

**New England College Health Association  
Grant Application 2011**

**STRESS BUDDY:  
A PEER-LED CAMPAIGN TO HELP STUDENTS SOAR ABOVE STRESS**

**Submitted by:**

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**Introduction/General Information:**

Boston University (BU) is a private research university with more than 31,000 students. It is one of the largest private universities in the United States and one of Boston's largest employers. Each academic year, BU enrolls approximately 4,500 new undergraduate and 500 new graduate students. Student Health Services at BU is comprised of Medical Services, Behavioral Medicine, Athletic Training and the Office of Prevention and Wellness with an affiliation with the Sargent Choice Nutrition Center. Together our team focuses on the care, treatment, and prevention of various illnesses and mental health concerns of our student population. Boston University is committed to addressing all issues related to student health and wellness on our campus. BU takes a comprehensive approach to addressing student's needs through student group involvement, campus department partnerships, online interventions, and group workshops and trainings. The student health center provides care for approximately 50,000 student visits each year. We seek to provide developmentally appropriate patient education in the context of our visits. Our center employs 40+ dedicated health care and support personnel comprised of professionals within the fields of psychiatry, family medicine, health promotion, and social work and others.

The Office of Prevention and Wellness is made up of two full-time professionals that create and deliver all primary prevention programs to the BU Student population. Our services include:

- *Creating and disseminating wellness programs*
- *Counseling students interesting in changing health behaviors (substance use, smoking, etc.)*
- *Promoting health through social media and resources across campus*
- *Evaluating and counseling students who have been identified voluntarily or through the University judicial process for alcohol related problems*

In addition, we coordinate a group of undergraduate students, the Student Health Ambassadors (SHA's) who assist in the implementation and delivery of our programs and health promotion tools. The SHA's meet regularly with the Director of Student Health Services and the Wellness Coordinator to learn behavior change theories, health promotion concepts, and leadership skills with the goal that they can become trainers of health education programs. There are a total of 16 SHA's for the upcoming academic year. These 16 individuals were chosen from a pool of applicants during the previous academic year because of their commitment to health education and exceptional academic standing with the University. The SHA's are charged with creating a health campaign each year that reaches a population of their peers. In the past they have focused their efforts on raising awareness of sexual health and sexually transmitted diseases.

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This past year, however, they have decided to shift their efforts towards reducing the stress experienced by their fellow peers. Beginning in the Spring of 2010 they created the “Stress Buddy” campaign. The SHA’s started their campaign by creating a survey (Attachment 1) that they distributed both online through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter and on campus within various dining halls and residences. The intention of this survey, completed by close 500 students, was to determine the number one health concern of BU students. 83% of the students questioned identified stress as their number one health concern and what they thought their peers were struggling with over other choices like alcohol, smoking, nutrition, and mental health.

The Stress Buddy program will provide students with strategies to reduce the manifestations of stress. It was created as an adjunct to our “Flu Buddy” which has been a successful model for flu prevention on our campus since the 2009-10 academic year. The ‘Stress Buddy’ teaches students ways to “soar above stress” by providing students with a place to discuss their own stress within a small group and learn 3 different stress management techniques taught to them by the Student Health Ambassadors.

The advocacy group, Mental Health America, found that we frequently deal with chronic stress in all the wrong ways by watching TV, eating fatty and sugary foods, and forgoing exercise and relaxation time (1). Stress impacts the body and mind; therefore it is crucial that we learn strategies to cope early on in our development. The chronic stimulation of the immune system makes it less effective at preventing illnesses and diseases, which is a big concern for those working in primary care on college campuses. In addition, stress can contribute to a sustained feeling of low energy or depression and can also exacerbate mental health disorders such as Bipolar Disorder and Anxiety. Mental Health providers have long agreed that stress causes changes to our personality by increasing irritability, hostility, frustration, aggression, anger, and isolation which all contribute to increased numbers of visits to the staff at Student Health Services. In addition, a quarter of students surveyed in the latest [National College Health Assessment](#) reported that stress has hurt their academic performance (2).

**Statement of Purpose:**

According to the ACHA-National College Health Assessment II 47% of college students have felt overwhelmed by all they had to do in the last two weeks and 41% of students reporting feel an above average amount of stress in the preceding 12 months. At Boston University, our mental health providers say that approximately half of the students they see report feelings of anxiety and stress and have difficulty completing their assignments on time. The wellness office spends approximately 20 hours each week promoting stress management and talking with students about healthy sleep habits, limiting caffeine, and learning relaxation techniques.

**Program Goals:**

**There are 3 goals of “Stress Buddy”**

- 1) Increase knowledge of stress management techniques that can be used by Boston University Students
- 2) Increase awareness of Boston University resources available to students suffering from stress
- 3) Reduce the total amount of stress Boston University students are experiencing per self-report

**Program Objectives:**

- 1) 80% of students completing the stress buddy program will be able to identify 3 stressors in their lives
- 2) 50% of students will continue to use the relaxation strategies learned in the stress buddy program
- 3) 75% of students will be able to describe a relaxation technique used in the stress buddy program

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Boston University students face stress particularly during the end of the semester and during mid-points due to exams and project deadlines. When speaking with students we find that most experience stress daily and are unequipped with coping strategies to deal with it both in the short-term and long-term. Having stress can be beneficial up to a point and then it can drastically impact a student's ability to sleep, manage time, focus, and perform academically. Their anxiety, irritability, and understandable imbalance can result in maladaptive behaviors such as smoking, using substances, and drinking alcohol. The consequences of inappropriately expressed anger, however justified, can lead to further judicial consequences and mental health complaints such as depression and anxiety.

The Stress Buddy Program proposes to assist students in transforming uncontrollable feelings of stress into effective thought processes and constructive assertiveness. The Office of Prevention and Wellness believes that our students can lead more fulfilling lives if they can gain better control over their emotions and develop tools for functioning within the broader society. We propose to guide participants toward improved problem-solving skills, educate participants about adaptive coping techniques, and teach participants to use strategies like time management, deep breathing, relaxation and social support to the fullest extent possible.

The Stress Buddy Program will be provided as both a walk-in workshop style event 2-3 times each month and also as a request from a particular student group. Visualization relaxation training will help students lower the level of emotional arousal and think more clearly about effective methods for handling tension. The instructors will use role playing, rehearsal, and discussion to illustrate appropriate communication and allow the participants to evaluate their own progress.

### **Target Population:**

There are approximately 17,000 undergraduate students enrolled in AY 11-12 at Boston University. The goal of the 'Stress Buddy' program is to target this group of students because typically they have underdeveloped coping skills in comparison to the graduate population. It is our intention to invite student groups, Greek life organizations, athletic teams, and residence floors to request the Stress Buddy program for their whole group. As reported in an ACHA presentation (3) stress differs for students depending on which academic programs or groups they are involved with. Our Student Health Ambassadors chose to work within small groups to make stress buddy a more personal experience for students. Our aim is to focus on smaller groups of students with common interests rather than large groups. In this way we can focus in on the stressors that are specific to individuals with common interests. It has been shown that peer-support groups increase perceived general health as well as participation (4). Using this peer-support method is a useful and inexpensive way to address student stress.

If young adults learn healthy adaptive coping skills early in life it is expected that these students will be better equipped to handle the stressors that will undoubtedly occur both in the professional workplace and in the home as they enter adulthood.

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### **Program Design/Range of Service:**

By using the feedback from the health concerns questionnaire that was given to over 500 students last year, the Student Health Ambassadors determined that stress was the most important aspect of student's lives that they wanted help with.

The process is outlined below:

- 1) A group of students decides that they want to invite a Student Health Ambassador to provide the Stress Buddy Program on one date that is mutually agreeable
- 2) The SHA will bring the materials and give-away's to the location booked for the 1 hour program
- 3) The group of participants will be asked to complete the Personal Stress Assessment (Attachment B) measuring their levels of stress currently
- 4) The SHA will then provide training on recognizing the differences between acute and chronic stress, how our bodies and minds react to stressors, and at least 3 coping skills that can be used including deep breathing, cognitive reframing, and visualization
  - a. *Deep-Breathing:* This relaxation technique encourages the participant to focus on his or her physical self-awareness while taking very long, slow breaths. During inspiration, stretching of lung tissue produces inhibitory signals which are known to synchronize neural elements leading to the modulation of the nervous system and decreased metabolic activity indicative of the parasympathetic state (5). In this parasympathetic state, student will be able to reduce anxiety, allowing them to relax, recharge and balance.
  - b. *Visualization Exercise:* The visualization exercise we plan on doing is referred to as the "Mini-vacation." We ask students to think of their perfect vacation getaway in specific detail such as what they see, smell, and hear while they focus on taking long, deep breaths. This is another way to engage the parasympathetic state, and reduce stress and anxiety.
  - c. *Cognitive Reframing:* This technique is used with the primary goal of forcing students to think about stressors in a more realistic way rather than as an ultimately negative factor. We ask students to think of a time when they over-analyze something - for example, a student failing an exam and then making the statement that "my college career is over." Instead, we help to change this thought process so the student can see that every potential setback is a learning opportunity.
- 5) Each participant will be given on and off-campus resources along with a give-away that outlines some of the tools provided during the program and asked to complete an evaluation of the program. These resources include but are not limited to professionals on and off-campus that work with students struggling with stress, courses that can be taken to learn more about stress, and websites that contain research-based information that can be read for further information.
- 6) To reduce the total amount of stress Boston University students are experiencing per self-report the SHA's will ask each participant to complete the Personal Stress Assessment at 6-weeks post participation via email.
- 7) The Student Health Ambassadors will be responsible for determining if students are learning any new coping skills from this program by comparing the data on the pre and post Personal Stress Assessments.

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**Evaluation:**

To evaluate the effectiveness of the stress buddy program, three methods will be used. Any student who participates in this program will be asked to complete an evaluation.

- 1) The Personal Stress Assessment will be given to all students at the beginning of the group workshop. This assessment will look at what types of stress each student experiences regularly and what they typically do to alleviate it. We will then ask each student to complete a post-evaluation six weeks after their participation to determine if there was a change in behavior in regards to stress management strategies and feelings. This data will be compared with the stress data available through the ACHA College Health Assessment II to evaluate the success of the campaign, the feedback from students and overall changes in perceived stress levels.
- 2) We will also partner with the mental health specialists within Student Health Services. When students request appointments for stress/anxiety they be recommended to attend a stress buddy program and have a follow up appointment 6 weeks later at which point they will be asked if the knowledge gained by attending program helped to minimize some of their stress to determine the effectiveness of the program.
- 3) Lastly, 2 focus groups will be held during the Spring of 2012 with students who participated in the ‘Stress Buddy’ program to get feedback about the program.

**Relevance to College Health:**

As previously mentioned, more than half of the students our Behavior Medicine team sees come in for problems associated with stress. In addition, it is well known that college poses many factors that lead to stress including a new independent environment to navigate, no authority figures to provide reminders of deadlines, communicating with professors, managing time (for many this is a first), and learning the social mores of a new microcosm.**ost:**

We are requesting \$2500 to cover the costs of the print materials, workshop group costs, and give-aways for participants. The Department of Wellness and Prevention will contribute matching funding (\$2,500) which covers the costs of the Wellness Coordinator time, website maintenance, and marketing the program. The following costs are anticipated for the 2011-2012.

<b>Type of Expense</b>	<b>NECHA Funds</b>	<b>BU Student Health</b>
Logo/Branding of Stress Buddy Program		\$790.00
Stress Buddy Posters 25 3' X 4'	\$1145.00	
Stress-Buddy Give Away	\$805.00	
Food for Open Workshop events	\$550.00	
FTE @ .03		\$1710.00
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>\$2500.00</b>	<b>\$2500.00</b>

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**References:**

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4. Peterson, U. Reflecting peer-support groups in the prevention of stress and burnout: randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. Volume 63, Issue 5, pp506-516. September 2008.
5. Jerath, R. Physiology of long pranayamic breathing: Neural respiratory elements may provide mechanism that explains how slow deep breathing shifts the autonomic nervous system. *Medical Hypothesis*. 23 February 2006.