

Basic Tips for Managing Stress

Ever find yourself getting stressed about whether or not you are adequately managing your stress? Or stressing about making it to the latest stress management seminar or finishing your most recent stress management book on CD? Kind of misses the point doesn't it. Stress can make you feel nervous, sad or depressed. You may worry a lot about your family, work and money problems. Living with these struggles every day can leave you tired, nervous and feeling that there is no way out of your situation.

Stress management shouldn't be stressful. In many ways it has become so because it has become a competitive sport - "I can manage my stress better than you can!"

Instead, let's get back to the basics. It doesn't have to be that difficult. In this article we will review basic tips for managing your stress.

Exhale

When people become tense there is a tendency to have shallow breathing from the chest, rather than deeper, more energizing breathing from the diaphragm. Breathing like this can actually make you feel more tense and anxious. Instead, take a minute to fully and completely exhale. Really push all of the air out of your lungs and then breathe in deeply through your nose, feeling your stomach go out as you do so. If your chest rises before your stomach you're not doing it quite right. Exhale and try again putting your hand on your stomach and trying to push your hand out as you inhale.

Now that you've got the breathing technique correct, take a few deep breaths, exhaling completely each time. This makes you breathe slower and helps your muscles relax. You can even consciously think about relaxing and lowering your shoulders and relaxing your arms and hands for a minute or two. These kinds of mini relaxation breaks during the day or in the evening as you come home from work can help you be aware of any tension you are holding on to physically and help you let it go.

Exercise and Stretch

Exercise is one of the best stress busters out there. Again, it doesn't have to be complicated. Don't stress out about finding a yoga class or doing the "right" exercise to reduce your stress. Just take a walk. Walking is one of those great "do anywhere" exercises that has been proven in study after study to improve mood, reduce stress and improve your general health. If you are not already exercising, just taking a 10 - 15 minute break to walk downstairs and outside for a few minutes during the work day can give you a time to adjust your breathing and your mood before returning to your desk or cubbie. Taking another 15 - 20 minute walk first thing every morning or in the evening gives you the aerobic exercise your heart needs to stay healthy, helps you burn extra calories to keep your weight in check, and gets your endorphins going to improve your mood and reduce stress. It's a win-win proposition.

If you are already exercising, consider increasing the intensity a little bit. Add some intervals of walking or pedaling faster (or add resistance if you are on a machine that allows you to do so) and watch how much better you feel. Add some weight lifting a couple of times each week and watch your stress level decrease and your perspective increase.

Don't forget to stretch several times each day. Stretching helps elongate and relax your muscles, which get more tense than you realize when you sit in a vehicle or at a computer all day. Lift your arms over your head and feel the stretch in your arms, waist and back - really stretch up to the ceiling and back a little. Make it a point to stretch before going to bed at night and first thing in the morning. It doesn't have to be complicated. Just gently bend and reach for your toes, lean a little to the right and a little to the left while doing so. Lay flat on your back, bend your knees and pull them to your chest before getting out of bed in the morning. Keeping loose helps you exhale and relax when you need to.



Think Positive

We've all heard of the power of positive thinking, but it is easy to forget when things get really hectic. In addition, positive thinking also gets confused sometimes with the idea of those daily affirmation sessions where you're supposed to stand in front of the mirror and tell yourself how great you are. While that does work really well for some people, for most it doesn't feel real and doesn't bring about any lasting change.

Instead, take a few minutes every day to think about the positives in your life. Review those things that make you smile. Last year's vacation, dinner with friends, having friends, family, health, healthy children, etc... Even if there are significant hardships in your life such as chronic illness in yourself or someone you care about, there are still ways to find the positives somewhere. For example, many people with serious illnesses such as cancer find that they very quickly reprioritize their lives and remember what is really important to them - family and friends - and then make efforts to spend more time with those that really matter.

If you are having difficulty finding things in life that make you happy, think back to what used to make you happy. Then make a plan for how to reorganize your life to regain those feelings and include more of what makes you happy on a daily basis. It is a combination of recognizing the big things (health, family, friends) and the little things (a beautiful day, meeting a kind or friendly person, having the opportunity to be kind or friendly to someone else, etc...) that creates happiness.

Count to Ten

When you feel yourself starting to get stressed - your shoulders or jaw tense up, you start feeling angry, you feel like you want to pounce on someone - exhale and count to ten. With the exception of true emergencies where someone's life is in danger, very few situations really require an immediate response. Most can wait ten seconds while you decide how you want to respond. That's right - while you **decide**. While we may feel sometimes like our responses to stressful situations are automatic, they don't have to be and probably shouldn't be. How often have you been involved in or seen a situation that just gets worse and worse for the people involved because they are **reacting** to each other instead of actually **communicating appropriately** with each other? This is an important skill at work and at home. No one feels good about themselves after speaking harshly to a loved one due to stress.

Instead of just reacting and blurting out something that you may regret when you are feeling stressed, literally count to 10 slowly in your head while you exhale. Then decide how you want to respond. Is it something you need to think more about? Do you need clarification on what the person said to make sure you understood them correctly? Are they reacting out of stress when maybe if they took a minute your communication together could be productive instead of destructive? Some strategies that work include asking clarifying questions such as "I want to be sure I understand you correctly. What I heard you say was.... Was that correct?" or "I need to think about this before responding. Let me get back to you on that in about 15 minutes." By clarifying or diffusing the situation, you can often turn what looks like it may be a negative interaction in to a positive one - and reduce everyone's stress!

Take care of yourself

Small daily indulgences that help you relax can also help your mood and your general health. Hot baths or showers help relax tense muscles and can give you a few minutes to yourself to just chill. Listening to good music in your car instead of one of those infuriating talk radio shows or the latest depressing news is also helpful. Have you ever enjoyed a news blackout because of an enjoyable vacation or even because of a particularly consuming project? The world didn't end and everything kept going without you. Give yourself a break from the gloom and doom of the news and news related shows sometimes and listen to good music or watch a comedy instead. Both will help diffuse your stress and improve your mood.

Massage is also a great stress management tool. There are organizations that offer reasonable package deals on weekly massages and some insurance policies and companies also include massage as a benefit. You can also enjoy giving and getting shoulder rubs with your partner or spouse. It's a great way to reconnect and human touch is in and of itself a mood enhancer and stress reducer.

Eating a healthy diet and avoiding tobacco and alcohol are also important in reducing stress. Good general health gives you more resilience to stressful situations and feelings. Include plenty of fruits and vegetables in your diet and if you drink, do so only moderately - 1 drink per day for women or 2 for men. If you smoke, speak to your healthcare provider about

stopping. There are many new medications and methods available now that can help even those who have had difficulty quitting in the past.

Talk about it

Research studies continue to show the benefits of social relationships. Whether its stress reduction, dementia, recovery from injury or illness, or depression, having a good social network and people you can talk to has proven health benefits. Let your partner or spouse know how things are and what is stressful or upsetting to you. Unfortunately they cannot read your mind and will not know what your needs are if you don't tell them. If you would like for them to help you come up with solutions or ways to deal with your stressful situations, tell them so. On the other hand, if what you really want is just for them to listen and be supportive of your efforts and feelings, tell them that. The key is to clearly communicate your needs. At the same time, reaching out to others helps you to feel better about yourself and to be more resilient to stress. Ask those you care about how you can be there for them as well.

Arrange to meet friends for lunch or dinner regularly and enjoy conversation and good humor. Even if you don't really feel like it, spending time with others enjoying dinner, a movie, shopping, or golf or another sport helps you forget about your problems for a while. It can also give you a relaxed atmosphere to vent about any issues you may be having and possibly gain a different perspective about them.

Ask for Help

Uncontrolled stress can be fatal. Research has shown that stress contributes to insomnia, weight gain, heart disease, high blood pressure, type II diabetes, depression and more. If you feel that you are unable to regroup on your own using these or other stress management techniques, don't be afraid to ask for help from a professional. Employee Assistance Program professionals, clergy, psychologists and other counselors can all help you deal with your stress and help you find happiness. If you have difficulty sleeping, neck or back pain, feelings of anxiety, depression or other stress related issues, speak to your healthcare provider.