

How to Be Calm In a Stressed-Out World

This is part 1 of a 2-part article designed to support you to live fully in our changing world. .

Part I: The Basics for Managing Stress

What is stress? Stress is defined as any change that you must adapt to. In today's world, stress is experienced by everyone who is living, working, and breathing. It's a fact of current life that none of us can avoid. Stress ranges in intensity from the extremes of coping with natural disasters, such as recent Hurricane Ike, the world economic crisis, and war to the experiences of starting a business, starting a new relationship (or ending one), or moving to a new city. All stress is not bad. What's important is how you respond to the changes in your life.

If you're living with high levels of stress, you're putting your entire well-being at risk. Stress wreaks havoc on your emotional equilibrium, as well as your physical health. It narrows your ability to think clearly, function effectively, and enjoy life.

The goal of managing your stress is to bring your mind, body, and spirit into balance. By adopting a positive attitude, learning healthier ways to cope, and changing aspects of your lifestyle, you can reduce the impact of stress on your life.

Recognize the signs of stress

Psychological signs of stress can include:

- Anxiety.
- Irritability.
- Mood swings.
- Sadness and depression.
- Emotional withdrawal.
- Hypersensitivity.

There are also *cognitive* symptoms associated with stress. Symptoms such as these can affect your work performance,

- Inability to make decisions.
- Blocked creativity or judgment.
- Poor memory.
- Difficulty concentrating.

- Sense that work is consuming your life

Finally, the *physical* manifestations of stress are often ignored until they reach the point of critical consequences. The following are common physical signs of stress:

- Changes in sleeping patterns, such as insomnia.
- Headaches.
- Backaches.
- Gastrointestinal disturbances.
- Fatigue.
- High blood pressure.
- Changes in eating patterns.
- Shortness of breath.

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

Assess your current stressors and explore ways that you respond to them.

- Generate a list of current events that produce stress in your life. (i.e., work or school demands, balancing priorities, health challenges). Include events that are beyond the personal, such as the terrorism and war, economic turmoil.
- Assess if you have a healthy or unhealthy coping style. For example:

Healthy Coping

Unhealthy Coping

Getting regular exercise

Self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, or overeating

Focusing on good self care

Keeping yourself overly busy

Connecting with family and friends

Isolating from family and friends

Discovering simple pleasures

Excessive procrastination

Start a stress journal

A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the ways you deal with them. When you feel worried or distressed, keep track of it in your journal.

Write down:

- What caused your stress (if you are unsure, take a guess)
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally.
- What your initial response was
- What you did to cope or feel better

Putting your worries on paper is a great way to clarify things. As you keep a daily log, you will begin to see patterns and themes. Your journal may help you see that you don't really have that much to worry about, or it may bring overlooked problems to light. Whatever your discoveries, your stress journal should help you establish a plan for moving forward.

Source: Smith, Jaffe-Gill, & Siegel, 2007

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