues that can deter first year students from this goal are: homesickness, not being able to say "No" to partying (an example of passive behaviour), bad finance management, vulnerability to drug use, and - my all time favourite - procrastination. There is useful advice on all these issues, but I would like to briefly touch on procrastination, as it can easily spill over to other important aspects of life such as money management, for example. You can as easily procrastinate over addressing your finances resulting in financial troubles, as you can with not preparing your presentation or your essay on time. Procrastination is seen as a result of the fear of failure. It can be also a result of a perfectionist drive. Because we want to do well, we fear failing. This fear triggers stress which makes thinking about the task uncomfortable. By avoiding doing what we should, we become more stressed and less able to handle situations such as

looming deadlines. Personally I would have liked to have seen further exploration of procrastination, as again it links into the (above mentioned) behaviour patterns. For example, the authors claim that non-assertive individuals are not as good at time keeping. On the positive side, they give a useful exercise on how to start tackling procrastination tendencies by using motivation imagery to inspire students into action. The technique highlights the "impact of doing nothing, compared to seeing your goals through." Of course, the benefits of completing a task "imperfectly" are far greater than the benefits of not completing a task at all.

With its friendly style, helpful exercises and cognitive techniques on how to handle stress, this book can be very helpful to students who are willing to recognise they can improve the ways in which they adapt to their new environments, handle assignments, and lead healthier lives. It can be also useful to parents, who at times can underestimate the difficulties in the transition from home to university. The authors encourage the reader to see that changing the way we think, is possible. As such, I hope it finds its place on university library shelves and in students' rooms.