

THREE STEPS TO STRESS MANAGEMENT

Basic stress management techniques include getting enough sleep and exercising regularly. Exercise has been shown to decrease the amount of stress hormones that are released in response to stress (see effects of stress on the body). It is also important to eat a balanced diet that is high in vitamin C and low in both caffeine and sugar. Although it is important for each person to find a set of techniques that work best for him or her, the following three steps can also offer some helpful guidance when stressors arise.

Step 1: Relax in a healthy way It is much harder to respond to a challenge when stress is interfering with clear thinking, so relaxation is the first step in stress management. Healthy strategies for relaxation include the following:

Relaxation exercises, Meditation exercises, Breathing exercises, Stretching, Taking a bath, Taking a walk, Petting an animal, Working out, Counting to ten, Taking a break/vacation, Getting a massage, Joining a support group, Praying, Painting, drawing, or playing a musical instrument, Engaging in a hobby, Using positive self-talk (e.g., “I can do this”), Reading inspirational or spiritual words, Writing in a journal or diary, Confiding in, or “venting” to, a friend, Listening to relaxing music or an inspirational tape, Listening to relaxation tapes (available from a counselor or bookstore) on which a recorded voice guides the listener in relaxing from head to toe, Watching television.

It is important to understand the difference between the healthy strategies listed above and unhealthy strategies. Unhealthy strategies include the overuse of alcohol, the overuse of either illegal or prescription drugs, smoking, overeating, violence, and yelling at or verbally abusing others. These strategies are only temporarily effective at best, and tend to create more problems than those that were present in the first place.

Step 2: Identify the problem

The better you know the stressors that can affect you, the more effective you will be in combating them. Sometimes the problem is obvious, such as when someone is feeling stressed about moving. At other times, people are simply feeling stressed in the middle of a workday and are not sure why. When the source of the stress is unclear, it may be helpful to make a list of one’s daily activities and keep a log of events that trigger stress reactions. After a week, the log can be examined for any patterns that may be present. If it is still difficult to identify the source of the problem, counseling may be helpful in identifying what may be triggering the stress. Although people may be unaware of it, emotional responses are often triggered in the present because of events that occurred in the past. Learning about those past events and how they still affect the present can be very helpful in managing stress.

Step 3: Address the problem

Basically, people are faced with one of two options: changing the situation or learning to accept it without feeling stress. This idea has been stated in the form of the famous Serenity Prayer: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Examples of managing stress by making changes include the following:

- Changing unrealistic goals (e.g., not trying to be perfect all the time)
- Changing unrealistic expectations (e.g., not expecting others to be perfect all the time)
- Re-prioritizing (e.g., making time to take care of yourself)
- Delegating a task/chore to someone else (e.g., not trying to do everything alone)
- Forgiving someone (e.g., letting go of an old grudge)
- Planning ahead (e.g., being prepared for the little surprises that often arise)
- Viewing a stressor as challenging instead of terrible, awful, or catastrophic
- Becoming more assertive (e.g., speaking up and learning to say no)
- Resolving conflicts through sharing and listening, rather than allowing conflicts to fester
- Getting more support (e.g., asking for help instead of trying to “tough it out” alone)
- Avoiding quarrelsome people as much as possible (e.g., not seeking out trouble)
- Bringing more humor into your daily routine
- Taking a vacation, because studies suggest that not doing so may increase the risk of heart disease and early death

Accepting what one cannot change means accepting the countless situations that are beyond human control. These include death, many illnesses, accidents, weather, the feelings or behaviors of other people, time and various mechanical problems. It is vital for one’s emotional and physical health to learn how to accept them instead of stressing over them.

With practice, these stress management techniques help people to gain control over stress, instead of allowing stress to gain control over them.

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