

Take Charge of Stress

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Feeling stressed is an unpleasant feeling. Stress also affects physical health. What is stress, and what are some good ways to start dealing with it?

If there is a lot going on, and we feel on top of it, we might feel exhilarated, challenged, interested, joyful. We usually talk about feeling stressed when more is going on than we can comfortably deal with, or when we feel a sense of danger. We might feel overloaded, under pressure, exhausted, ragged, or on a treadmill. We might wish we could escape from a situation that we feel stuck in, especially if we feel that something bad might happen. If there's some kind of threat, danger, dread, anxiety, conflict, or other unpleasantness, stress is present. Maybe we're anxious that something bad will happen if we don't get a good grade on an exam or get our boss's approval; maybe we need to meet our own high standards for being a good worker or a good parent. Maybe we feel stuck in an unpleasant job or difficult personal relationship. Part of what makes a situation stressful is feeling that you don't know how to cope with the unpleasantness or overload. Stress is also a response of your body. You might feel that your muscles are tense or that your chest is constricted. Or you might feel frozen solid. Or your stomach might hurt. Or your breathing might be shallow.

The key to stress management is creating a sense that you are on top of things and that you're not in danger. The goal is feeling relaxed, feeling pleasure, not feeling anxious; feeling in control while effectively managing your life. Feeling relaxed instead of stressed is not just for when things are going well. You aim for maintaining your internal equilibrium in the face of life's challenges and ups and downs. There are many strategies for achieving this. Here are some ways to get started:

1. Commit to becoming less stressed. Decide that this is a priority and you're going to do it.
2. Start small. Stress management programs can be useful, but it is also good to start out small and simple. If you create a burdensome agenda of tasks or activities that you must do, or

attitudes that you must have, or else you've failed, then stress management can itself become a stressor. Of course, if you're the kind of person who wants to dive in and do more, go ahead.

3. On the other hand, do have a schedule. Start out with what is comfortable and easy. Pick something that you can comfortably make part of your lifestyle, even if this is only for five minutes a day.

4. Decide to give time, money, and thought to your well-being. If this means taking time for yourself or spending money on pleasurable or relaxing activities, this is okay and even important. Plan on budgeting resources such as time or money to having a relaxed life.

5. Find what works for you. For some people, exercise is a great stress-buster; for other people, sitting and meditating is most enjoyable.

6. One way to start is to build stress-free moments into your day. Decide that you'll have times during the day that you're taking a "vacation" from whatever is worrying you or demanding your time. Build pleasure and relaxation into your day. You might want to exercise, take walks or hot baths, meet friends for coffee, or attend stress-reducing activities ranging from yoga to touch-therapies. If you're really busy, you can still take a five-minute time-out. Just pause and relax. This can help break the cycle of responding to events as dangers and reinforce a sense of relaxed rhythm to your day.

7. Mindfulness, that is, paying attention to the here-and-now, can help to plunge you out of stress responding and more deeply into yourself. Mindfulness is a practice that can help to deal with physical and mental expressions of anxiety and overload. Not having a rhythm between rest and activity can also increase feelings of overload. Brief periods of mindfulness during the day can help to restore this rhythm. You might find that in the end you accomplish more if you rest or relax.

Mindfulness means paying attention to the here-and-now to get in touch with yourself; to do this, you slow down and notice yourself. There are many formal programs you can find that teach mindfulness and many local groups that practice meditation. To start on your own, take a brief, five-minute time-out; aim for doing this two or three times a day. Stop. Notice what you are seeing, hearing, smelling. Chew your food twenty-five times and pay attention to what you taste.

Tune into your body—what do you really want to eat? If you're outside, notice the trees, feel the air. Notice the breeze on your face.

8. Breathing practices are also good ways to reduce stress responding. They can be learned as part of mindfulness training, yoga, qi gong, and in many other ways. To start on your own, practice daily for at least ten minutes; aim for practicing twice a day. First, simply pay attention to your breathing. How does breath feel as it passes your nostrils, is the air warm or cold? Does your chest or abdomen move as you inhale and exhale? After noticing the breath for a while, allow your belly to expand when you inhale. You can intentionally expand your abdomen away from your spine to make this happen, and you can put a hand on your belly to feel it. Notice how long your inhalation and exhalation take; then, whatever the time is, slow your breathing and make the exhale longer than the inhale.

9. Remember that exercise is great for stress, but relaxation is also important. Sometimes people think that relaxation means being inactive, zoning out, taking a vacation from real life--for example, by watching TV or having a beer. However, relaxation is an active state of the body and the mind, of active attention, in which you are moving from your center. Time-outs, mindfulness or meditation, and breathing practices help to achieve this state. So do many other activities, ranging from moving meditations like qi gong to body-oriented therapies like shiatsu. You might find that in the end you accomplish more if you rest or relax.

10. Understanding what stresses us and having effective ways to cope are also important. Many self-help and professional sources of assistance are available for this. Spend some time researching what works for you. Here's one website that has many self-help stress-management resources:

<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>

The key to whether a stress management technique or activity is helpful: Do you feel more relaxed, alert, alive, centered, on top of things? If you feel relaxation or pleasure, you're doing something right.

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