

What is Stress?

Stress is an emotional response to the demands of life. It is the pressure we feel to meet a deadline, to keep a schedule, to expect others to keep their commitments or to raise caring children in a seemingly hostile world. Stress is the one feeling most everyone is concerned about, and for good reason. *It is estimated that 75 - 90% of all illnesses are stress related.* Getting a handle on stress can, for a lot of us, mean a healthier and longer life.

Good Stress and Bad Stress

Not all stress is bad. Actually, there is some stress that's good. Stress is a normal part of life. When our life has purpose and we have dreams we want fulfilled, the challenges of fulfilling these dreams creates stress, but the kind of stress that energizes us.

Good stress activates us to use our personal power in positive ways to meet our needs, desires, and wants. The kind of stress that is bad is called *distress*, or stress that drains us physically, emotionally, and socially. Bad stress or distress shows up in signs like headaches, backaches, ulcers, diarrhea, fatigue, anxiety, depression, lashing out, withdrawing from others. Chronic distress can result in severe illnesses like colitis, cardiac problems, stroke and cancer.

Distress and Unmet Needs

Distress can often be attributed to our inability to get our basic needs met. As previously mentioned, getting our basic needs met is the functional purpose of our behavior. Getting our needs met reduces our stress, allows us to be the caring parent we want to be, and allows us to help our children get their needs met and, in turn, reduces their stress. Nurturing our selves as men and women is a great way of reducing our stress.

Handling Stress

The most important aspect of stress is the ability to handle it. Since most stress is self-induced, the ability to handle it rests primarily with each person.

Physical Approaches

1. **Get regular exercise.** Exercise increases our strength and stamina. Try exercising with a friend. You can get your social needs met by being with your buddy and your emotional need met for fun and support.
2. **Improve your diet.** Stress and diet are closely linked. We all know what we should eat, yet don't take too seriously the practice of eating healthy meals. Balance is the key.
3. **Listen to your body.** Minimize the wear and tear on your body by listening to its messages (stiff neck, headaches, etc.) Massages, rubdowns, and hot baths are great stress reducers.
4. **Learn relaxation skills.** There are many simple relaxation techniques, however, none are effective unless they are used. Visualizations are great to use when you're holding a crying baby in the middle of the night, hoping the child will stop so you can go back to sleep. When you feel less stress, so will your child who will have a greater chance of falling asleep.
5. **Adequate sleep.** Get six to eight hours sleep per night, or if night sleep is not always possible, take naps during the day.



Mental Approaches

1. **Adopt a new attitude.** Try to be less rigid, less perfectionist, less competitive, and less impatient. Flexibility is a key stress reducer.
2. **Increase self-worth.** Replace negative self-labels ("I'm no good!") with positive self-labels ("I can succeed!").
3. **Set realistic expectations.** Review all the "should" and "musts" in life and determine which are worth keeping and which are worth getting rid of.
4. **Keep a positive outlook.** Get rid of the prejudices, the negative labels of others, and the view of the world as negative. A positive outlook does wonders for reducing stress.
5. **Improve your communication skills.** Use problem solving, negotiation and compromise; don't keep things inside, share your feelings; listen to others and learn from others.
6. **Leave work at work.** People need to get away from work and leave it behind. Bringing your work home with you is a sure way to stress out yourself and your family.
7. **Get organized.** Make a list of things that need to get done, evaluate what's really important, and value free time.

**Social Approaches**

1. **Develop a support network.** Friends are important to share good times and bad. Don't close down, stay open.
2. **Develop a social life.** People with a strong peer network who are active socially live longer and happier lives. Be active, meet others, and join social clubs.
3. **Volunteer your time.** Helping others is a good way to reduce stress. By reaching out and helping others, we empower ourselves as well as those we're helping.
4. **A sense of humor.** Humor is one of the first things that goes when people are stressed out. Laughter is the voice of children. Be child like. Play and find the lighter side to issues.
5. **Relax.** Recreate, meditate, read, be alone and contemplate life, go for nature walks, etc.
6. **Develop hobbies.** Train collecting, bird watching, stamp/coin collecting, shop flea markets, cultivate a garden, plant trees. Develop outside interests and invest your time and energy.



Try This...

1. Identify five stressors (things that cause stress) in your life.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

2. Make a plan how you can reduce or prevent these stressors from dictating the quality of your life.

3. Develop a plan to cope with the stressors you can't change. _____

4. Identify five stressors (things that cause stress) in your children's lives.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

5. What can you do to help your child(ren) reduce their stress?
