

A Brief Guide to Stress Management

Stress is an inevitable part of life – there is simply no way to completely avoid it. But when it is prolonged or excessive, it can have harmful consequences for our health. For example, it can impair immune system functioning or trigger the release of hormones that speed up heart rate and raise blood pressure. Stress also can increase our risk of illness or worsen existing illnesses by making it more difficult for us to maintain a healthy lifestyle (e.g., regular exercise, nutritious diet). Learn how to manage stress effectively by using the following strategies.

Identify what is causing your stress. Although this might appear to be a simple assignment – you may quickly point to new responsibilities at work or a crisis with the family (or both) – it is not always clear exactly why a certain situation is stressful or what elements of the situation make it so. Keep a journal in which you record not only the various tasks you have each day but also your thoughts about these tasks and your ability to handle them.

- Exactly what did you do that was so stressful?
- Who else was involved?
- What was said?
- How did you feel about what you did or what was said?

It is also a good idea to keep track of the activities and experiences that you enjoyed each day and the times you were able to break free of the stressful situation and relax at least a little. Were there moments of joy and appreciation for something or someone you encountered? Perhaps you experienced a sense of awe and wonder as you watched a beautiful sunrise or looked through a book with photos of some of the world's most magnificent natural wonders. Or maybe it was just an enjoyable conversation you had with someone.

Carefully analyze your daily activities and thoughts.

- Which task or tasks caused the most stress?
- Was there one particular responsibility you found stressful, or was the stress you experienced the result of having to handle too many responsibilities?
- Did the people with whom you interacted add to or reduce the stress?
- What did you say to yourself about how you handled your responsibilities?
- Did you feel you did a good job?
- Was the task as difficult or overwhelming as you had anticipated?
- How much time did you have to do some of the things that you enjoy?
- What situations or activities did you find relaxing or renewing?

Prioritize your various responsibilities or tasks. Which are the essential tasks – the ones you absolutely must continue? Are there any that you can set aside or ask someone else to take over? Frequently, we are reluctant to step back from responsibilities or hand them off to others, but there may come a time when you need to do this in order to carry out your most important responsibilities and, at the same time, maintain your own health.

Improve your time management skills. It can be helpful to set aside enough time to list each day's responsibilities, establish priorities, and create a realistic plan for handling these responsibilities. Be sure to schedule some time for yourself!

Improve your communication skills. This is not to say that you have poor communication skills but that new circumstances may call for a change in your approach. Chances are that at least some of the people with whom you interact are not aware that you are feeling overwhelmed. They may not know about all of your various duties, or it may appear to them that everything is under control and that you do not need any assistance. The only way these individuals are going to come to your aid is if you take the initiative to say in a calm but assertive manner what you are feeling about your situation and needs. The best way to handle this type of communication, especially during a crisis or period of great stress, is to identify exactly what you need to say, plan how to say it, and even rehearse it a few times. And remember, the goal is to communicate what you need, not to criticize others.

Recognize negative thoughts and replace them with more realistic, positive ones. For example, instead of saying to yourself (perhaps over and over again), "I'm dreading tomorrow. I'll never be able to handle everything I'm expected to do," replace it with a more realistic statement, "I'm not looking forward to tomorrow, but I've handled days like this before and will be able to handle this one, too."

Find someone you can trust and in whom you can confide your feelings about the difficulties in your life – a friend, a member of the clergy, a mental health professional, or members of a support group. Often during our most stressful times we are reluctant to let others know what we are going through, but that is exactly when we need to take the initiative to reach out and ask for help. You should not try to go through any difficult period – marital strife, financial difficulties, caring for an ill family member – by yourself.

Be involved in activities that you find enjoyable. Often when we encounter stressful and demanding situations, the first thing we allow to drop from our schedule are activities that bring us pleasure and restore our spirits – listening to our favorite music, reading interesting books, or taking leisurely walks. Granted, you may no longer have as much time as you did before to enjoy these activities, but with careful planning you should be able to find ways to get some of these back into your life. You should not underestimate the importance of these activities. We all need these types of activities to restore and strengthen our mental health.

Practice relaxation exercises. One of the commonly used approaches is "progressive relaxation." In this method, you systematically tense different muscle groups and then gradually relax those muscles. It is not always easy to achieve a relaxed state when your life is full of demanding responsibilities, but it can be done. The key is to practice your relaxation procedures regularly. Therefore, it is important to carve out of your schedule each day at least 15 minutes for practice.

