

Managing Stress: How to manage stress

When faced with a threatening situation—whether physical or emotional, the body releases a surge of adrenaline and cortisol. This is sometimes known as the state of “fight or flight.” Pressure can be a good thing—energizing and enabling us to perform at our highest standard for an important task, but when the level of pressure in our lives becomes too great, it can lead to stress which can be harmful and may result in both physical and mental illness if left unmanaged.

This is the third in a three-part series of articles on emotional intelligence at work. Read the previous article, [“What causes stress?”](#)

How to manage stress

First, recognize your stress responses.

Once you learn to recognize your own response to stress, you can begin to treat it effectively. A good way to achieve this is to keep a stress diary. Write down how you are feeling and the factors that influence you. Documenting your thoughts, reactions and feelings in a stress diary can help you to better understand the most important and frequent stressors in your life and how you react to them. When you are familiar with these, you can begin to prepare for and manage them, by both addressing their causes and adopting some stress management techniques.

Sometimes, the best way to deal with your stress will be to confront it at the source. Not all stressors can be dealt with directly and it is important to remember that a certain amount of conflict, change and uncertainty is inevitable in our lives and that we need to find ways to live with it.

If stress is something that recurs throughout your life, seek to build resilience from previous experience.

Change your attitude—think positive.

A key step in stress management is to try and change your attitude towards the source of stress. Positive thinking involves paying attention to the negative messages that you send yourself and turning them around to be more positive. Learn to recognize negative thought patterns and replace them with more realistic and helpful thoughts. Make a conscious decision to keep yourself in a positive frame of mind, to prioritize your workload and not be too hard on yourself.

Make changes to your lifestyle.

It may be difficult to find the motivation to maintain a healthy lifestyle when you are stressed. Unfortunately, it is typical for many people to develop maladaptive ‘coping strategies’ when under stress. For example, getting caught up in problems and not making time to see family and friends or enjoy the things in life that are important. It is easy to skip meals or just have a quick sugary snack, to exercise less and to increase your intake of coffee, alcohol or tobacco. However, all this could actually increase your stress levels and make you less able to cope by leaving you feeling depleted and lethargic.

Exercise.

During a period of stress or anxiety, hormones are released into the bloodstream. By remaining sedentary, these hormones stay in the bloodstream longer, cause waste products to build up and can increase feelings of irritability and anxiety. As little as 30 minutes of moderate exercise a day can help. It will give you a stronger immune system, more energy and improved sleep patterns. Physical activity has the benefit of removing the by-products of the stress response and helps the body to relax. It also releases endorphins into the bloodstream that provide pain relief and a sense of euphoria.

The type of exercise that you choose is not important. What is important is that you find something that works for you. It may be a brisk walk to and from work or during your lunch hour. It might entail short bursts of physical activity such as cycling instead of taking the car, using the stairs instead of taking the lift, dancing, swimming or any other form of physical activity that you find enjoyable. It does not have to take place in a gym or even take a lot of time out of your day.

Ask your doctor for advice on the type and level of activity that would be healthy for you. Make it a goal to find a level of exercise that is safe, comfortable and that you will be able to sustain over time.

Healthy eating.

Eating sugary and fatty snacks is a common response to stress, which can have adverse effects including weight gain and fluctuating blood sugar levels. If you are lacking nutrients your body will not be capable of handling stress effectively.

Diet is an important contributor to stress management. Therefore, it is important to include plenty of fruits, whole-grain products, and leafy vegetables. Avoid fatty foods and salt for the benefit of your heart and arteries. Try to eat regularly to avoid a dip in blood sugar levels and drink plenty of water. Limit your intake of caffeinated drinks such as tea and coffee that can dehydrate, increase your heart rate, and stimulate the release of several stress hormones.

Rest and relaxation.

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We can all benefit from taking part in relaxing activities. This could be spending time with family or friends, listening to music, or reading a book. The important thing is that it makes us feel good. For some people relaxation classes or breathing exercises may be useful. Deep breathing is probably the easiest relaxation technique to master, and among the most effective. Slow, deep, diaphragmatic breathing slows down your heart rate, reduces blood pressure and relaxes tense muscles.

To practice deep breathing, stand or sit in a comfortable position, with good posture so that your stomach is not compressed. Put your left hand over your belly button and your right hand on your chest. Breathe as normal and try to become aware of which hand rises first. If your breathing is fast and shallow your right hand will rise first. Breathe in deeply through your nose,

until you control your breathing and your left hand rises before the right hand. Try and remember that “left is right” in order to establish deeper, calmer breathing.

Another way of learning how you respond to stress is to measure your pulse rate. If it is higher than normal try to slow it down with help of breathing techniques. To do this you should measure your resting heart rate at a time when you are feeling relaxed (first thing in the morning is usually good). Then compare this to when you are feeling stressed.

Once you have tried a few techniques think about how you will work them into your schedule. The key to using relaxation techniques is to do them two or three times a day and plan them into your schedule as a high priority relaxation break.

Express emotions.

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Stressful situations can be harder to cope with when you try to do it on your own. Sharing problems with friends and family can help you to cope with difficult situations. Talking things through with a trusted friend or family member can help take your mind off the problems you can't control and make you feel more able to cope with the things that you can control. Knowing someone who can provide moral support, practical advice, or just sympathize can help you to feel less overwhelmed. It may also help you to put things in perspective and work out a strategy to deal with the problem or situation. There may be situations where you don't feel able to discuss your problems with either friends or family. Some people find it helps to talk to a counselor as they are outside of the situation and are experienced and qualified to help.

[Research](#) shows that stress hormones are released through tear ducts while we cry.

Another useful practice is writing. This can help by defusing destructive tension and relieving stress. For many people, putting thoughts and feelings on paper reduces anxiety. If you are worried about something, try taking a few minutes to write down your thoughts. It can free your mind to move on to other things. This is particularly useful at night time if you are experiencing disturbed sleep patterns.

Sometimes stress is a result of taking on too much work and finding it difficult to say 'no' to a manager, a colleague or even in personal relationships. It is important to remember that your needs and wants are as important as any other person's is. If you find that not being assertive enough applies to you, it might be beneficial for you to attend a course in assertiveness training.

This is the third in a three-part series of articles on managing stress. Read the first in the series, [“How do I know if I am stressed?”](#)

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