

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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Not all stress is bad for you. Each of us thrives on 'positive' stress, i.e. stress that motivates us to achieve a goal, increases our awareness and brings new perspective into our lives. However, 'negative' stress has the opposite effect resulting in feelings of irritation, anger, depression ultimately leading to health problems such as ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, irritable bowel syndrome, skin problems, and many others.

You may well be asking "what is positive and what is negative stress then?" Since we are all unique individuals, we all have unique levels of what is called 'optimal' stress. So, what is distressing to one person, may be stimulating to another. In other words, stress is subjective, and peculiar in terms of the physical and psychological responses of each person. Negative stress occurs when the individual experiences their optimal levels of stress becoming overwhelming, rather than motivating.

What is certain is that we are all subject to stressors of some degree or another throughout our lives. We cannot eliminate the resulting stress from deadlines, sorrows, confrontations, frustrations that are part of (and ultimately deepen and enrich) our lives. We can, though, learn to manage it and use it to help us. In today's increasingly competitive and oftentimes dangerous world, it is imperative that we learn to manage those things that cause us stress, for without this skill we are likely to succumb to the myriad of stress-induced illnesses.

The main steps required in managing stress, and taking back control of your life, are:

Identifying the source of stress in your life
Changing your reaction to it

Here are some steps towards managing the stressors in your life:

Identifying your Stressors

What events distress you? What do you tell yourself about the meaning of these events?
How does your body respond to stress? Do you have physical and/or nervous reactions? Specify the way your body responds to the stress.

Recognise what you can change

Can you avoid or eliminate these stressors completely? If not, can you reduce their intensity – by managing them over a period of time, taking a break?

Can you implement changes in order to manage these stressors e.g. goal setting, time management, or relaxation methods

Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress

When you react to danger (physical or emotional), you trigger a 'stress reaction' which sets off a cascade of hormonal and physiological reactions in your body preparing it for 'fight or flight.'

This is where it is very important to take a bit of time to analyse your reactions. For example:
Could you be seeing the stressor in exaggerated terms i.e. making a difficult situation into one of catastrophic proportions?

Are you trying to please too many people?

Do you respond to events as critical and urgent?

Do you feel you are responsible for every situation?

If you respond 'yes' to these questions, consider 'reframing' the events more moderately – seeing them as something you can cope with rather than something that overwhelms you; try and see the events in perspective rather than emphasizing the negative qualities, or posing repetitive 'what if' questions.

Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress

Diaphragmatic breathing: slow, deep breathing helps normalize heart rate and respiration.

Learn Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

If necessary, obtain a short course of medication from your GP. This is a short-term solution, learning to moderate your reactions is a preferable, long-term solution to managing stress.

Build your physical reserves

Cardiovascular exercise, at least 4 times a week, for a minimum of 30 minutes each time is very important. In addition, moderate exercise such as swimming, yoga, walking at least 3-4 times a week will build up your physical reserves.

Eat nutritious, well-balanced meals.

Avoid nicotine, drugs, excessive stimulants (tea, coffee) and alcohol.

Mix leisure time with work by taking breaks, and getting away as often as possible.

Get enough consistent sleep.

Maintain your emotional reserves

Develop mutually supportive friendships/relationships

Pursue meaningful personal goals – not the goals of others

Expect some set-backs, frustrations

Become a friend to yourself; stop the negative self-talk, be kind to yourself

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