

Dealing With Stress

Some stress can be a good thing. It is the tap on our shoulder that reminds us to finish a task, to try harder, to reach deeper and achieve our personal best. But when stress is excessive or unmanaged it becomes distress. When we become overwhelmed by the stress, not only do we become less effective in tackling our responsibilities, but we also increase the probability of a number of health-related problems. Distress may result in headaches, high blood pressure, backaches, insomnia and may reduce the body's resistance to illness and disease. Distress can also cause us to become discouraged and depressed.

It is common to believe that difficulties cause stress. For example, if you have recently experienced a death, a divorce, job loss or a move, you might expect to be stressed. But people are not machines. Different experiences affect different people very differently.

Major life events can be stressful. Even positive events, such as weddings, the birth of a baby, buying a house, can be stressful. But they affect people differently.

Daily hassles can be a major source of stress. Losing the keys, a child's sickness, lack of money may be as stressful as major life events. Sometimes it is the little things that become overwhelming.

When stress moves beyond that gentle nudge that encourages us and instead becomes mentally overwhelming and physically exhausting, it's time for action. It's time to relax. It's time to use our resources to control or alleviate our stress.

We all have resources – but we may not think to use them. For example, we may have friends who are willing to help us when an ice storm hits. We may have a sense of humor that helps us see our situation in a funny way. We may have a lifetime of experience with difficulties that helps us deal with them. We may have great organizational ability that we can use to make our lives run more smoothly. When we use our resources well, we can manage many of the stresses of life.

Even if our resources are limited, we can ask for help. There may be people at work or in our neighborhood or where we worship who will help us. We can use the resources we have to help us get the help we need.

Here are ten ways you can use your resources to control the stress in your life:

1. **Participate in a physical activity.** Taking a walk, working in the yard or going for a bike ride can help relieve that “uptight” feeling. The body and the mind work together. During physical activity epinephrine is released, which produces feelings of euphoria. Sometimes the key to mental relief is found in a good physical workout.
2. **Toss stressors you can't change.** Much of what we worry about isn't real. Do you spend mental reserves processing “what if” scenarios? Other stresses are real, but out of our control. Make a list of all your stresses and worries. Determine what is real and in your control. Toss or bury the rest.
3. **Keep fit.** A healthy diet, regular exercise and plenty of sleep have long been the doctor's remedy for bouncing back from a physical illness. Since the mind and body are connected, keeping fit is good advice for physical and mental well-being.
4. **Find something to laugh about.** Humor is effective medicine. Laughing releases hormones that work to physically reduce anxiety. Find the funny side of life or read humor to help you deal with stress.
5. **Enjoy the moment.** Instead of reliving the frustrations of the past or anticipating the stresses of the future, focus on the present. Use the five senses to enjoy the here and now. Listen to sounds that usually go unnoticed. Count them. Savor the taste of a favorite food. Describe it. Feel the texture of a rose petal. Compare it. Smell the scent of a flower. Cherish it. In the words of one stress expert, “wherever you are, be there.”
6. **Build a support network.** Help is always available. No one needs to do it alone. Work with a mentor. Join a support group. Have a neighborhood party. Organize others around an issue. Call your family and friends. The best way to develop a support network is to be a support to others. Everyone wins when support is accepted graciously and extended freely.

7. **Write in a journal.** Sometimes writing about something brings it all back into perspective. As we write, we may also identify new resources or creative ways to address a challenge. We also may rally our own psychological reserves and be able to tackle our challenges with increased energy and clarity.
8. **Relax.** When we feel stress starting to build up, we can soothe ourselves and relax. Think about good things. Take a few minutes to sing or do something you love to do. Pray. Breathe deeply. Play a game with your children. Each of us knows what will work to help us restore peace to our lives. Sometimes a temporary solution may be to ignore it. This won't permanently solve problems, but it may provide a desperately needed break. Sometimes a break is all that is needed to approach things with renewed energy.
9. **Prepare.** A task, event or crisis is most stressful when we are unprepared to address it. The obvious solution is to prepare. Taking time to learn from our errors, develop new skills and collect resources or plot a strategy is time well spent.
10. **Look at things differently.** We can manage stress by the meaning we give to an event. We can change the way we think about things. One person may worry that her partner will desert her – because her father did. As a result she may worry and fret. She may even argue with her partner. But she can change the way she thinks

about him. “He has always been very faithful. I know he loves his family.” Rather than expecting the worst, we can hope for the best. Much stress is the result of worrying about things that never happen.

Even if a dreaded event happens, we can make the most of it. We can use our resources. We can see it as an opportunity for growth. In fact, some scholars say that stressful events are our friends; they help us grow and become stronger. There may be a recovery time after something difficult hits us – we should be patient as we heal from a painful situation – but we can be better as a result of our difficult experiences.

Applications □

- Think about a stressful situation you are currently experiencing. What resources can you use to deal with the situation?
- Are there certain times that are most stressful for you? What can you do to deal with those?
- What are ways that you soothe yourself? How can you use this when you are feeling stressed?
- Do you have a certain friend who may help you feel more peaceful? Call that person, send an e-mail or go out to lunch with him or her.