

Coping With Stress in Your Life

Between balancing finances, caring for aging parents and the demands of work and family, it's not surprising that many of us live in a constant state of stress. Stress can be a positive force that helps you get the job done, improves your performance and keeps you motivated. However, experiencing constant high levels of stress can be harmful to both your body and mind. Continuously feeling stressed is considered a contributing risk factor for many chronic conditions including heart disease, certain cancers and depression.

Although it is not possible to remove stress from your life completely, you *do* have more control over it than you might think. With practice and a commitment to effective stress management, you can keep up with the fast pace of modern life *and* cope with the daily challenges that everyone faces.

Find the Source

The first step in successfully managing stress is to uncover what your biggest stressors are. Although this seems easy, it can be very difficult to pinpoint the actual causes. For example, it may not be your job demands that are draining you but how you organize and prioritize around work. Perhaps your workload at home leaves you feeling too exhausted to focus well at work. Fortunately, once you identify the larger problem, you have also started to identify the solution.

A great way to discover your most common stressors is to start a stress journal. Write about your recurring stressors—when it happens or at a time you set aside. It only takes a few moments to write down what caused your stress, what your thoughts and feelings were and what your reaction was. This will help you see the pattern and the circumstances that contribute to the stress.

It's important to find healthy ways of coping with stress, even more so if you find yourself withdrawing from friends and family, being inactive, over or under-eating, sleeping too much, relying on drugs or alcohol or taking your stress out on others.

Choose Healthy Tactics

We all admire those individuals who seem to stay calm under pressure, adapt easily and handle any challenge. Although some people have a more natural tendency for stress reduction than others, you can work on developing this same kind of positive attitude. Unfortunately there isn't just one solution. Everyone responds differently to stress and you will need to experiment to find the healthy tactics that work best for you.

Staying Away from Stress

Some stressors simply can't be avoided. While it's not recommended to try total stress avoidance, you will be surprised by how much stress you can eliminate by making a few conscious changes:

Know your limits. As hard as it can be, sometimes "no" or "not right now" is the right answer. Prioritize what truly must be done, when and why. Realize what you can and can't do in both your home and professional life. Sometimes we expect more from ourselves than anyone else would expect from us. Taking on more than you can handle will make your stress levels skyrocket.

Take control and think outside the box. If the daily drive to work is making you tense, explore alternative modes of transportation or look for ways to make the commute a more pleasant experience. If grocery shopping trips are taking up too much time, try stopping at your local market on your way home from work. Identify the things that cause you stress and if it's possible, avoid them.

Stay away. If there's someone in your life that is always causing you stress, see if you can limit the amount of time you spend with him or her or consider how to address your concerns with them. In some cases, it may be wise to let the relationship disappear completely from your life, either bit by bit or all at once.

*Effective stress management
gives you the tools you need
to take charge, find a balance
and uncover your natural
ability to handle stressful
situations everyday.*

Focus on what you can do to limit the tension in your life and experiment with ways of dealing with stress.

Adapt to the Situation

Sometimes it's just not possible to change what is causing you stress. Instead, try to change your expectations and attitudes that may be contributing to your stress. Start to:

Think about the big picture. If something is bothering you, try to step back and evaluate it. Is this actually important? Will it have any impact on you in a month, a year or even a week from now? If not, you should be focusing your time and energy on what is truly important to you and your loved ones. A sense of purpose and long term focus has been linked to higher levels of resilience.

Be realistic. No one is perfect, including you. Aim for reasonable standards, look for possible solutions and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Find the positive. If something is stressing you out, try to find your inner optimist. Reflect on all the positive, happy things you have going for you in life including your relationships with family and friends, workplace positives and your valuable personal and professional achievements. This will help you keep things in perspective.

Accept the Things You Can't Change

Life will provide you with stressors you can't prevent or change. A death in the family, a devastating medical diagnosis or a global recession are actually handled best if you accept them as they are. Pick your battles wisely and invest your energy where it can make a difference. Try to:

Let go. Recognize when events are out of your hands. Stop trying to control the uncontrollable and focus on the things you *do* have power over including your own reactions, meanings, emotions, conclusions and actions in response to an event.

Lean on others. If you're having a hard time coping, try opening up to a friend or make an appointment with a professional therapist. Talking about your problems will not only help you release your feelings, it may also reveal some practical solutions.

Take care of yourself

Don't get so caught up in the stress of your daily life that you forget to meet your own needs. If you regularly set aside time for yourself you will be better equipped to handle the stressors that are heading your way. Make sure you:

Get healthy. One of the best ways to release tension is to exercise regularly. Ideally this should be 30 minutes of activity a day. But don't stress if you can't manage that, focus and lots of small investments will also do: take the stairs, park further away or play an active game with your child. Exercise should be coupled with a healthy and balanced diet. Too much fat, salt, sugar, alcohol and caffeine will actually end up draining your energy. Physical activity and a healthy diet both play a big part in reducing and preventing the negative effects of stress.

Catch up on your sleep. Try to get a full nights rest. If that isn't possible, consider power napping or on the spot relaxation techniques to let your mind and body rest. Feeling tired will increase your vulnerability to stress and can make you irrational.

Take a time out. Read a book or share a laugh with your friends. Set aside time and don't let your other responsibilities creep in. This is an opportunity to forget about your stress, recharge and refocus your energy.

In our fast-paced world, stress is a normal part of life. Although some people thrive on stress, research has shown that the long-term effects can be damaging to your physical and emotional health. Step back and first identify your major sources of stress. Remember, while you can't get rid of all stressors from your life, you can eliminate some and learn to handle the rest better.

Make a Change

If you can't avoid a stressful situation, figure out how you can change it so the problem won't continue into the future. Be sure to:

Open up. If something or someone is bothering you, talk about it. Keeping things bottled up will only cause more resentment and the situation will never improve. Even if you just share your frustration with a close friend or family member, getting your feelings out can help you release some of your stress, feel better and maybe even give you some insight into how to handle the situation.

Negotiate. Although it's a challenge, look for solutions everyone can live with. If your boss complains about your work pace but is a constant distraction, ask him or her to give you more time to get to work. If your spouse wants you to spend more time with the children, but you're extremely busy at work, look for windows of time where you might be able to take a break and make up the time later. Just be sure that when you're negotiating, you approach the situation in a respectful and open way.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP.

Contact details can be found on your EAP brochure or, you can call Canada collect to reverse the charges, by calling your local operator and asking to speak to an operator in Canada. Then request to place a collect call to Canada 905-886-3605. You'll be put in touch with our Care Access Centre who can help arrange for help closer to home.