

Coping with Stress

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You may lead a generally balanced life, but nearly everyone has stressful times. Learning to cope with stress is important to your health and your relationships, so identifying its sources and putting them in perspective will help you to eliminate or deal with the stress and enable you to lead an even more balanced life.

What to Do

Identify the Main Sources of Stress

Pressure can be positive, providing challenges and building confidence as you meet those challenges. How you see the situation can make the difference between whether you experience pressure or stress. Ask yourself which situations you find stressful and identify the elements within them that cause the stress. Sources of stress in trying to balance the demands of work, home, and family include:

- conflict
- handling difficult behavior
- performance worries
- demanding routines
- increased demands on your attention or time
- financial worries

Which of those in the above list do you recognize as sources of everyday stress in your life? Think about possible ways in which you can eliminate or alleviate the stress.

Major life changes have also been shown to cause a disproportionate amount of stress, especially when three or more occur within the same two-year period. The most stressful life events are:

- the death of your partner
- divorce or separation
- legal proceedings against you
- a prison term
- personal injury
- marriage
- having or adopting a baby

- losing or changing jobs
- retirement
- moving
- bereavement

Have any of these life events affected you in the last two years? The process of adapting to such events will inevitably take a toll on your welfare, as you understand, respond to, and live with the change. Think about each life event and how you are dealing with it, but without dwelling too much upon it. Make time to relax and recover, using that time to do something you really enjoy, unrelated to the change you face. You will likely know or meet others who are going through similar life changes. But even people who have not yet had to face any of these changes will understand that this is a difficult time for you and will want to help, so do not isolate yourself.

Strengthen Your Relationships

Contact with others is crucial to your doing your job, but some people are a lot easier to deal with than others. Your support network outside work can help you to deal with the pressures of your job and actually reduce your stress, so strengthening your relationships is well worth doing.

Learn to Handle Criticism

Do you have to put up with constant criticism or put-downs from one person? People who are always negative about others and their ideas tend to be insecure. Reminding others of their faults is a way of deflecting attention from their own perceived failings. Perhaps they feel their position is threatened or that they need to compete with you. Someone like this, who may already feel frustrated or have low self-esteem, often feels even worse seeing others enjoy success.

- When someone makes a personal attack, try to rise above it and remain cheerful, rather than reacting to it negatively.
- Use phrases such as “that’s an interesting perspective” to show that you have heard without agreeing.
- Repeat a negative comment to the person who gave it. They might notice the destructive effect of their words and will tone down or qualify their comment. Listen carefully, as this could be useful feedback. Perhaps you have said or done something that they have difficulty coping with.
- If a critic uses sarcasm in an attempt to belittle you, understand what this person is implying, then ask “why do you say that?” to clarify the meaning. This also highlights the critic’s negative tactics and may be enough to stop the behavior.
- Confront persistent critics directly. Describe the criticism you have been receiving, disclose how it makes you feel, and suggest what you would like instead. “You have been sarcastic and critical of me on a number of occasions recently, which I find hurtful. If you have a problem with something I do, come to me so we can discuss it.”

- Make a log of events, including your attempts to confront and resolve the problem.

Don't Absorb Others' Anger

Do you cope well with angry people? Here are a few simple tips that will help you restore calm.

- Keep calm yourself. Concentrate on breathing slowly, listening carefully, and keeping your body language open.
- Disarm the immediate mood by responding and showing concern: "I can see that this has really upset you; let's discuss it so I can understand fully and see what we can do about it."
- If someone is too upset to listen there is little point wasting your energy. Ask her to come back when she has calmed down so that you can discuss the problem properly.
- Find a good time and place to discuss persistent anger problems. Be sure that the people involved know in advance what you want to discuss, so they can prepare themselves. Figure out why this person uses inappropriate behavior—what does she hope to gain, or has it worked for her in the past? Plan your challenge to her anger carefully. Remind yourself that she may have a real grievance or frustration that you can deal with.
- Describe why you think this anger is a problem and how it causes difficulties for you and/or others. Explain what behavior you would like to see replace the anger. Ask this person if she has problems changing her behavior and discuss what you can do to help. You may have to negotiate and make compromises to solve the problem.

Avoid "Dead Batteries"

Can you identify people who act as dead batteries, draining others of their energy while giving little in return? Sometimes we can simply "unhook" ourselves from negative or unresponsive people and have less to do with them. But, if they are members of our work team or family, it is difficult or impossible to do so. We must deal with the issue rather than avoid it. Find or create a good time for just the two of you to talk without being distracted. Describe how you see this person's behavior and disclose how it makes you feel. Explain what you think would make the situation better and ask if any barriers exist that might stop this from happening.

Communicate Assertively

Prioritization and self-organization can reduce your stress and help you to manage a demanding workload. Promising less can mean getting more done. But what if you find it hard to say no or to ask for the help you need? As with any skill, practice improves performance, so improve your ability to assert yourself by working through the points below.

- Get into the habit of using assertive body language. Stand (or sit) tall, taking up plenty of space. Breathe deeply and easily, making eye contact with an open expression. Do not fiddle with your hands or cross your arms or legs. Clasp your hands lightly, relaxing your shoulders.

- Practice projecting your voice more powerfully. Start by exhaling all the air in your lungs, which will trigger your body to take a deep breath before you talk. Enunciate consonants clearly, keep your voice soft but turn up the volume. Drop the pitch of your voice (without dropping the volume) at the end of a phrase to convey conviction in your own words.
- While you're still getting used to communicating assertively, you may want to give yourself time to consider your response by making use of useful phrases like "Possibly, but I'll get back to you on that," or "I need to think about that, I'll let you know."
- If people interrupt you while you talk, raise a hand to signal "stop," increase the volume slightly and finish your sentence with conviction. If they continue to interrupt, you can say "please let me finish" as you put up your hand, to draw the person's attention to what they are doing. Keep your cool and continue your point: "I was saying that..."
- Recognize the other person's point of view while saying what you think. It is important to express yourself honestly but constructively. A useful phrase might be: "I realize that you...but I feel that..."
- When you are asked to do something, state clearly what your answer is, what you are prepared to do and what you are not. Do not feel that you must justify yourself; it is the request you are rejecting, not the person. Repeat the message until the other person accepts it.

Develop Stress-Relieving Habits

Biochemicals are released in response to stress to prepare your body for action. Even after the stress is gone, and you no longer need to respond with "fight" or "flight," these biochemicals may continue to affect your body. Exercise is the single most effective stress reliever. By making exercise a part of your working day, you can boost your energy and increase your stamina. Exercise removes the effects of the biochemicals adrenaline and cortisol. After a stressful meeting, take a brisk walk to burn them off before resuming your day.

A routine that includes aerobic, anaerobic, and stretching exercises is ideal but the best exercise of all is the kind that fits your lifestyle. A walk to work, using the stairs rather than the elevator, and a lunchtime stroll are all ways to fit exercise into the working day. A Saturday bicycle ride and a couple of visits to the gym or exercise class during the week are all it takes to release the noradrenaline and endorphins which relieve the tension caused by a frenetic daily routine. You will improve your circulation and digestion at the same time, making a good night's sleep more likely.

What to Avoid

You Don't Prioritize Your E-mails

An inbox full of e-mails can be overwhelming, so start by trawling through to delete spam and other unimportant "noise" from your mail. Then "classify" the e-mails that remain: those that require an

instant response and those that require only a couple of lines can be dispatched quickly. File longer e-mails that require a considered response or ones with attachments that need to be read, so that you can give them appropriate attention; set a reminder to make sure you don't forget. Prioritize the e-mails that are left and deal with them as effectively as you can.

You Are Available 24/7

Deal with phone calls and e-mails during set periods of the day only. Turn off the “message alert” on your computer and turn off your cell phone when you need to concentrate. You can still respond to people within a reasonable time—but in managed chunks of time that will keep you sane.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

Assertiveness.com: www.assertiveness.com

Mindtools.com: www.mindtools.com/smpage.html

National Mental Health Association: www.nmha.org/infoctr/factsheets/41.cfm