

STRESS MANAGEMENT: TEN SELF-CARE TECHNIQUES

Many people don't realize it, but stress is a very natural and important part of life. Without stress there would be no life at all!

We need stress (eustress), but not too much stress for too long (distress). Our body is designed to react to both types of stress. Eustress helps keep us alert, motivates us to face challenges, and drives us to solve problems. These low levels of stress are manageable and can be thought of as necessary and normal stimulation.

Distress, on the other hand, results when our bodies over-react to events. It leads to what has been called a "fight or flight" reaction. Such reactions may have been useful in times long ago when our ancestors were frequently faced with life or death matters. Nowadays, such occurrences are not usual. Yet, we react to many daily situations as if they were life or death issues. Our bodies really don't know the difference between a saber-toothed tiger and an employer correcting our work. It is how we perceive and interpret the events of life that dictates how our bodies react. If we think something is very scary or worrisome, our bodies react accordingly.

When we view something as manageable, though, our body doesn't go haywire; it remains alert, but not alarmed. The activation of our sympathetic nervous system (a very important part of our general nervous system) mobilizes us for quick action. The more we sense danger (social or physical), the more our body reacts. Have you ever been called upon to give an extemporaneous talk and found that your heart pounded so loudly and your mouth was so dry that you thought you just couldn't do it? That's over-reaction.

Problems can occur when overactivation of the sympathetic system is unnecessary. If we react too strongly or let the small over-reactions (the daily hassles) pile up, we may run into physical, as well as psychological, problems. Gastrointestinal problems (e.g., diarrhea or nausea), depression, or severe headaches can come about from acute distress. Insomnia, heart disease, and distress habits (e.g., drinking, overeating, smoking, and using drugs) can result from the accumulation of small distress.

What we all need is to learn approach matters in more realistic and reasonable ways. Strong reactions are better reserved for serious situations. Manageable reactions are better for the everyday issues that we all have to face.

ARE YOU A REACTOR OR AN OVER-REACTOR?

Below are situations that cause stress in some and distress in others. Imagine yourself in each one right now. How are you reacting?

- Driving your car in rush hour
- Misplacing something in the house
- Dealing with incompetence at work

- Being blamed for something
- Getting a last minute work assignment
- Having something break while using it
- Planning your budget
- Waiting in a long line at the grocery store or bank

SOME HEALTHFUL HINTS

Basically, we need to modify our over-reactions to situations. Rather than seeing situations as psychologically or physically threatening and thereby activating our sympathetic nervous system, our parasympathetic nervous system (that part which helps lower physiological arousal) needs to be called into play. The following suggestions are designed to reduce distress. Try them. They work!

1. **Learn to Relax.** Throughout the day, take 'minibreaks." Sit-down and get comfortable, slowly take a deep breath in, hold it, and then exhale very slowly. At the same time, let your shoulder muscles droop, smile, and say something positive like, "I am r-e-l-a-x-e-d." Be sure to get sufficient rest at night.
2. **Practice Acceptance.** Many people get distressed over things they won't let themselves accept. Often these things that can't be changed, like someone else's feelings or beliefs. If something unjust bothers you, that is different. If you act in a responsible way, the chances are you will manage stress effectively.
3. **Talk Rationally to Yourself.** Ask yourself what real impact the stressful situation will have on you in a day or a week and see if you can let the negative thoughts go. Think through whether the situation is your problem or the other's. If it is yours, approach it calmly and firmly; if it is the other's, there is not much you can do about it. Rather than condemn yourself with hindsight thinking like, "I should have...", think about what you can learn from the error and plan for the future. Watch out for perfectionism - set realistic and attainable goals. Remember, everyone makes errors. Be careful of procrastination - breaking tasks into smaller units will help and prioritizing will help get things done.
4. **Get Organized.** Develop a realistic schedule of daily activities that includes time for work, sleep, relationships, and recreation. Use a daily "thing to do" list. Improve your physical surroundings by cleaning your house and straightening up your office. Use your time and energy as efficiently as possible.
5. **Exercise.** Physical activity has always provided relief from stress. In the past, daily work was largely physical. Now that physical exertion is no longer a requirement for earning a living, we don't get rid of stress so easily while working. It accumulates very quickly. We need to develop a regular exercise program to help reduce the effects of working. It accumulates very quickly. We need to develop a regular exercise program to help reduce the effects of stress before it becomes distress. Try aerobics, walking, jogging, dancing, swimming, and the like.
6. **Reduce Time Urgency.** If you frequently check your watch or worry about what you do with your time, learn to take things a bit slower. Allow plenty of time to get things done. Plan your schedule ahead of time. Recognize that you can only do so much in a given period. Practice the notion of "pace, not race."

7. **Disarm Yourself.** Every situation in life does not require you to be competitive. Adjust your approach to an event according to its demands. You don't have to raise your voice in a simple discussion. Playing tennis with a friend doesn't have to be an Olympic trial. Leave behind you 'weapons' of shutting, have the last word, puffing someone else down, and blaming.

8. **Quiet Time.** Balance your family, social, and work demands with special private times. Hobbies are good antidotes for daily pressures. Unwind by taking a quiet stroll, soaking in a hot bath, watching a sunset, or listening to calming music.

9. **Watch Your Habits.** Eat sensibly - a balanced diet will provide all the necessary energy you will need during the day. Avoid nonprescription drugs and minimize your alcohol use - you need to be mentally and physically alert to deal with stress. Be mindful of the effects of excessive caffeine and sugar on nervousness. Put out the cigarettes - they restrict blood circulation and affect the stress response.

10. **Talk to Friends.** Friends can be good medicine. Daily doses of conversation, regular social engagements, and occasional sharing of deep feelings and thoughts can reduce stress quite nicely.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

You can learn more about managing stress through books and audio cassette tapes available at public libraries and bookstores. Among the more popular books are *Stress Without Distress* by Dr. Hans Selye, *Mind As Healer, Mind As Slayer* by Dr. Kenneth Pelletier, and *Relaxation Response* by Dr. Herbert Benson. A useful cassette tape is *A Six Second Technique to Control Stress* by Dr. Charles Stroebel.

For an individualized stress management program, you may wish to consult a health care professional specializing in health promotion. For a referral, contact the local office of your state's psychological association, or the department of psychology at a nearby college or university.

This handout was prepared by Kent T. Yamauchi, Ph.D.

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