

How Can I Manage Stress Better?

Identifying unrelieved stress and being aware of its effect on our lives is not sufficient for reducing its harmful effects. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. However, all require work toward change: changing the source of stress and/or changing your reaction to it. How do you proceed?

1. Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions.

- Notice your distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over your problems.
- Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about meaning of these events?
- Determine how your body responds to the stress. Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?

2. Recognize what you can change.

- Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?
- Can you reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)?
- Can you shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)?
- Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?

3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.

- The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger...physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
- Are you expecting to please everyone?
- Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent? Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?
- Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.
- Try to temper your excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and the "what if's."

4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.

- Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal.
- Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback can help you gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart rate, and blood pressure.
- Medications, when prescribed by a physician, can help in the short term in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer. Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution.

5. Build your physical reserves.

- Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging).
- Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
- Maintain your ideal weight.
- Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants.
- Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can.
- Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.

6. Maintain your emotional reserves.

- Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships.
- Pursue realistic goals, which are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.
- Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.
- Always be kind and gentle with yourself -- be a friend to yourself.