

Managing Your Stress

Completely banishing stress from your life is not an attainable goal. Nor, some would argue, should it be, and personal growth usually occurs in times of stress. If you consistently try your hardest and seek new endeavors, you will naturally feel challenged and sometimes even stressed. This is all part of personal growth. But sometimes stress threatens to overwhelm you. The appropriate goal is to limit your stress to reasonable and manageable levels.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to minimize its negative toll, and to prevent it from getting a grip on you in the first place. These strategies provide you with a sense of control over your life and/or the situation. They also boost your mood and your confidence in handling a stressful situation. Usually there is no one right or wrong way to cope with a stressful situation. The idea is to have as much information—as many “tools in your toolbox”—as possible.

Probably the most crucial aspect of managing stress is to not be surprised when it happens. *Stress is going to happen*, whether you think it will or not, and whether you are prepared appropriately for it or not. Being surprised by stress actually paralyzes you into not responding, which is the worst thing that one can do in a stressful situation. There is a common myth in our society about the “stress-free situation.” This does not exist. It is truly a myth, and seeking it really prohibits you from being able to realistically deal with day-to-day life situations.

For stressors that are uncontrollable, the key is to adapt your response to the needs of the situation and/or manage your cognitive or emotional responses in order to minimize stress. For example:

- Expect surprises in your life, and remind yourself that there is no such thing as a stress-free life or situation.
- Remind yourself that you have successfully handled similar situations in the past.
- Find some humor in the situation.
- Reward yourself with something enjoyable after managing the stressful situation.
- Find a trusted friend to talk with about the experience.
- Use relaxation exercises to control your physical response to the situation.
- Make a list of similar situations and the strategies that you used to successfully manage them in the past.
- Ask others what they have done in similar situations.
- Don't strive for perfection; remind yourself that no stressful situation can be handled “perfectly.”

For stressors over which you have some control, in addition to the strategies described above, you can do things to actively respond to the situation. For example:

- Make a list of stressors, so that you can prioritize them and tackle them one at a time, in order to minimize feelings of being overwhelmed.
- Break down large tasks or goals into smaller sub-goals.
- Change aspects of a stressful situation that give you problems. For example, rearrange your schedule, have a problem-solving discussion with the bothersome person, organize your work space, schedule some time for a break, take a brief walk or ask someone for help.
- Limit your exposure to the stressor in question. Remember that there are some stressors you can walk away from.

Develop systematic problem-solving skills.

- Don't expect to be perfect. Expect to give it your best shot and learn from the experience.
- Identify the stressful situation.
- Define it as an objective, solvable problem.
- Brainstorm all possible solutions, without evaluating them.
- Then anticipate the possible outcomes of each solution.

- Choose a solution and act on it.
- Evaluate the results, and start over if necessary.

Improve your coping skills.

- Practice assertive communication.
- Learn to identify and ask for what you need to successfully handle a situation.
- Find someone who successfully handles stress and imitate that person.
- Surround yourself with confident and competent people who have experienced and learned from the adversity that they have faced in life.
- Plan and prepare in advance for problematic situations. For example, anticipate problems and develop a game plan for how to respond, including reminding yourself that the situation has occurred before and that you have survived it before.
- Flexibility is crucial. If your coping strategy for a situation has failed repeatedly, chances are that doing more of it is not going to work. Stop, rethink, and try something different.

Make lifestyle changes that are conducive to healthy living.

- Take care of yourself physically; learn yoga, relaxation exercises or deep muscle relaxation skills; limit caffeine and alcohol intake; get enough sleep; drink plenty of water; eat a healthy, balanced diet and manage your weight; stop smoking; see your physician to evaluate physical symptoms, and follow through with recommended preventive screenings; take medication as prescribed.
- Strive to balance work and personal life, schedule time for personal recreation, stay involved with family and friends, and limit contact with people who are chronically negative.

It is important to note that there are medications that can calm the physiological response to stressful events. If your physical/emotional symptoms are severe, speak with your doctor to determine if one of these medications might be of use to you. While the medications do not teach you new coping skills, they can help you in the short term to get through highly stressful experiences. In the long term, however, learning relaxation skills and coping strategies, and how to think through problems will help you with the next unexpected situation.

If you find yourself unable to function at the level you have become used to, or at the level you wish to, stress may be interfering with your life. If you find yourself worrying, feeling physical (muscle) tension, having rapid heart rate or doing a lot of "what-if-ing," or postponing work because you feel overwhelmed, talk to your family doctor or see a mental health professional to discuss your stress level and coping skills.

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