

How To Be Calm in a Stressed-Out World

This is Part 2 of a 2-part article designed to support you to live fully in our changing world. Please feel free to share this information with others.

Part 2: Your Resiliency Quotient and Your Strategies for Coping

What's Your Resiliency Quotient? Your ability to handle and bounce back from stress depends on many factors, including your:

- Sense of control
- Belief in a higher power or purpose
- Good support system
- High level of self-confidence
- Good overall health
- Sense of humor
- Ability to handle unpleasant emotions
- Positive attitude toward change

The more of these factors you have, the greater your ability to handle stress and bounce back from it.

How do you take charge of stress and deal with stressful situations?

In our fast-paced world, many men and women deal with frequent or unrelenting stress. The overextended “soccer mom,” the “Type A” personality, the self-critical perfectionist, or the chronic worrier. You're always wound up, always stretched to the breaking point, always rushing around or juggling too many demands.

Operating daily in the red zone comes at the high price to your health, vitality, and peace of mind. But while it may seem that there's nothing you can do about your stress level—the bills aren't going to stop coming, a day will never have more than 24 hours, the career will always be demanding—**you have a lot more control than you might think.** In fact, the simple realization that you're in control of your life is the foundation of stress management.

Managing stress is all about taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. The ultimate goals are to balance life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun and to maintain resilience to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on.

What are two basic options to manage stress?

- 1. Avoid unnecessary stress.** You may be surprised by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

Learn how to say “no.” Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities. Taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.

Avoid people who stress you out. If someone consistently causes

stress in your life and you can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.

Take control of your environment. If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic makes you tense, take a longer but less traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online.

Avoid hot-button topics. If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.

Pare down your to-do list. Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your 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.

- Avoid the stressor.
- Alter the stressor.
- Accept the stressor.
- Adapt to the stressor.

If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

Express your feelings instead of bottling them up. If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.

Be willing to compromise. When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.

Be more assertive. Don't take a backseat in your own life. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. If you've got an exam to study for and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you only have five minutes to talk.

Manage your time better. Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. But if you plan ahead, you can avoid these stress inducing pitfalls.

What are the time management tips to reduce stress?

Create a balanced schedule. All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Try to find a balance between work and family life, social activities and solitary pursuits, daily responsibilities and downtime.

Don't over-commit yourself. Avoid scheduling things back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day. All too often, we underestimate how long things will take.

Prioritize tasks Make a list of tasks you have to do, and tackle them in order of importance. Do the high-priority items first. If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early. The rest of your day will be more pleasant as a result.

Break projects into small steps. If a large project seems overwhelming, make a step-by-step plan. Focus on one manageable step at a time, rather than taking on everything at once.

Delegate responsibility. You don't have to do it all yourself, whether at home, school, or on the job. If other people can take care of the task, why not let them? Let go of the desire to control or oversee every little step. You'll be letting go of unnecessary stress in the process.

Accept the things you can't change. Make the Serenity Prayer *a part of your life. Accept that some sources of stress are unavoidable. For example, you can't prevent or change the death of a loved one 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 you 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 you can control such as the way you 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 your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.

Share your feelings. Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist. Expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic, even if there's nothing you 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 yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

How can you adapt to the stressor?

If you can't change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your 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 your favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.

Look at the big picture. Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself 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 your time and energy elsewhere.

Adjust your standards. Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable

stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others and learn to be okay with “good enough.”

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

Source: *National Victim Assistance Academy, U.S. Department of Justice*

What are some stress reduction tips? Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress by making healthy lifestyle choices and taking care of yourself. If you regularly make time for rest and relaxation, you’ll be in a better place to handle life’s stressors when they inevitably arise.

Nurture yourself. Don’t get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

Set aside relaxation time. Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don’t allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries.

Connect with others. Spend time with positive people who enhance your life. A strong support system will buffer you from the negative effects of stress.

Do something you enjoy every day. Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano, or working on your bike.

Keep your sense of humor. This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Healthy stress reducers

Create downtime but be realistic about the amount of time that you can dedicate to downtime. This time should be incorporated into your daily routine. Downtime can consist of relaxing activities or quiet relaxation:

Recognize what activities are relaxing for you. Be specific when exploring your options:

- Going for walks
- Meeting with friends
- Reading for pleasure
- Listening to music
- Taking a bath

Begin practicing relaxation techniques. Decide which techniques work for you and practice daily. Give yourself variety by finding several techniques that work for you:

- Meditation
- Guided imagery
- Deep breathing exercises

- Progressive relaxation (muscle relaxation)

Recommended Readings

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and It's All Small Stuff. New York, NY: Hyperion, 1997. Carlson, R.

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1988. Davis, M., Eshelman, E., & McCay, M.

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