

# Stress Management and Relaxation



Stress is a part of everyone's life. Some stress is necessary for life and achievement, but too much stress harms us physically and emotionally.

Hans Selye, M.D., an expert in his field, defines stress as a "nonspecific response of the body to a demand."

When stress is prolonged or particularly frustrating, it becomes distress. Recognizing the early symptoms of distress and then doing something about them can make a major difference in a good quality of life or "just surviving."

Exercise is an excellent way to relieve stress and to relax. The exercise may be physical—gardening, housework, walking, swimming, or bicycling. Or it may be mental—prayer and meditation, self-hypnosis, deep breathing, or taking a mental time-out.

However, coping with stress effectively involves more than learning the techniques of certain mental or physical exercises. Coping also includes healthy thinking—that is, having a good attitude toward self and life in general. Lastly, handling stress requires actively applying the techniques you've learned.

## Guidelines for Coping

People control their own feelings! It is possible to create, at will, a calm and peaceful state of relaxed alertness. Some ideas or guidelines that may help are listed.

- **Be in charge.** Most tension comes from within and is created by the person, not the situation. Recognizing it is possible to choose the way you will respond or react to a situation is helpful to most people.
- **Share your feelings.** Talk to someone about your concerns and worries. Perhaps a friend, family member, teacher, or counselor can help you see your problem in a different light. If you feel your problem is serious, you might seek professional help from a religious leader, psychologist, or psychiatrist. Knowing when to ask for help may avoid more serious stress-related problems later.
- **Know your limits.** If a problem is beyond your control and cannot be changed at the moment, don't fight the situation. Try hard to accept what is until change becomes possible.
- **Take care of yourself.** You are special. Get enough rest and eat nutritious meals. If you are irritable and tense from lack of sleep, or if you are not eating correctly, you have less ability to cope with stressful situations. If stress repeatedly keeps you from sleeping, ask your doctor for help.
- **Make time for fun.** Schedule time for work and recreation. Play is just as important to your well-being as is work; you need a break from your daily routine to relax and have fun.
- **Be a participant.** To help from getting bored, sad, and lonely, go where things are happening. Inactivity tends to focus your thoughts on your problems. Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, get involved and become a participant. Offer your services in neighborhood or volunteer organizations. Help yourself by helping others.
- **Accept responsibility.** Accept responsibility for the way you feel, respond, and behave. Don't blame others for the situation or feel overwhelmed by guilt. Simply accept reality and decide what to do about the present situation.
- **Check off your tasks.** Trying to take care of everything at once can seem overwhelming, and, as a result, you may not accomplish anything. Take one thing, one day at a time. Don't try to tackle your whole life's problems at once. Make a list of what you need to do, then do one thing at a time, checking it off as it's completed. Give priority to the most important ones and do those first.
- **Compromise with others.** Cooperate with people instead of demanding things always be your way; it's better than fighting and always being "right." Give-and-take on both sides reduces the strain and makes you both feel more comfortable.
- **It's okay to cry.** A good cry is a healthy way to bring relief to your anxiety, and it might even prevent a headache or other physical consequences. Take some deep breaths; they also release tension.

- **Create a quiet scene.** You can't always run away, but you can "dream the impossible dream." A quiet country scene painted mentally or on canvas can take you out of the turmoil of a stressful situation. Change the scene by reading a humorous, upbeat book or playing quiet music to create a sense of peace and tranquility.
- **Avoid self-medication.** Although you can use drugs as a crutch to relieve stress temporarily, drugs do not remove the conditions that caused the stress in the first place. Tranquilizers, alcohol, and nicotine, in fact, can create more stress and depression than they remove. Any medication should be taken only on the advice of a physician.
- **Develop a positive attitude.** Practice looking at people and situations as potentially positive instead of thinking of them as negative or harmful. Accept and appreciate "self." Be kind to yourself. Concentrate on your good points, and accept that we all make mistakes. Only by being at peace within yourself can you hope to reduce your stress and find peace in all parts of your life.

Here are some things you can do when you feel stressed:

1. Breathe
  - Deeply through your nose and slowly out your mouth.
2. Muscle relaxation
  - Tense and relax each major muscle group. Start with your face, and go down to your toes.
3. Take time-outs
  - Allow yourself brief breaks.
4. Plan for stressful situations
  - This way, you won't be caught off guard.
5. Positive self-talk
  - Avoid negative thinking; don't be hard on yourself.
  - Reward yourself for managing stressful situations.
6. Be strong
  - State your needs and goals to others clearly.
  - Respect others' goals and feelings.
  - Work together with others.
7. Exercise
  - Always talk to your doctor before beginning any exercise program.
  - Be active at least 30 minutes on most days of the week.
  - Make lifestyle changes to increase your physical activity.
8. Enjoy yourself
  - Take time out for hobbies and friends.
  - Do something you enjoy.
  - Call a friend.
9. Avoid drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes
  - They really do not help.
10. Take care of yourself
  - Sleep well, eat well, and live well.

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