Managing Stress

Stress is natural. To the extent, it is a sign of vitality, stress is good. Yet unless we learn how to cope effectively with stress-producing situations, stress can overwhelm us and undermine our ability to perform. The primary way to manage stress is to modify the situation with something that enhances our feeling of control. For some, relaxation is also very important in counteracting stress. It’s impossible to be tense and relaxed at the same time, and relaxation is a skill you can learn.

Did you realize you have actually learned to be tense in most stress-producing situations? Now you can learn how to identify the warning signs, you can choose how you will react.

What Happens When You Are Tense

Signs of stress are easy to recognize and differ little from person to person. Basically your rate of breathing becomes more rapid and shallower; your heart rate begins to speed up; and the muscles in your shoulders and forehead, the back of your neck, and perhaps even across your chest begin to tighten. Probably your hands and perhaps your feet become cold and sweaty. There are likely to be disturbances in your gastrointestinal system, such as a “butterfly” stomach or diarrhea, vomiting, and frequent urination. Your mouth may become parched, your lips may dry out, and your hands and knees may begin to shake or tremble. Your voice may quiver or even go up an octave.

A number of psychological changes also occur when you are under stress. These changes are the result of your body and mind trying to “defend” you from some real or imagined threat. The threat could be from an actual situation, such as someone approaching you with a gun in hand. Or it could come from something that hasn’t actually happened but that you are worried about. As a result, you’re more easily confused, your memory becomes blocked, and your thinking becomes less flexible and more critical. If the situation persists, you may also find it difficult to concentrate, and you may experience a general sense of fear or anxiety, insomnia, early waking, changes in eating habits, excessive worrying, fatigue, and an urge to run away.

The urges to stand and fight or to run away are two of the human body’s basic responses to stress. But many times both urges must be suppressed because they would be inappropriate. For instance, a person taking an exam may want to bolt from the exam room, but it probably would not help the grade to do so, and it’s pointless to fight with a piece of paper. So we often find we must cope with a situation in a way that allows us to face it. This is where learning to manage stress can make a difference!

A Stress Relief Smorgasbord

To provide yourself with a sense of relief, you need to do those things that help you to let go of stress or invigorate your mind and body. However, many of the traditional things that people do with the intention of relieving stress—such as drinking alcohol, taking drugs, oversleeping, or overeating—don’t relieve stress and may actually increase it! There are many other ways of handling stress that actually work:

Get Physical

- **Relax your neck and shoulders.** Slowly drop your head forward, roll it gently to the center of your right roll it backward to the center of your shoulders and pause; gently roll it to the center of you left shoulder and pause; gently roll it forward to the center of your chest and pause. Then reverse direction and go back around your shoulders from left to right.

- **Take a stretch.** In any situation, if you pause to stretch your body you will feel it loosen up and become more relaxed, so stand up and reach for the sky!

- **Get a massage.** Physical touch can feel wonderful when you are tense, and having someone help you relax can feel supportive.
- **Exercise.** Physical exercise strengthens both mind and body. Aerobic exercise is the most effective type for stress relief.

**Get Mental**

- **Count to ten.** Many people discount this method because it sounds too simple. Your purpose is to master self-control and gain a more realistic perspective or outlook. To give yourself time to gain that new outlook or to come up with a “better” way to handle the situation, count slowly while asking yourself, “How can I best handle this situation?”

- **Control your thoughts.** The imagination can be very creative—it can veer off in frightening directions if allowed to do so. To gain control of negative thoughts or worries, imagine yelling “Stop!” as loudly as you can in your mind. You may have to repeat this process quite a few times, but gradually it will help you shut out angry or frightening thoughts.

- **Fantasize.** Give yourself a few moments to take a mini vacation. Remember the pleasure of an experience you enjoy, or listen to a child laugh, or just let your mind be creative. Make a list of some places or activities that make you feel relaxed and good about yourself. Next time you need to get away, refer to the list, close your eyes, and take a mini break.

- **Congratulate yourself.** Give yourself pats on the back. No one knows how difficult a situation may have been for you to handle, or even how well you may have handled it, so tell yourself, “Good going.”

- **Ignore the problem.** This may sound strange at first, but many problems just don’t need to be dealt with or can’t be solved right now. Forget about the problem at hand and do something more important or something nice for yourself.

- **Perform self-maintenance.** Stress is a daily issue, so the more you plan for its reduction, the more likely it will be reduced.

**Get Spiritual**

- **Meditate.** All that meditation requires is slow breathing and concentration. Look at something in front of you or make a mental picture while you gradually breathe slower and slower and feel the relief spread through your body and mind.

- **Pray.** You don’t need to go through life feeling alone. Prayer can be a great source of comfort and strength.

- **Remember your purpose.** Sometimes it is very valuable to remind ourselves why we are in a particular situation. Even though it may be a difficult situation, you may need to remind yourself that you have to be there and to realize that the situation’s importance outweighs its difficulty.

**Use Mind and Body Together**

- **Take a Break.** If possible, get up from what you are doing and walk away for a while. Don’t let yourself think about the source of the problem until after a short walk.

- **Get hug therapy.** We need at least four hugs a day to survive, eight hugs to feel okay, and twelve hugs to tackle the world. “Hugs” can come from many different sources and they can take many different forms. They can be bear hugs, smiles, compliments, or kind words or thoughts. If you have forgotten how to hug, ask a small child you know to teach you. Young children know that every time you give a hug, you get one back as a fringe benefit!

- **Try progressive relaxation.** Perform a mental massage of each muscle in your body from your feet up to your head. Take the time to allow each muscle to relax and unwind. Imagine that the muscles that were all knotted and tense are now long, smooth, and relaxed.

- **Laugh.** Nothing is so important that we must suffer self-damage. The ability to laugh at your own mistakes lightens your load and gives you the energy to return to a difficult task.
• **Find a pet.** Countless studies have demonstrated that caring for, talking to, holding, and stroking pets can help to reduce stress.

**Develop New Skills**

• **Learn something.** Sometimes your problem is that you lack information or skills in a certain area. The sooner you remedy your deficiency, the sooner your distress will end.

• **Practice a hobby.** If you have one, use it; if you don’t currently have one, then it’s time you did. A hobby can immerse you in accomplishment and pleasure. The stress management habits that you are currently acquiring and practicing are likely to serve you for the rest your life. Learning to handle stress in a healthy fashion is important not only to survive your first year and do well but to cope with the demands and opportunities of adulthood. A healthy adult is one who treats his or her body and mind in a respectful manner. When you do that, you communicate to all other adults that you are handling yourself well and don’t need them to baby you or tell you how to live your life.

**Getting Help**

Sometimes our problems are either too overwhelming or too complex for us to resolve by ourselves. If that is the case, you might benefit from checking out the services provided by your college counseling center. Counseling centers often offer individual or group sessions on handling difficult times or situations. The support and skills of a trained professional can help make difficult issues a lot more manageable.