

Tips, Insights & Tactics

Stress Management



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There are two types of stress. Positive stress is called eustress. It's the short-lived, motivating kind of stress that helps incite us to prepare for a test, a sporting competition or other challenge. Negative stress is called distress. It's the longer term, anxiety-ridden kind of stress. The purpose of this report is to help you recognize and deal more effectively with the negative stressors in your life.

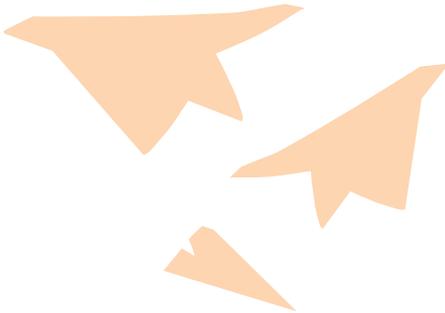


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Excess stress is the enemy of harmony and productivity; at work and at home. It affects our mental and physical well-being, and our relationships. Some stressors are easily dealt with. Others are more complex, and may require a combination of strategies to manage.

This report examines the causes and effects of too much stress, and provides tips, insights and tactics to help you reduce the stress in your life.

Causes of Stress

Stress is created by the demands and pressures we feel. Their effects can be physical, mental and emotional. Although we may try to compartmentalize our lives, we are whole beings. What happens at work, may affect what happens at home—or vice versa.

Stressors aren't entirely universal. What upsets one person, another is able to take in stride. So, it's important to understand which things are creating our individual stress. Once we've identified our personal stress triggers, we can begin to take action to deal with them.

Take a moment to list the top five stressors you're currently dealing with in your life. If you're having trouble identifying your stressors, below are a few ideas that may help:

- Keep a journal for a week or two. At the end of each day, write down a brief note to identify what, where, who, how or why you felt stressed. It won't take long before you'll be able to see which things occur most often and which cause the greatest levels of anxiety.
- Divide your adult life into three segments. For each segment of years, what recurring factors do you remember that made your life stressful at work, home or school during that period. Are you dealing with any of the same issues today?
- Here's a list of common stress triggers:

Change—The larger the change, the greater the potential stress. Is the change happening to you or with you? Will adapting be easy or difficult? Whether you agree or not, do you understand the reason the change is being made?

Causes of Stress (continued)

FUD—fear, uncertainty and doubt.

Expectations—yours or those around you.

Attitude/Perception—how does your individual mental/physical health factor into what's distressing you? Your lifestyle? Beliefs?

Overwork—particularly over long periods.

Isolation—lack of information/communication.

Duration—chronic stressors.

Effects of Stress

Feeling stressed can have a multiplying effect. For example, losing patience with friends or family members, when what's really stressing us is something at work. When we live with stress over time it can begin to feel normal. We may raise our tolerance, but eventually it will take its toll.

If you recognize any of the following physical or mental symptoms of stress, try to identify their cause.

Tight Muscles—usually in the neck, shoulders, or jaw; or other nervous habits.

Headache—or gastrointestinal upset.

Somber Mood—humourless, difficulty smiling, laughing or lightening up.

Tiredness—lack of energy or enthusiasm.

Sleep—difficulty sleeping, or difficulty going back to sleep.

Temperament—irritable, easily angered, anti-social behaviour.

Emotional—inappropriate outbursts.

Anxiety—excessive, unable to move on.

Appetite—some research indicates appetite increases in response to short term stress and decreases in response to stress over a long period.

Skin conditions—chronic conditions like eczema and alopecia are exacerbated by stress.

Excess—increased use of caffeine, alcohol, tobacco, pain relievers or other drugs.

Long term stress will eventually affect attitude, attendance and attrition at work. Unchecked, it can lead to an impaired immune system or other, even more serious health conditions like cardiovascular disease or cancer.



Health and Stress

Optimizing your health directly relieves stress through activities like exercise. Plus, it helps you to better withstand the negative effects stress can cause. As in all health-related advice, consult your doctor or a nutritionist to ensure you're getting the nutrients and vitamins you need, and for the safety of any exercise or dietary programs you adopt.

Diet

Strive for a healthy, balanced diet. Think of food as something to nourish your body. Assess your current diet, make reasonable, incremental improvements and repeat. If you drink caffeinated or alcoholic beverages, use moderation. The same goes for donuts and other sugary treats.

Many nutritionists encourage adding Omega-3, which occurs naturally in fish like salmon and sardines, to your diet regularly.

Water

Drink plenty of water to keep your body hydrated. Many enclosed environments like offices, automobiles, and airplanes especially, are arid. The water will flush toxins, and get you up and moving for more bathroom breaks too.

Exercise

The benefits of exercise are well documented. A workout provides immediate stress relief through the release of pent up energy. Like meditation, it can also focus all your thoughts in the moment, relieving your mind from its stressors. Longer term, it improves your body's ability to handle some of the negative effects of stress.

Sleep

Like nutrition, ensure your mind and body get the rest they require. A proper night's sleep, regularly, helps alleviate stress and helps you be more creative, energetic and positive.

Ergonomics

Good posture and good ergonomics when working at a computer for extended periods, will help fend off fatigue, physical stress and potential injury. If possible, work at a raised workstation so you can switch between sitting and standing.

Health and Stress (continued)

Emotional Health

When something stressful occurs, try to consider the long term perspective instead of reacting with a short term response. Take the high road. Cope with stress, with maturity and intelligence, rather than emotion. It will help you lessen the stressor's effect on you.

Acceptance

Perfection is an ideal, not a reality. Aim to improve, not to be perfect. Accept where you are at this moment, unequivocally. Embrace your flaws as comfortably as your strengths. Then begin a realistic, incremental plan of improvement. Unconditional self-acceptance is a wonderful stress buster. Try it.

Self-Talk

Watch your language. The way you talk to yourself is a great indicator of the pressure you put on yourself. When you present to a group, notice the difference between, "I hope to do well," versus "I expect to do well." If things go less than perfect, notice the difference between, "I need to practice more next time," versus "I made a mess of that." We are often our own harshest judge. Why not be your own best coach?

Note that the proper care and nurturing of your physical and mental state is not a cure for medical conditions. Stress levels can affect the severity of symptoms you feel, but consult a doctor to treat any underlying medical conditions directly.





Stress Management

As individuals, we all cope with stress differently. Our genetics, personality and life experience all factor into our response and ability to handle various stressors. There are relatively few things in life we can control completely. There are a few more that we can influence. And there is a majority over which we have no control whatsoever. Strive to recognize the difference every day.

When we encounter something beyond our control or influence we have a choice: we can worry about it (stress) or take control of our reaction to it (de-stress). As Stephen Covey, author of the landmark *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*® advised, we each have a circle of concern (larger) and a circle of influence (smaller). When we focus on concerns, our circle of influence shrinks. When we focus on our areas of influence, our influence grows.

When you're ready to decrease the stress in your life, you can manage it in three ways: exposure, countermeasures and relief. Choose several of the strategies in the sections that follow to create a plan to manage and reduce the impact of the stressors in your life.

Exposure to Stressful Situations

Once you've identified situations that create stress, you can begin to lessen their effect. Some can be eliminated completely. Others may be unavoidable, but can be reduced. For example, if you find the heavy traffic of your rush hour commute infuriating, you can choose to limit your exposure. Change your hours, your route, or the method of your commute, such as a carpool or bus.

Change the Pattern

One of the best ways to reduce stress is to change the circumstances surrounding it. And pay attention to your mood. If you're having a bad day already, give yourself a few moments to relax and de-stress a little before you immediately jump into a situation you suspect will be stressful.

Take a Breath

Today's relentless pursuit of productivity raises our stress levels. We're driven to accomplish, but the reality is that we do our best work when we're fresh and energized. Investing a little time to rest and refresh usually more than pays for itself.

Stress Management (continued)

Take a moment for a relaxing breath every hour. If you work at a computer continuously, get up and get away from it for a moment. When you return you'll be more alert and relaxed. And take a longer, more complete break at appropriate intervals, from the day's stressors. It will help reset the balance.

Strive for Balance

Overload is a common cause of stress. Before you take on more projects and tasks, consider your current schedule and commitments. Think in terms of balancing your time across a variety of high-value tasks—not just filling it.





Stress Countermeasures

When we begin losing control over our projects and tasks we begin feeling overwhelmed. As the feelings mount, so does our stress. One of the most powerful stress busters is organization and planning.

Plan Your Day

Any time you feel like your day is planning you, stop at your first opportunity to reverse the situation. Get organized. Take your overwhelming workload and quantify it. It may still be large, but it will be finite. And what can be defined, can be managed.

Make a list of action items—monthly, weekly or daily—whichever is helpful. Some project managers like to end their workday defining tomorrow's action items and some prefer to create their daily list at the start of the day.

If it's an option, delegate, or share your workload with coworkers. If not, talk to your manager and work out a plan to prioritize your assignments.

Set Goals Realistically

Goal setting is an important aspect of planning and organization. But don't fall into the trap of creating unrealistic or unreachable goals. If you expect more of

yourself than others, imagine you're setting goals for someone else. Or try breaking your goals up into smaller, more realistic pieces. And as you work your way through your milestones, don't forget to celebrate your success.

Practice Improvement

Counteracting different stressors can take time to learn to do effectively. Be kind to yourself. Give yourself time to learn. Start small and build. Pick a specific stress reaction, find a useful countermeasure and learn to master it. For example, counteract anger with calming strategies; withdrawing with energizing tactics; and shutting down with rejuvenating measures. Then move on and up.

Change Your Perspective

When you're caught up in the moment of a setback; when you've lost perspective, stress increases. To regain your balance, make a successful break from what's causing your stress. Ask a trusted friend or associate for advice—not empathy or validation—useful advice.

Stress Countermeasures (continued)

Learn from those who seem to handle stress successfully. Ask them for ideas. Do something kind for yourself. Frame the situation in time. How will you look back on this a week, a month, a year, from now?

Take a ten or fifteen minute break—alone. Relax and wipe the slate clean. When you return to the task at hand, try to keep your new perspective top of mind.

Explore the Past

As you were growing up, how did close friends and family members deal with stress. Did you learn helpful or ineffective coping skills from them? Leverage what's useful and try to be conscious of reactions that aren't helping.

Weigh Your Contribution

It's easy for stress to ignite negative emotions. Don't go there. Instead, strive to be assertive, not aggressive. When it's relevant, assert your opinions and feelings instead of becoming angry, defensive or passive aggressive. Remember, you're either contributing to the solution, or the problem; reducing stress, or increasing it.

Follow the Money

Money and work vie for first place on the list of top stressors. If you feel as if you've lost control of spending, try switching from plastic to cash. It changes your perspective. Or keep all your receipts, like you would for an expense report. Total them up to see where the money goes. When you have the big picture, it's easier to see where to make cuts and how to approach spending more strategically.

Unplug

Mobile computing continues to blur the lines between work and home. The always-on compulsion is addicting and can usurp so much of your attention, there's no time left to simply relax. Everyone needs downtime to recharge. If you find you can't help checking messages throughout the evening, try confining it to a specific time. Almost anything can wait a few hours. You'll be able to respond more effectively and efficiently when you're well rested and fresh.

Manage Your Perceptions

The more stressed we are, the more negative we become. Pay attention to what you express to others and to yourself. This is not a suggestion to sugar coat reality. A glass with equal parts of water and air, is just that. But the way we express what we see, tells us something about our perception.

Watch for Patterns

It's human nature to commiserate. We all do it. But a little goes a long way. If you find yourself revisiting the same complaints, it's time for a more strategic approach. Try to identify the issue as clearly and unemotionally as possible. Then brainstorm solutions. And remember, it's considerably more difficult to change someone else's behaviour than your own.

Think Big Picture

A famous prayer counsels us to accept the things we can't change; to have the strength to change the things we can; and the wisdom to know the difference. It's a simple guide, but not always so easy to apply. Nevertheless, it's worth stepping back from most stressful situations, and giving it a try.

Choose Your Complements

Neutral colours are selected to fade into the background, but colour can pack a powerful psychological punch. Research has shown that shades of green and blue have a calming, soothing effect. Attention-getting colours like red, orange and yellow have a stimulating effect. Surround yourself with colours that help mitigate the effects of the stressors you feel most often.



Lighten Up

Humour is a wonderful counter-measure for anxiety. It's next to impossible to be simultaneously anxious and light-hearted. In fact, we naturally create a state of giddiness or feeling punchy after a prolonged period of stress or intense effort. Foster your sense of humour to take the edge off stressors. Some workers keep a joke book handy, or subscribe to humorous websites, so that help is near whenever they feel the need to lighten their mood.





Stress Relief

The body's natural response to stressors is the "fight or flight response." Breathing and heart rate increases. Pupils dilate. The body preps itself for physical action. We're perfectly evolved for threats of physical danger. Not ideal for the stressors of the digital age. Instead, we need ways to counteract the body's natural response; to relax tense muscles, frayed nerves and defensive postures.

Start by exploring your senses. They're magical. Which ones have the most powerful calming effects on you—sound, scent, touch, taste or sight?

Tune In

The right music, or recordings of the natural world like ocean waves or rainfall, can have a powerful renewing effect. Today, access to music has never been easier, or more personal. Use it to reenergize or ease tensions, clearing your mind to think more clearly and calmly.

Ease Up

Tension often shows up in tight muscles in the neck, shoulders, arms and hands. You may not even notice the subtle increase over time. Try gradually clenching the muscles in one area for 30 seconds, then release. Use the sensation to help you relax even further with the goal to release all the tension in that area.

Take a Deep Breath

Conscious relaxation usually begins with breathing. When we're stressed our breaths become shallow. Even a couple of deep breaths can help us relax. If there's time to go a bit deeper, sit in a chair with good support for your back and arms. Sit comfortably with your feet flat on the floor, the chair supporting you. Take slow, deep breaths as you focus on feeling the weight of different parts of your body being supported. Start with your feet and slowly work your way up to the top of your head.

Stress Relief (continued)



Just Be

If you have easy access to a pool or calm waters, floating can provide a unique and beneficial approach to relaxation. There's something about water that promotes a sense of calm and a connection with the natural world that can wash away the day's worries and cares.

Center Yourself

Yoga and meditation have shown great benefit to reduce stress, calm anxiety and enable a more positive, creative frame of mind. Hatha yoga is a recommended style for beginners. It will help you tone your muscles, learn to control your breathing and quiet your mind.

Rejuvenate

Access to massage is no longer limited to luxury spas and upscale health clubs. Its growth is in part due to its benefits in reducing stress and aiding relaxation. Today, massage is available at the office, events, clinics and hospitals, and specialty shops. Talk to your doctor and a certified massage therapist to determine what's right for you.

Reflexology is a specific type of massage that focuses on reflex areas of the feet and hands that correspond to organs, glands and other parts of the body. Some office workers gently rock an empty bottle or a golf ball with their feet to help relieve tension and stress.

Reach Out

When feelings of isolation contribute to your distress, tap your social networks. Contact with friends and family provides considerable support to help you cope and decompress. They can also help you expand your network, if you feel your social circle is too small or limiting.

Stop to Refresh

At work, it may be difficult to find a place where you can relax for a few minutes without feeling self-conscious or as if you could be interrupted at any moment. In nice weather, a nearby park may work. If nothing else comes to mind, consider a short escape to the parking lot, to sit in your car. Push the seat back, close your eyes and focus your mind on relaxing for a few calming minutes.

If you work from home, you might even consider a power nap after lunch. It works wonders for workers in Central America and other parts of the world.

Sleep Restfully

When the day is done, try consciously relaxing your body before falling asleep. Focus your mind on breathing and relaxation to give yourself a calm, soothing start on getting a restful night's sleep.

Tap Every Sense

Aromatherapy is the use of fragrance to affect mood or behaviour. Use of essential oils is not without controversy. Check with a licensed medical provider for advice. Scents of lavender, chamomile and sandalwood are often said to have a calming effect.

Seek the Help You Need

If you find yourself unable to relax or de-stress, it may be time to seek further help. Consider setting up an interview with a therapist, who specializes in stress relief, to help you develop coping strategies that will work for you.

Tips, Insights & Tactics

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