



Knowledge Consortium of Gujarat
 Department of Higher Education, Government of Gujarat
JOURNAL OF COMMERCE AND MANAGEMENT
ISSN : 2279-025X

Year-1 | Issue-4 | Continuous issue-4 | January-February 2013

Stress Management: A Path to Happy Life

It may seem that there's nothing we can do about our stress level. But we have a lot more control than we might think. In fact, the simple realization that **we're in control of our life is the foundation of stress management.**

Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of our thoughts, our emotions, our schedule, our environment, and the way we deal with problems. The ultimate goal is a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun – plus the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on.

Identify the sources of stress in our life

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in our life. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Our true sources of stress aren't always obvious, and it's all too easy to overlook our own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sure, we may know that we're constantly worried about work deadlines. But maybe it's our procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that leads to deadline stress.

To identify our true sources of stress, look closely at our habits, attitude, and excuses:

- Do we explain always stress as temporary ("I just have a million things going on right now") even though we can't remember the last time us took a breather?
- Do we define stress as an integral part of our work or home life ("Things are always crazy around here") or as a part of our personality ("I have a lot of nervous energy, that's all")?
- Do we blame our stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until us accept responsibility for the role we play in creating or maintaining it, our stress level will remain outside our control.

Start writing a stress Diary

A stress Diary can help us identify the regular stressors in our life and the way we deal with them. Each time we feel stressed; keep track of it in our diary. As we keep a daily log, we will begin to see patterns and common themes. Write down:

- What caused our stress (make a guess if we're unsure)?
- How we felt, both physically and emotionally.
- How we acted in response.
- What we did to make our self feel better.
- Record Blood pressure and pulse

Look at how we currently cope with stress

Think about the ways we currently manage and cope with stress in our life. Our stress Diary can help us identify them. Are our coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.

Unhealthy ways of coping with stress

These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but they cause more damage in the long run:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smoking • Drinking too much • Overeating or under eating • Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer • Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using pills or drugs to relax • Sleeping too much • Procrastinating • Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems • Taking out our stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)
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Learning healthier ways to manage stress

If our methods of coping with stress aren't contributing to our greater emotional and physical health, it's time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they all require change. We can either change the situation or change our reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it's helpful to think of the four As: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no "one size fits all" solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes us feel calm and in control.

Dealing with Stressful Situations: The Four A's

<p>Change the situation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid the stressor. • Alter the stressor. 	<p>Change our reaction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt to the stressor. • Accept the stressor.
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Stress management strategy

1: Avoid unnecessary stress

Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed.

- **Learn how to say "no" –**

Know our limits and stick to them. Whether in our personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities when we're close to reaching them. Taking on more than we can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.

- **Avoid people who stress us out –**

If someone consistently causes stress in our life and we can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time we spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.

- **Take control of our environment –**

If the evening news makes us anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic's got us tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do our grocery shopping from nearby mall / online.

- **Avoid hot-button topics –**

If we get upset over religion or politics, cross them off our conversation list. If we repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse our self when it's the topic of discussion.

- **Skip down our to-do list –**

Analyze our schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If we've got too much on our plate, distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts." Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

2: Alter the situation

If we can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what we can do to change things so the problem doesn't present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way we communicate and operate in our daily life.

- **Express our feelings instead of bottling them up.** If something or someone is bothering us, communicate our concerns in an open and respectful way. If we don't voice our feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- **Be willing to compromise.** When we ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If we both are willing to bend at least a little, we'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.
- **Be more assertive.** Don't take a backseat in our own life. Deal with problems head on, doing our best to anticipate and prevent them. If we've got an exam to study for and our chatty roommate just got home, say up front that we only have five minutes to talk.
- **Manage our time better.** Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When we're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. But if we plan ahead and make sure we don't overextend our self, we can alter the amount of stress we're under.

3: Adapt to the stressor

95% of tension is created by 5% of carelessness and laziness. This has to be avoided. If we can't change the stressor, change our self. We can adapt to stressful situations and regain our sense of control by changing our expectations and attitude.

- **Reframe problems.**
Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to our favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.
- **Look at the big picture.**
Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask our self how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus our time and energy elsewhere.
- **Adjust our standards.**
Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting our self up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for our self and others, and learn to be okay with "good enough."
- **Focus on the positive.**

When stress is getting us down, take a moment to reflect on all the things we appreciate in our life, including our own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help us keep things in perspective.

Adjusting Our Attitude

How we think can have a profound effect on our emotional and physical well-being. Each time we think a negative thought about our self, our body reacts as if it were in the throes of a tension-filled situation. If we see good things about our self, we are more likely to feel good; the reverse is also true. Eliminate words such as "always," "never," "should," and "must." These are telltale marks of self-defeating thoughts.

4: Accept the things we can't change

Some sources of stress are unavoidable. We can't prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation we can't change.

- **Don't try to control the uncontrollable.** Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things we can control such as the way we choose to react to problems.
- **Look for the upside.** As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If our own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from our mistakes.
- **Share our feelings.** Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist. Expressing what we're going through can be very cathartic, even if there's nothing we can do to alter the stressful situation.
- **Learn to forgive.** Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free our self from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

5: Make time for fun and relaxation Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, we can reduce stress in our life by nurturing our self. If we regularly make time for fun and relaxation, we'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors when they inevitably come.

Healthy ways to relax and recharge

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go for a walk. • Spend time in nature. • Call a good friend. • Sweat out tension with a good workout. • Write in personal diary. • Take a long bath. • Light scented candles. • Do exercise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea. • Play with a pet. • Work in garden. • Get a massage. • Curl up with a good book. • Listen to music. • Watch a comedy. • Do prayer / Meditation
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Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that we forget to take care of our own needs. Nurturing our self is a necessity, not a luxury.

- **Set aside relaxation time.** Include rest and relaxation in our daily schedule. Don't allow other obligations to encroach. This is our time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge our batteries.
- **Connect with others.** Spend time with positive people who enhance our life. A strong support system will buffer us from the negative effects of stress.
- **Do something us enjoy every day.** Make time for leisure activities that bring us joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano, or working on our bike.
- **Keep our sense of humor.** This includes the ability to laugh at our self. The act of laughing helps our body fight stress in a number of ways.

Learn the relaxation response

We can control our stress levels with relaxation techniques that evoke the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the stress response. Regularly practicing these techniques will build our physical and emotional resilience, heal our body, and boost our overall feelings of joy and equanimity.

6: Adopt a healthy lifestyle

We can increase our resistance to stress by strengthening our physical health.

- **Exercise regularly.** Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of

stress. Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week. Nothing beats aerobic exercise for releasing pent-up stress and tension.

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress, so be mindful of what we eat. Start our day right with breakfast, and keep our energy up and our mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day.
- **Reduce caffeine and sugar.** The temporary "highs" caffeine and sugar provide often end in with a crash in mood and energy. By reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugar snacks in our diet, we'll feel more relaxed and we'll sleep better.
- **Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs.** Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief is only temporary. Don't avoid or mask the issue at hand; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind.
- **Get enough sleep.** Adequate sleep fuels our mind, as well as our body. Feeling tired will increase our stress because it may cause us to think irrationally.

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