



Stress Management



It is no secret that stress is a part of life. As most have experienced at one time or another, stress--in small doses--can actually be beneficial. When we are faced with an urgent situation, our body's "alarm system" goes off, causing us to think and act more quickly. But what happens when we are stressed for long periods of time? When we are constantly in a state of stress, our body is unable to turn this alarm off, which ends up wearing down our mental and physical health over time.

This guide will provide you the tools you need to not only control the level of stress in your life but also help you effectively tackle the stresses you may encounter on a daily basis.

Effects of Chronic Stress

Did you know that chronic stress is very harmful? It causes your body to stay on high alert, flooding it with persistently high levels of stress hormones. Over time, these stress chemicals wear down the body, worsening the chronic conditions you may already have and causing a number of other health problems.

Effects of Chronic Stress on Your Health

- Increases fatigue
- Raises blood pressure
- Worsens or increases risk of depression
- Worsens chronic pain
- Causes migraines
- Causes acid reflux (heartburn) and ulcers
- Weakens the immune system
- Lowers your metabolism

While it is not always possible to control the sources of your stress, you can control the way your mind and body react to it. This guide will cover several Stress Management techniques that have been proven to work in both lowering your stress level and decreasing its harmful effects.

Step 1: Identify Sources of Stress

Of course, every person is different and each has his or her own personal stressors. Sometimes the sources are obvious--such as a new job, financial hardship, or taking care of a sick loved one. Other times, the causes of stress are less obvious, such as having to cook, clean, or mow the lawn--routine tasks that take up time and energy. Thus, **the first step to effectively controlling your stress is to know exactly what is causing it.** One of the best ways to do this is to start a **Stress Journal**. The purpose of a Stress Journal is to help you identify the specific stressors in your life as well as how you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, write it down in your journal. Over time, try to find patterns and common themes.

What to Write in a Stress Journal

1. **Stressor:** The cause of your stress
2. **Effect:** How it made you feel, physically and emotionally
3. **Coping Strategy:** What you did to make yourself feel better

Step 2: Identify Unhealthy Habits

Coping habits that are unhealthy are those that may help you feel better temporarily, but that either does not effectively deal with the stressor or that harm your health in the long run.

Examples of Unhealthy Coping Habits

- ✗ Smoking
- ✗ Using pills or drugs to relax
- ✗ Drinking too much alcohol
- ✗ Withdrawing from friends and family
- ✗ Binging on junk or comfort food
- ✗ Procrastinating
- ✗ Zoning out for hours looking at your phone
- ✗ Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- ✗ Sleeping too much
- ✗ Taking out your stress on others

Step 3: Make Time for Relaxation

One important component of stress management is to set aside “me” time. Remember--**nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury**. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you’ll be in a better place to handle life’s stressors.

- **Schedule in leisure time.** Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule--even write it down on your calendar. Don’t allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries.
- **Do something you enjoy every day.** Create a **Stress Relief Toolbox** with small activities that you enjoy doing. Make an effort to do one of those things every day.
- **Keep your sense of humor.** This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The very act of laughing has a therapeutic effect on your body and mind.
- **Do relaxation techniques on a regular basis.** Activities such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate your body’s relaxation response.

Step 4: Practice the 4 A’s

❖ AVOID Unnecessary Stress

This includes learning to say “No” and making a conscious decision to prioritize your To-Do List.

❖ ALTER the Situation

If you can’t avoid a stressful situation, try altering it by taking control of your environment. Make an effort to find alternative solutions to stressful tasks.

❖ ADAPT to the Stressor

If you can’t change the stressor, try adjusting yourself by adapting to it. You will find that many things are not as stressful as they appear when you change your expectations and attitude.

- **Reframe problems:** Try viewing things from a more positive perspective.
- **Look at the bigger picture:** Ask yourself: “Is it even that important in the long run?”
- **Adjust your standards:** Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with “good enough.”
- **Practice gratitude:** When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

❖ ACCEPT the Things You Can’t Change

Some stressors--such as illness, the death of a loved one, the economy-- are simply unavoidable. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, you will see how much energy and frustration it saves.

- **Discover a way to benefit from each situation.** When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth.
- **Learn to forgive.** Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of bitterness and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.