



Beating Stress: Challenges, Choices, Changes

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Stress comes in many forms. There are normal and predictable stressors, such as a new job, getting married, or moving. There are sudden stressors such as a disaster, assault, or death. There is some stress that is simply irritating and other life stress that just continues to build up. The first step in managing stress is to understand stress in general, then consider how you react to your life stressors.

Here is how stress works: **A + B + C = X**

A = The stressing event.

B = The resources you and your family have in order to deal with the stressor (time, money, support from each other, spirituality, etc.).

C = The way you and your family perceive the stress (“we can handle it” versus gloom and doom).

The sum of these three factors — “X” — determines if the A-B-C mix ends up being a crisis or if the stressful event will be well-managed.

People can recover from stress, but the intensity, duration, and timing of the stressor affect the recovery. The process varies for everyone.

Keep in mind that:

- Stress is normal.
- Stress is a function of duration and intensity.
- Social support is critical for managing stress.
- Coping mechanisms can be learned.
- Everyone copes differently.
- Coping can be positive or negative.



Coping

How do you respond to stress?

- **Problem-focused response** – Identify the issue and consider several alternatives for responding.

Work is too demanding → Options to reduce the load

School is overwhelming → Tutor, teacher assistance

- **Emotion-focused response** – Allow emotions to control reactions.

Criticism → Shrug it off, avoid it

Bullying → Seek allies, fight back

Positive Coping Measures

Focused and deep breathing – Inhale, expand the lungs, then slowly exhale. Visualize the tension leaving your body and positive energy coming in.

Self-talk – Replace negative responses (such as “I can’t”) with positive talk (such as “everything will work out”).

Laugh – Try it! Laugh out loud, read a joke, or watch a funny movie.

Stretching – Starting with your toes, move up your body while stretching each joint and muscle.

Forgiving – Deep hurts that we carry with us can be exhausting. Forgiving leads to healing. Write down your feelings. Share a letter with those who have hurt you, if appropriate. Forgive and move on. Forgiving others frees you and gives you greater peace of mind.

Poor Ways to Manage Stress

- Denying the problem exists only works until you realize it won't go away.
- Using drugs or alcohol will only numb the pain for a little while and may lead to bigger problems.
- Isolating yourself may drive you into a deeper sadness.
- Escaping through books, TV, or the Internet is only a temporary fix.
- Projecting anger may hurt someone you didn't intend to hurt.

What Can You Do?

Look inside – Think about how you take care of yourself physically and emotionally. Do you eat well? Do you get exercise? Do you drink alcohol only in moderation? Do you regularly set aside quiet time for yourself to write, meditate, think, or pray? Do you make time for restful walks or to enjoy nature?

Look outside – Do you reach out to friends, family, or co-workers? Sharing common goals and conversations with others takes time and effort but can be rewarding and relaxing. If you need to talk with someone other than friends and family members, consider a counselor.

Make a plan – Write down how you spend your time. Add up the “me” time and the time you spend with others. Is there balance? What is important to you?

Manage change – How do you manage change? Burying your head in the sand won't make challenges or transitions go away.

Stress Tips

- Get regular physical activity.
- Practice relaxation techniques.
- Do deep breathing.
- Eat healthy.
- Cut down on caffeine.
- Meditate — get still — “center.”
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Develop better time management.
- Count your blessings daily.
- Practice positive self-talk.
- Simplify your life.
- Dance and sing.
- Grow in self-esteem.
- Forgive.
- Play.
- Hug.
- Get a massage.
- Deal with anger positively.
- Adjust feelings.
- Set personal goals.
- Laugh a lot.
- Get back to nature.
- Take life one day at a time.
- Talk about your troubles.
- Know your limits.
- Live by YOUR own values rather than those imposed on you.
- Get in touch with your spiritual nature.
- Seek professional help.

When to Seek Professional Help

Seek professional help if:

- You do not have a strong support network to turn to, talk with, and lean on.
- Your thoughts, fears, or emotions interfere with daily living.
- Your sadness, loneliness, moodiness, or nervousness lingers and adversely affects your school, work, and relationships.
- You have problems with alcohol or other drugs, drastic weight reduction, or changes in sleep or eating patterns.
- You exhibit unmanageable impulsiveness, hostility, anger, or violence.

A common reason people do not seek help is that they are in denial — thinking the problem is not bad enough to seek help for — or they fear sharing personal thoughts with another person. Another reason is worrying what others will think or thinking they can tough it out by themselves. It takes a brave person to seek help when needed. A trained counselor or psychologist can help identify constructive ways to deal with emotions.

Resources

American Psychological Association. 2010. “Depression and How Psychotherapy and Other Treatments Can Help People Recover.” APA Website. www.apa.org/topics/depress/recover.aspx?item=5.

Matthews, D. Wayne. 2006. *StressSmart: The Challenge of Balancing Your Life*. North Carolina Cooperative Extension. www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/temp/Wellness/CurrModules/StressSmart.pdf.

Palmer, A. 2003. “Self-Disclosure a Leading Factor in Not Seeking Therapy.” *Monitor on Psychology* 34 (8): 16. www.apa.org/monitor/sep03/factor.aspx.

Source: D. Wayne Matthews, 2006 (see Resources).