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# Stress in Everyday Life

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## A LIFE EFFECTIVENESS GUIDE

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# Understanding the Situation

"I can't cope anymore!"

"This is too much – I've had it!"

Is this what you are feeling right now? Comments such as these are common every day occurrences in our busy lives – and we call it STRESS. Although never quite adequately defined, vague generalisations such as "Stress and tension are normal reactions to events that threaten us" are used to describe it. Such threats can come from accidents, financial troubles and problems on the job or with family and through our emotional and physical reactions to the given situations, we become what is termed 'stressed'.

Not that long ago, the terms of worry, anxiety, fear, impatience, and anger gave way to what has been formally termed 'stress' and its offshoots, stressful, stress-related, and stressed-out. Further complicating matters is the fact that different people react to the same "stress" in unpredictable ways.

Stress is not a diagnosis but a process happening over time. The level and extent of stress a person may feel depends a great deal on their attitude to a particular situation. An event which may be extremely stressful for one person can be a minor event in another person's life.

Stress is not always a bad thing because some people thrive on it and even need it to get things done. However, when the term 'stress' is used in a clinical sense, it generally refers to a situation that causes discomfort and distress for a person and that is the area we will look at in this article.

Regardless of who you are or what you do, chances are you spend a lot of time entrenched in the busyness of life, worrying about getting everything done, and feeling out of control. We feel obligations and pressures which are both physical and mental and the attached stress, which can be quite debilitating, is not always obvious to us. A recent poll found that 40 percent of people feel stressed every day and another 39 percent are sometimes stressed.

Most people don't handle their stress well. They focus on the unpleasant and unexpected things that happen daily. This should just be called 'life'; however, we need to learn to handle the stressors that life sends our way.

There is a major difference between **stressors** - those things that happen every day that have the potential for driving us crazy, or making us angry, frustrated, and hurt, and **stress** - the way we choose to respond to these stressors. You make a choice about how situations will affect the rest of your day.

We cannot help but allow our daily routines to take over our lives. Working, studying, running the errands, groceries, kids, deadlines, projects, budgeting - the list can go on and on. And the things that are supposed to make our lives essentially easier are the same things that often cause us the most stress. For example, think about your computer, your car, and all the gadgets in your household that just happen to breakdown right when they are most needed.

Technology evolved to make our lives easier and less stressful and it is continually improving in leaps and bounds, yet we all still feel deep stress on many occasions despite great technology. Backaches, headaches, strokes, migraines, sleeplessness, anger and hostility etc. are showing us that we are more stressed than ever before. Even our hobbies and interests are stressful and demanding activities.

# Different types of Stress

One of the reasons why people have a hard time ending stress is that they are not addressing the core issues within their lives. Following are six categories of stress. They are categorised so that you may first know the issue and the cause of the problem to find the solution.

## **1. Work/Study-Related Stress**

The workplace and the school are very stressful environments. Deadlines are a major cause of Work/Study Related Stress. Other factors that might contribute to this type of stress are conflict with your boss/co-workers and/or teachers, changes that happen abruptly, where you cannot cope with them, threats to job security, or a fear of having a failing mark.

## **2. Relationship/Family Related Stress**

Family related stress includes divorce/separation issues, extra-marital affairs, child-rearing, teenage break ups and unwanted pregnancies among others. This area is a major stressor for most people and oftentimes, stress coming from this area can have a major impact in other areas.

## **3. Environment Related Stress**

Environment related stress is where the normal daily routine of a person is bombarded by disturbances and changes that the person cannot cope with. Disturbances include noise from the surroundings (i.e. jackhammer in a nearby construction site, traffic noise, etc.), and weather disturbances among others. Changes in the environment such as moving to a new state, having a new job or having a completely different lifestyle are stressors too.

## **4. Psychological Stress**

Psychological stress can include fear of an individual which can either be real or be a phobia which is not grounded in reality. Sleeplessness, anxieties and worries are sometimes caused by unrealistic fears which have no basis. The subconscious of a

person and/or his/her belief systems, cultural background and social activity can all contribute to a socio-psychological stress complex.

### **5. Financial Stress**

Feelings of helplessness in financial terms are one of the most common causes of stress, and because the economic well-being of an individual is connected to other areas of his/her life, a financial problem can also have spillover effects in areas such as relationship and health.

### **6. Health Related Stress**

The health of a person is the wellspring of his life. Health related stress ranges from sleeplessness to drug abuse. Illnesses are also sources of stress. Some of the most common illnesses can be the most major stressors – such as influenza, asthma or psoriasis.

These categories are not isolated from each other. Mostly, one stressor can lead to other forms of stress. The categories can mix and match to create more stress and pressures can creep in from one area of your life to another. Above all this, the degree of stress can be mild to extreme. A suffering from stress in one area could not possibly isolate this area from infecting and inflicting damage to other areas of life.

# Stages of Stress

In response to the above stressful events, you can experience one, two or all of the following stages:

## **Stage 1: Mobilisation of Energy**

All bodily activity is increased in response to a stressor that is frightening, such as a near car accident. This starts the body's 'fight or flight' reaction, causing the release of adrenalin. You feel your heart pounding and your palms feel sweaty. This is called primary stress.

It can also be the result of a situation where you choose to put yourself under stress (e.g. the night before your wedding). This is called secondary stress.

### **SYMPTOMS:**

- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- rapid breathing
- sweating
- decreased digestion rate, creating butterflies and indigestion

## **Stage 2: Exhaustion or Consuming Energy**

If there is no escape from Stage 1, the body will begin to release stored sugars and fats, using up its bodily resources.

### **SYMPTOMS:**

- feeling driven
- feeling pressured
- tiredness and fatigue, an increase in smoking, coffee drinking and/or alcohol consumption
- anxiety

- memory loss
- acute illnesses such as colds and flu

### **Stage 3: Draining Energy Stores**

If the stressful situation is not resolved, you may become chronically stressed. The body's need for energy resources exceeds its ability to produce them.

#### **SYMPTOMS:**

Serious illnesses such as:

- heart disease
- ulcers
- mental illness

As well as:

- insomnia (difficulty sleeping)
- errors in judgement
- personality changes



# Identifying Symptoms

**Stress is a problem when a person feels he/she cannot cope.**

As a condition treated clinically, stress occurs when the demands of life that persons' experiences exceed (or they feel they exceed) their ability to cope. A variety of factors can contribute to the feeling of being 'stressed'. This may include:

- Environment (work, home, school etc)
- Lifestyle
- Emotional issues.

An individual person's attitude, personality and approach to life will influence how he/she respond to stress. The following factors all play a part:

- How a person thinks about a problem
- The different ways a person copes with difficult situations
- Life experiences and life history
- A person's self-esteem
- Whether they have people around who can provide support.

# How to Manage Stress

How do we cope with stress? There are literally thousands of books, articles and websites that cover stress and stress management. However, the ancient and natural ways are probably still the best ways towards peace and serenity. The old adage, 'prevention is better than cure' is certainly true for stress management. Here are some tips on how to end your daily battle with stress:

- **Have a healthy lifestyle** - health is wealth. It cannot be stated emphatically enough. The only happiness that we can ever enjoy in this world is life, and having a great life starts with being healthy. Sometimes, people are ill equipped to face the stressors in their lives because their bodies cannot handle activities involving pain, endurance and strength. This means exercise (see note below) and eating a healthy nutritious diet.
- **Exercise regularly** - regular exercise is a great way to manage stress. You should do some form of exercise that causes you to feel puffed afterwards. A leisurely stroll to the bus stop is not enough! Have at least 20 minutes of exercise three times a week.
- **Eat well** - a nutritious diet is important. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and avoid sweet and fatty foods.
- **Avoid conflict** - avoid situations that make you feel stressed as much as you can. Avoid unnecessary arguments and conflict if you find them stressful (although ignoring a problem is not always the best way to reduce stress).
- **Relax** - make sure you give yourself some time to relax each day and try to spend time with people who make you feel good about yourself.

- **Sleep** - a good sleep routine is essential. Do something calm and relaxing before you go to bed, like listening to music, reading, or taking a warm bath if you have difficulty falling asleep.
- **Enjoy your life** – stop to smell the roses. It's important to make time to have some fun. We get easily entangled with daily concerns. Our society seems to be heading towards self-destruction. We work all day; we even work many additional hours at our job just to get rich quickly or to help make ends meet and a lot of people forget to enjoy life in the constant surge of their busyness. Always remember that happy thoughts, and moments, make us joyful. It is good if you will learn to reward yourself from time to time.
- **Communicate** - People who haven't learnt to say NO, people who are unable to admit to mistakes and weaknesses are highly stressed individuals. A simple misunderstanding between you and your boss or your teacher can really make or break you. Oftentimes, it is the small things that are neglected in communication.
- **Prioritise** - have a battle plan. Get your life in order! For a good many people it may seem hard to do this. However, the benefits to your levels of stress are huge. In financial matters, always weigh between needs and wants. According to Da Vinci, simplicity is still the ultimate sophistication – i.e. living a simple life that is free from lots of complexities.

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.”

There are things which we cannot change, and there are things that have to be addressed even though going through them could be painful. Are your problems based on real issues? What things can be changed? What are the things that cannot be changed? Do you need to take it easy on yourself?

# Stress and Health

You've heard the advice over and over again: You can maximise the success of your fight against disease by minimising stress. Likewise, excess stress can inhibit your body's ability to heal and your immune system's ability to suppress illness. It seems simple enough.

But when it comes to stress-inducing events, only the death of a spouse or close family member, a divorce or jail term outweigh being diagnosed with a serious or life-threatening illness.

All the negative effects of life's demands and pressures are lumped together under the umbrella we call stress. It is aggravated by the uncertain prognosis and lifestyle changes that usually accompany illness or surgery. Whether you are dealing with lupus or heart disease, cancer or arthritis, you know that pain, physical limitations and decisions regarding treatment can cause frustrations which exacerbate stress levels of day-to-day living. What was once manageable now seems insurmountable after a heart attack or organ transplant.

While you might be tempted to ignore stress, Valerie R. Houghton, who has counselled people with critical illnesses for 20 years, advises against it. "By applying some practical tools, you will not only decrease the level of stress in your life and improve your emotional state; you also increase your chances of survival and improve the quality of your life, such as a better night's sleep or less pain."

Stress is the perception of a threat to your physical or psychological well-being and the feeling that you are powerless and unable to control that threat. It is usually associated with some unexpected change in the status quo, such as a traffic detour, a job reassignment, or a serious illness. But, according to many specialists in health care, while you may be unable to alter the situation producing the stress, you can change your perception of it and choose a more appropriate response.

The keys to changing your perception to combat the negative effects of life's demands and pressures are found in stress reduction tools. They include:

- adjusting your priorities and attitude
- practicing mindfulness
- relaxation techniques

As with any new tools, it takes practice to learn to use these to their maximum effectiveness. You will find some to be more useful than others, and some to be awkward at first, but all of them are highly effective after repeated use. The tools that work well for you won't necessarily help someone else, and vice versa. It's important for you to test them and try to determine which tools can help you most and then put them to work.

“What if, instead of running a tape projecting the worst outcome imaginable, we stop, relax and use mindfulness to deal with the pain? It's my experience, and that of many of my students, that by reducing your stress level you can reduce physical pain.” (Katie Allen, RN of Berkeley, California teaches breathing awareness and restorative yoga to people with cancer and other life-threatening conditions. She describes how her experience with cancer led her to incorporate mindfulness into her classes to help students deal with pain.)

# Preventing Stress

**1. Make Decisions** - here are two techniques:

**A. Can't make up your mind? Maybe your subconscious can help you.**

Before going to bed, think about your problem and the various choices you could make. Think about each choice clearly in your mind. Tell yourself you're going to make the decision while you sleep.

You may not name the solution the next morning but if you keep trying, you will eventually awaken with your mind made up.

**B. Sit down with a pencil and paper and make some lists.**

1. List your options.
2. List the consequences of each option.
3. Write your responses to this question: 'What will happen if I don't choose at all?' If you don't make a decision, that's a decision in itself and it also has consequences. Once you realise that something is going to happen whether you make a decision or not, you may find the decision easier to make.

**2. Avoid Procrastination**

If procrastination causes stress in your life, learn to stop putting things off. People don't do their best work under pressure. However, some people convince themselves that if they do so they can avoid dealing with their habit of procrastination. Make a weekly schedule and fill it with lots of time for leisure as well as work. That way, you'll enjoy your leisure time because you'll be doing it at the right time, not when you should be working. And when you are working, you won't resent it because you'll know that your personal time is coming up soon.

### **3. Delegate**

People who haven't learned to delegate often feel needlessly stressed. Some are poor delegators because of too little or too much ego. Delegating isn't a matter of dictating to others; it's asking others to assist you by doing tasks they can handle. This gives you more time to do those tasks that perhaps only you can do.

# Tools to Minimise the Effects of Stress

- **Lighten up.** Don't take yourself or those around you too seriously. Cultivate your sense of humour and joy.
- **Volunteer to serve your community.** It doesn't take a lot of time or strength to read to kindergartners for an hour a week, but it will take your mind off your problems and fears.
- **Adopt a pet.** Besides providing companionship and a nonjudgemental ear, pets lift our spirits. Has walking been prescribed to control your blood pressure? A dog will make sure you get out every day.
- **Cultivate a garden.** Whether you prefer flowers or vegetables, take pleasure in nurturing the plants, watching them bear fruit or flowers and then share your harvest.
- **Indulge yourself.** Especially when you are preparing for a treatment or struggling to get through a trying time. Get a professional pedicure, take a bubble bath, lunch at an outdoor café, take a walk on the beach or spend an afternoon browsing in a bookstore.
- **Take a class.** Just for the fun of it. Quilt making, conversational French, painting, Chinese cooking: whatever your choice, don't take it too seriously.
- **Adjust your attitude.** Tell yourself that just for now you will leave behind your expectations and preconceived notions. Consider the possibility that, no matter how bleak your situation seems, the end result will be a good one.
- **Look at your priorities and learn to let go.** Ask yourself if being right or controlling every situation is more important than improving your health. Let the other driver take the parking place; save your energy to build your health.
- **Be mindful.** Focus your attention on what you are experiencing moment to moment. Let go of expectations, and quiet the inner voice that says, "should," "must," "always," "ought" or "never."
- **Find a relaxation technique.** Many programs teach various ways to experience inner peace and tranquillity, thus relieving stress. The common



threads of these tools are repetition and a passive disregard of everyday thoughts. You can take some classes or rent videos to find the practice that takes you to the quiet place where healing can occur, and then do it every day.

Try:

- ❖ Breathing, especially diaphragmatic or abdominal breathing.
- ❖ Meditation.
- ❖ Visualisation or guided imagery.
- ❖ Restorative (or passive) yoga.
- ❖ Meditative prayer.
- ❖ Progressive muscle relaxation.
- ❖ Tai Chi or Qigong (Chinese movement programs).

- **Look at your everyday life**

Examining and perhaps changing a number of behaviours in your day-to-day life can help.

- ❖ Identify situations you find most stressful and prepare a plan for dealing with them.
- ❖ Watch your diet, limiting caffeine, alcohol and sugar.
- ❖ Engage in regular aerobic exercise to build up your body's ability to resist stress and improve sleep.
- ❖ Prescription and over-the-counter drugs can cause distress and anxiety. This can include everything from some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and muscle relaxants to certain antidepressants, antihistamines, antihypertensives and antiviral medications. Check with your doctor or pharmacist if you feel that anxiety might be a side effect of your medication.
- ❖ Find someone in whom you can confide, sharing sorrows as well as joys. If you are uncomfortable talking to your family, friends, or clergyman about stressful issues in your life, ask your doctor to refer you to a therapist.

# Work-life Balance: Ways to Restore Harmony and Reduce Stress

## **Stress at work**

According to the Australian National Occupational Health and Safety Commission Report, December 2003, high stress levels lead to thousands of stress-related WorkCover claims every year. Cases of mental stress had by far the highest median (8.5 weeks) and average (16 weeks) time lost, and accounted for 29% of all new cases of disease. This is way above the median of 3.4 weeks lost and average of 9.3 weeks for all new cases of injury or disease.

Stress in the workplace is common and caused by many different factors and issues. Many problems may never be fully resolved and the amount of stress a person experiences is often determined by whether or not they can accept that some things in life will simply never be sorted out to their satisfaction. For instance, a person may feel stressed by the way they are treated by their employer, or the behaviour of a work colleague.

Sometimes this stress can be resolved by dealing with the particular behaviour as in many organisations, there are processes that can be followed to deal with workplace problems like harassment, victimisation or unfair treatment.

If your work life and personal life are out of balance, your stress may be running high. Here's how to reclaim control.

Finding work-life balance in today's frenetically-paced world is no simple task. Spend more time at work than at home and you miss out on a rewarding personal life. Then again, if you're facing challenges in your personal life such as caring for an aging parent or coping with marital or financial problems, concentrating on your job can be difficult.

Whether the problem is too much focused on work or too little, when your work life and your personal life feel out of balance, stress — and its harmful effects — is the result. To take control, first consider how the world of work has changed, then reevaluate your relationship to work and apply the strategies for striking a more healthy balance as described in this guide.

### **How work invades your personal life**

There was a time when employees showed up for work Monday through Friday and worked eight to nine hours. The boundaries between work and home were fairly clear then. But the world has changed and, unfortunately, the boundaries have blurred for many workers. Here's why:

- **Global economy.** As more skilled workers enter the global labor market and companies outsource or move more jobs to reduce labour costs, people feel pressured to work longer and produce more to protect their jobs.
- **International business.** Work continues around the world 24 hours a day for some people. If you work in an international organisation, you might be on call around the clock for troubleshooting or consulting.
- **Advanced communication technology.** People now have the ability to work anywhere — from their home, from their car and even on vacation. And some managers expect that.
- **Longer hours.** Employers commonly ask employees to work longer hours than they're scheduled. Often, overtime is mandatory. If you hope to move up the career ladder, you may find yourself regularly working more than 40 hours a week to achieve and exceed expectations.
- **Changes in family roles.** Today's married worker is typically part of a dual-career couple, which makes it difficult to find time to meet commitments to family, friends and community.

If you've experienced any of these challenges, you understand how easy it is for work to invade your personal life.

## Overtime obsession

It's tempting to work overtime if you're an hourly employee. By doing so, you can earn extra money for a child's university education or a dream vacation. Some people need to work overtime to stay on top of family finances or pay for extra, unplanned expenses.

If you're on salary, working more hours may not provide extra cash, but it can help you to keep up with your workload. Being willing to arrive early and stay late every day may also help earn that promotion or bonus.

Before you sign up for overtime, consider the pros and cons of working extra hours on your work-life balance:

- **Fatigue.** Your ability to think and your eye-hand coordination decrease when you're tired. This means you're less productive and may make mistakes. These mistakes can lead to injury or rework and negatively impact your professional reputation.
- **Family.** You may miss out on important events, such as your child's first bike ride, your father's 60th birthday or your high-school reunion. Missing out on important milestones may harm relationships with your loved ones.
- **Friends.** Trusted friends are a key part of your support system. But if you're spending time at the office instead of with them, you'll find it difficult to nurture those friendships.
- **Expectations.** If you work extra hours as a general rule, you may be given more responsibility. This could create a never-ending and increasing cycle, causing more concerns and challenges.

Sometimes working overtime is important. It's a choice you can make to adjust to a new job or new boss or to pay your bills. If you work for a company that requires mandatory overtime, you won't be able to avoid it, but you can learn to manage it.

If you work overtime by choice, do so in moderation. Most importantly, say no when you're too tired, when it's affecting your health or when you have crucial family obligations.

## **Striking the best work-life balance**

It isn't easy to juggle the demands of career and personal life. For most people, it's an ongoing challenge to reduce stress and maintain harmony in key areas of their life. Here are some ideas to help you find the balance that's best for you:

**Keep a journal.** Write down everything you do for one week. Include work-related and non-work-related activities. Decide what's necessary and satisfies you the most. Cut or delegate activities you don't enjoy, don't have time for or do only out of guilt. If you don't have the authority to make certain decisions, talk to your supervisor.

**Take advantage of your options.** Find out if your employer offers flex hours, a compressed work week, job-sharing or telecommuting for your role. The flexibility may alleviate some of your stress and free up some time.

- **Manage your time.** Organise household tasks efficiently. Doing one or two loads of laundry every day rather than saving it all for your day off, and running errands in batches rather than going back and forth several times are good places to begin. A weekly family calendar of important dates and a daily list of to-dos will help you avoid deadline panic. If your employer offers a course in time management, sign up for it.
- **Rethink your cleaning standards.** An unmade bed or sink of dirty dishes won't impact the quality of your life. Do what needs to be done and let the rest go. If you can afford it, pay someone else to clean your house.
- **Communicate clearly.** Limit time-consuming misunderstandings by communicating clearly and listening carefully. Take notes if it helps.
- **Let go of the guilt.** Remember, having a family and a job is okay - for both men and women.
- **Nurture yourself.** Set aside time each day for an activity that you enjoy, such as walking, working out or listening to music.
- **Unwind** after a hectic workday by reading, practicing yoga or taking a bubble bath. Sitting down and watching the news is NOT recommended for relaxation

or unwinding as many studies advise the news creates an upward shift in anxiety and stress levels.

- **Set aside one night each week for recreation.** Take the phone off the hook; turn off the computer and the TV. Discover activities you can do with your partner, family or friends, such as playing golf, fishing, bike riding or walking on the beach. Making time for activities you enjoy will refresh you.
- **Protect your day off.** Try to schedule some of your routine chores on workdays so that your days off are more relaxing.
- **Get enough sleep.** There's nothing as stressful and potentially dangerous as working when you're sleep-deprived. Not only is your productivity affected, but you can also make costly mistakes. You may then have to work even more hours to make up for these mistakes.
- **Bolster your support system.** Give yourself the gift of a trusted friend or co-worker to talk with during times of stress or hardship. If you're part of a religious community, take advantage of the support your religious leader can provide. Ensure you have trusted friends and relatives who can assist you when you need to work overtime or travel for your job.
- **Seek professional help.** Everyone needs help from time to time. If your life feels too chaotic to manage and you are constantly worrying about it, talk with a professional such as your doctor, a psychologist, a counsellor or a life coach.

And if you're experiencing high levels of stress because of marital, financial, chemical dependency or legal problems, a counsellor can link you to helpful services in your community.

Balance doesn't mean doing everything. Examine your priorities and set boundaries. Be firm in what you can and cannot do. Only you can restore harmony to your lifestyle.

# Humour Makes Life Easier

Humour can be a powerful and effective mechanism for coping with stress, especially when combined with other means of stress reduction. The real power of humour and laughter shows up when you learn to use it in stressful situations. It keeps things in perspective, helps dispel negative emotions, and puts you in a frame of mind that can help you better cope with the situation. Combining stress management techniques with a more light-hearted outlook on life won't make you stress-proof, but it can make the difficult things easier to endure.

If you're willing to laugh at the little disasters in life, you'll find that other areas of your life will also become easier. Laughter, especially when you laugh at yourself, does many important things:

- It empowers you. When you laugh at your setbacks, you no longer feel sorry for yourself. You feel uplifted and encouraged.
- It helps you communicate more effectively.
- It makes you more likeable.
- It helps you cope. "Nothing erases unpleasant thoughts more effectively than concentration on pleasant ones." (Hans Selye, stress researcher)
- It provides perspective by removing you from your problems. Everyone makes mistakes, and we need to remember that, "I may not be totally perfect, but parts of me are excellent." (Ashleigh Brilliant)
- People tend to be less threatened by you.

## **Using Humour Effectively**

You may agree that laughing will help with your stress but agreeing with this doesn't always help when the kids fight, miss the bus, and leave you late for work.

Everyone has his or her own sense of humour. If you're not attuned to yours, you'll end up missing many opportunities to use humour skills to deal with life's stressors. Being an

adult can be serious business, but so many people have lost the sheer capacity for fun, joy, and laughter. Even when the opportunity is there, we miss it. Many adults have this problem that can be called "humour impairment." Simply defined, it means the inability to find humour even in situations that are funny to most people. Stress can cause humour impairment. Fortunately you can make the choice to change.

### **Finding the Laughter in Life**

You don't have to laugh out loud to find something funny, but you do need to recognise the types of humour you will be able to use most effectively to manage stress. Do you like slapstick humour or verbal humour? Do you understand what kinds of humour offend you? Do you like jokes that focus on things you have in common with the comedian? Do you like humour built on current events? Do you like wordplay and puns? Do you like to see props and gimmicks? Do you find humour in things that weren't necessarily meant to be funny? Answering these questions will help you identify what humour to seek to help reduce stress and have more fun in life. You also need to ask yourself how long you hold on to misery before letting loose with humour.



# Tips to Alleviate Stress

You know that getting your life under control will reduce the stress you endure every day. If you're willing to make some adjustments, things can change. You'll have to practise better self-management.

Improving self-management involves a process. It's not complicated, but it's not going to happen overnight. It requires you to stop digging yourself into a hole and figuring out a better way to get things done.

**Purge and organise everything around you.** If you don't love it, need it, or use it, get rid of it...from your wardrobe to your mind to your computer.

**Set goals.** You've talked a lot about what you need to do. You've claimed that you've tried and tried to do this or that. Take "try" out of your vocabulary and take the steps to do what you need to do. Once you set goals for yourself, you'll be very clear on what you should spend your time doing. You'll turn off the TV, and start spending your time on things that will help you go to the next level.

**Make lists.** Now that you've gotten organised and you've set goals so that you know what you should spend your time doing, write down everything you need and want to do (at work, then at home). I mean everything. Now look at the list and batch similar or related work together. If it's something you can do quickly, say two minutes or less, go ahead.

Now look at the list and pick out the most important project or goal you need to finish or meet. Since any one of these will require more thought and time to get it done, you'll need to plan how you'll do it. Spending time upfront to plan will save you time later.

- a. Name the project. Determine what the objective or outcome is.
- b. Write down every thing, big or small, that you or someone else needs to do to make it happen.
- c. Prioritise everything that needs to be done, adding timelines.
- d. Schedule each task on your calendar to work on it, starting from the deadline and working backwards. Add time for contingencies such as interruptions and unexpected crises.
- e. Get everything you need for the project, including all the resources you'll need to pull it off.
- f. Set up systems that will help you remember each step and due date. Get everything out of your head and use a 'to do' list, tickler file, planner, PDA, checklist, computer reminder, or whatever, to help you remember.
- g. Do the work as planned.
- h. Now repeat this process for all your other projects.

# Counselling and Support

Sometimes, when we are feeling depressed, anxious, confused or unable to cope, talking to supportive friends, family members, or joining a support group may be very helpful.

But if that isn't enough, you should consider seeking professional counselling. While counselling cannot fix all the problems in your life, it can help you sort things out so that you feel more able to cope. A therapist can help you learn more about yourself, so that you can use your own strengths to regain a feeling of control over your life. Remember, it is how we think of, or react to, life's events that make us feel over-stressed -- not just the events themselves.

Finding the right help for stress can be a stressful experience. This section outlines the kinds of help you can seek in your area.

*NOTE: Call your health insurance organisation to check which services are covered by your plan.*

## **The Family Doctor**

Your family doctor can help you identify your health problem. A thorough look at your health profile and a complete medical examination can establish the reason for your ill health (mental or physical). Your symptoms may be the result of an illness that may or may not be due to stress.

Your doctor may prescribe a treatment, or suggest that support and a few ideas about how to manage your situation may be all you need. If your family doctor suggests the use of tranquillisers, make sure you are well-informed about their purpose and their side effects before you decide whether to use them.

## **Therapists.**

You or your family doctor may decide that talking to a therapist will help you deal with your feelings. You might be referred to a counsellor at a community agency or in private

practice, or to a psychiatrist or psychologist who works in a hospital or has a private practice.

### **The Psychiatrist**

Psychiatrists complete a degree in general medicine. They have an additional four years training in diagnosis and treatment of emotional and behavioural problems. Because they are medical doctors, psychiatrists are licensed to prescribe medications. Some or all of their fees can be claimed back through Medicare. To see a psychiatrist, ask your family doctor for a referral. If you don't have a family doctor, you can call a local hospital or community health centre to ask about their mental health services.

### **The Psychologist**

A clinically trained psychologist holds a doctorate (PhD.) in the study of human behaviour, as well as in the treatment of behavioural and emotional problems. Many private health care insurance plans cover the services of registered psychologists. Check with your health fund.

### **The Social Worker**

A social worker has a university degree in social work. Most are employed by hospitals or community agencies. However, some have taken additional training in psychotherapy and are in private practice. Your doctor may refer you to a therapist who is a social worker.

### **The Stress Specialist**

There are many organisations and individuals that provide stress management education and treatment. Some are psychologists, others are physiotherapists, occupational therapists or people with other kinds of training. To find out what's available, look in the yellow pages of your phone book under "stress management". Phone and ask about services and fees. Some accept only those referred by family physicians.

## **Self-Help Groups**

Sometimes people really feel the need to belong to a caring community. Many self-help groups (also called mutual aid groups or support groups) have developed across the country in the past few years.

Many people find they need the opportunity to take charge of their own situation. Sometimes, understanding can only come from someone else who has experienced the same type of problem.

In self-help groups, people experiencing similar problems get together to share information and help each other cope. Members use their individual strengths to support the others. Often, they use their collective strengths to advocate for social change. For some, membership in a self-help group is an alternative to professional therapy. However, for many people a support group is useful in addition to formal helping services.

To find out about self-help groups in your community, contact your local council.

# Journaling

Journaling is a way of tracking the development of our thoughts and feelings. It enables us to not only record our journey but also to write down our goals and our plans on how to reach those goals.

The journal is a very powerful tool which assists us in recording our perceptions. The Journal, as the name implies, leads us on a journey which helps us to reveal our true selves. We are not simply recording our experiences as in a diary. With a Journal, we are going beyond simply recording what "happens" in our lives to a process of transformation into our highest concept of ourselves and allowing a healing to take place. A journal helps us to discover ourselves and our higher purpose. By combining the tool of journaling with all the other tools we have discussed, we will reveal the essence of our being is love, life and laughter.

Research has shown that journaling merely fifteen minutes each day, can improve one's health and one's stress levels. There is a correlation between the expression of thoughts and feelings and one's sense of self worth. The stronger you express your feelings, the greater the transformation through the journaling process and thus the greater the reward.

The purpose of our journals is to help us express our thoughts and feelings in a deep, intimate and personal way. Our journal may include descriptions of our daily interactions with others and the feelings that arise out of those interactions.

The key factor is to understand that we are a part of the equation. Events may happen far away from us, but our day to day personal experience is something we are taking part in. We can work through painful memories, or events in our lives, or scribe joyful experiences. Both painful experiences and joyful experiences give us a great insight into how we are living our lives and how we can make new more empowering choices in the future and be happy with the choices we made in the past that got us to the place we

are today. All thoughts and feelings are important to the process of your journal and no entry is too big or too small.

It is probably best when we have a flexible approach to our journals and include pictures that we find, or make, sketches, articles from magazines and books and quotes from people in our lives or historical figures.

Often people will ask questions of themselves in their journal and then as they add to their journal, they answer these questions. The important thing is that we are able to express ourselves and allow for the journal to be part of our journey revealing our path and empowering us to see ourselves more clearly and make choices that are more empowering.

The depth of your writing is not as important as the process and putting pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard. Our goal is personal discovery and positive transformation knowing that "as we change our minds, we change our lives."

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