

Understanding Stress

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Short-Term Stress

Short-term (acute) stress is caused by anything that temporarily throws you off balance. This can be something as simple as a long line at the post office, or locking your keys in your car. Although the stressful feelings can be very intense, they usually go away after a short time.



Long-Term Stress

Long-term (chronic) stress is constant, unrelenting pressure. It can be caused by managing a busy household, or caring for an elderly parent. It can also result from a lengthy illness, or a series of taxing events. Long-term stress often leaves you mentally and physically drained. You may get the feeling the stress will never end. Some people even get so used to the stress that they can't recognize it anymore.

The Pros and Cons of Stress

Stress is not all bad. On the upside, it can help you cope with change. Or, stress can help you handle challenging situations, like talking in front of a group. On the downside, stress can make you feel out of control. And constant stress can harm your health. But by learning to deal with stress better, you can avoid its negative effects.

Now is the time to start managing your stress. You don't have to do this all at once. First, learn more about stress. You can then figure out what triggers it. Finally, you'll be shown some ways to deal better with stress. Let's get started..



Finding a Place to Start

At first, it may seem hard to change how you react to stress. When you are overloaded with stress, you may feel buried by life's demands.

It can be tough to put one foot in front of the other. So learn the skills in this booklet one at a time. You can then start making better choices about how to handle stress and balance your heavy load.

STARTING TO MANAGE STRESS

You can use stress to reach your goals.

Learning to Deal with Stress

Managing stress doesn't mean getting rid of it all. It just means dealing with stress better. To do this, you'll first learn to think about stress in new ways. You'll then find out how to react better to stressful situations. And finally, you'll be taught some techniques that will help you relax.



Skill 1

LEARNING ABOUT STRESS

How does stress affect your body, mind, and emotions?

Stress is the pressure of having too much to handle. The body's reaction to stress is the "fight-or-flight" response. It helped early humans fight or flee from an enemy. In fact, our bodies still react to stress in the same way. And if this happens often, it can harm your health. Some of the effects of stress are listed on these two pages.



How Your Body Reacts to Stress

When you're under stress, your body prepares to fight or flee. Below are some of the changes that can occur in your body during the fight-or-flight response.



- Certain stress hormones, such as adrenaline, are released.
- Heart rate increases.
- Muscles become tense.
- Blood pressure rises.
- Pupils dilate to sharpen vision.
- Hands and feet get cold and clammy.
- More blood flows to the large muscles.
- Sweating increases.
- The body becomes more numb to pain.
- "Goose bumps" appear on the skin.

HOW YOU MAY RESPOND TO STRESS



How You May Respond to Stress

If stress hormones aren't used to fight or flee, they stay in the body. This can set you up for illness or make it hard to handle daily routines. Many of the symptoms that stress can cause are listed below. Put a check mark next to any symptoms you've had in the past month. Checking off any box means that you may be under stress.

- A hard time doing things right
- Learning problems
- Speech problems
- Obsessive, negative thoughts

Physical Symptoms

You may not feel well if you're under stress. For instance, you may have:

- Headaches
- A "stiff" neck and tense shoulders
- Back pain
- Frequent tiredness
- Sexual dysfunction
- An upset stomach
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Emotions

You may respond to stress with a range of emotions, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Extreme sadness
- Anger or hostility
- Impatience
- Irritability
- A feeling of helplessness

Behavior

When you're under stress, you may act in ways that aren't normal for you. For instance, you may:

- Eat poorly
- Smoke or drink too much, or use drugs
- Drive recklessly
- Become accident-prone
- Communicate poorly
- Show extreme anger

Thinking

Stress can affect the way you think. For instance, you may have:

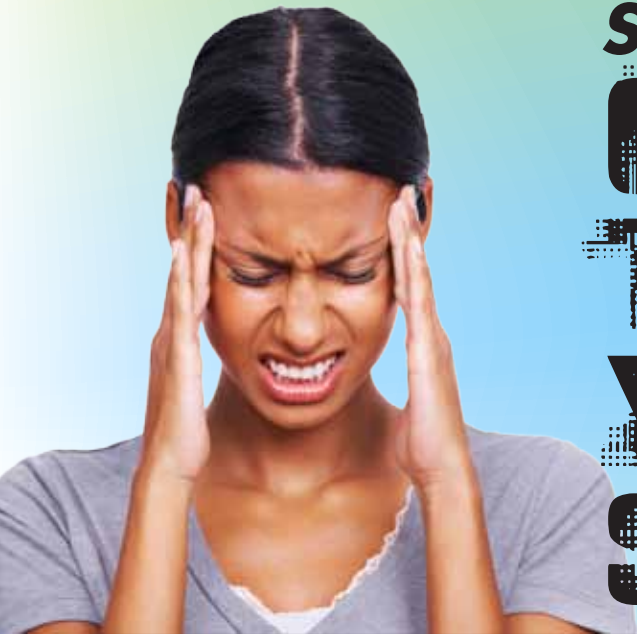
- Poor concentration
- Forgetfulness



To manage stress, you need to learn what causes it. The demands of daily life that trigger the stress response are called stressors. Whether they're big or small, stressors can take a toll on your life. Some common ones are listed below. To get to know your stressors, fill in the log on the next page for a week.



*What triggers your stress?
It's time to find out.*



Skill 2

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STRESSORS

What Can Trigger Your Stress Response?

Stressors can be people, places, situations, events, feelings, or ways of thinking. Each person has his or her own stressors. Yours may not be the same as those of your friends, coworkers, or family.

Common Stressors Here are some common stressors:

- Any major life change
- Time pressures
- Money problems
- Too many responsibilities
- Death of a loved one
- Illness
- Loneliness
- Being in a crowded place
- Temperature extremes
- Exposure to bright light or to loud noises

Accept Alter
 Avoid Adapt
 Accept Alter
 Avoid Adapt

TAKING ACTION

How you respond to a stressor is your choice.

Learn to handle your stressors better. You decide how to respond to a stressful situation. To do this, choose from the options listed below and on the next two pages. With practice, you'll deal with stress better. And you'll feel more in control.

Choosing Your Response to a Stressor

How you respond to a stressor is your choice. You can accept a stressor, avoid it, alter it, or adapt to it. The response you choose depends on what your stressor is.

Accepting a Stressor

You can't control or prevent some stressors, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job. You can't undo what happened. But you can begin to deal with the stressor by accepting it:

- Rest assured that your feelings are normal and, in the case of a loss, give yourself time to grieve.
- Talk with a trusted friend or a professional counselor about the stressor.
- Recall other stressors that you couldn't control or prevent and how you dealt with them.

Accept Alter
 Avoid Adapt
 Accept Alter
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Avoiding a Stressor

You can't control some stressors, such as bad traffic. But sometimes you can avoid a stressful situation. Good planning is the key. Try these tips:

- Change your schedule or route to keep out of the worst traffic.
- Learn to say "no" to others without feeling guilty.
- Avoid people who take too much of your time and drain your energy.
- Find a way to leave the situation.

Skill 3



TAKING ACTION



Altering a Stressor

Sometimes you can change how you deal with a stressor. For instance, you may get a lot of phone calls while trying to work. If so, see if someone can take messages for you. You can return the calls later. Here are some other hints:

- Take control of the situation. Change the time, place, or setting of an event.
- Ask others for the support you need.
- Manage your time better.
- Limit how long you devote to certain tasks. Or, enroll in a time management class.
- Picture in your mind how you want to handle a scheduled event before it happens. To prepare for the event, rehearse what you pictured.



Skill 3 TAKING ACTION

Adapting to a Stressor

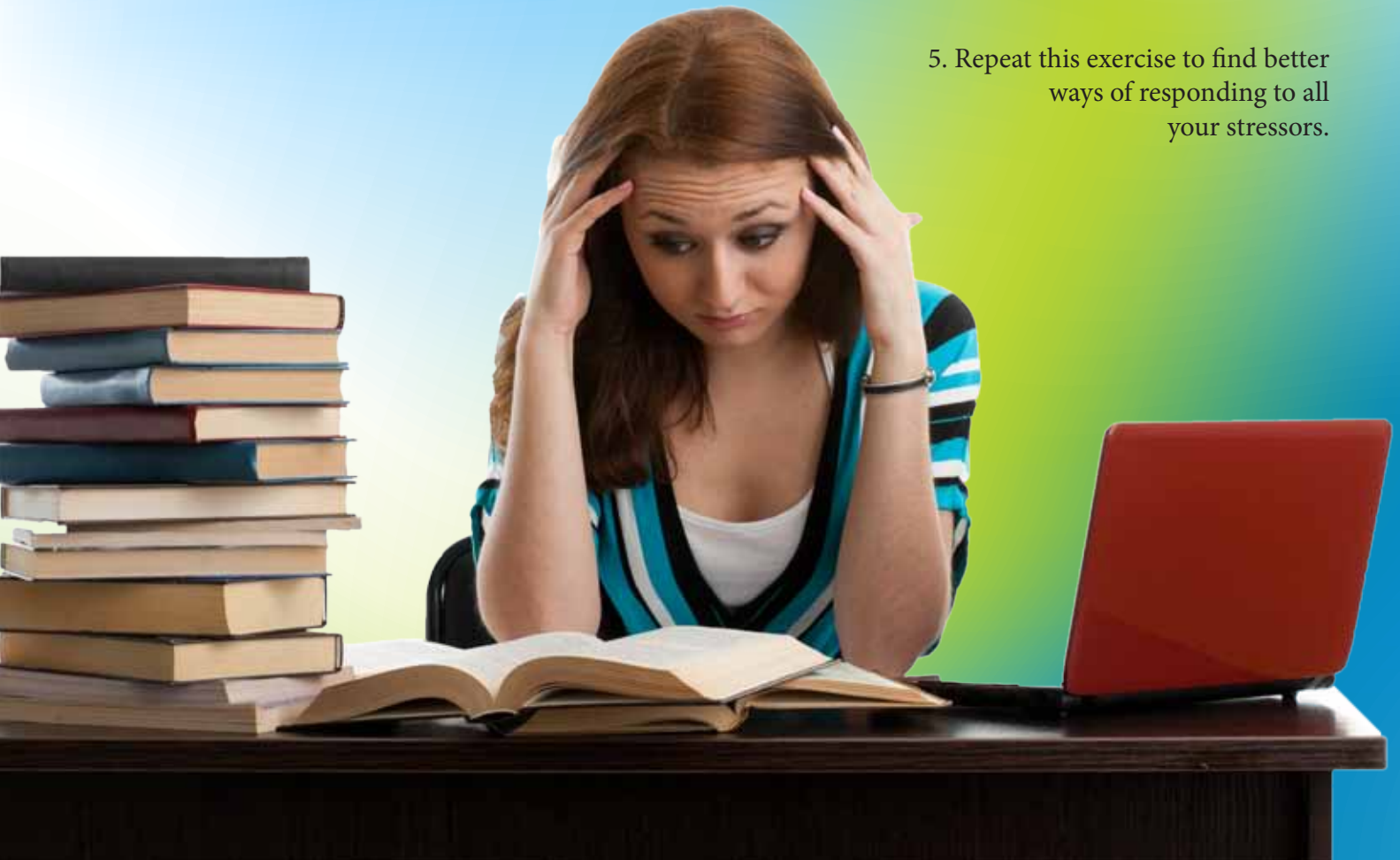
You can often adapt to a stressor. This means coping with it by changing how you think or act. For instance, you may have to put in extra hours at work this week. And you may feel overwhelmed. Here are some ways you can handle this stressful feeling:

- Ask yourself, “Is it worth being upset over this?” If it isn’t, take a more upbeat approach.
- Think of the positive things in your life. You may find that the good outweighs the bad.
- Ask yourself, “Will this matter a year from now?” If it won’t, then it’s best not to worry about it now.
- Picture yourself in a pleasant place. This will help you relax and deal with your stress.
- Try to pause and relax before you act. First, stop what you’re doing. Then take a deep breath and slowly count to 10. This will help clear your mind so you can make a plan of action.

How Will You Respond to Stress?

To practice responding better to stress, try this exercise:

1. On a blank sheet of paper, write down a stressor that often bothers you.
2. Ask yourself, “How should I deal with this stressor? Do I accept, avoid, alter, or adapt to it?”
3. Write down how you will respond.
4. Practice what you have written down.
5. Repeat this exercise to find better ways of responding to all your stressors.



Having too little time can be a big stressor. So, managing your time well can help reduce stress. To begin, figure out what you want and need to get done. Think of ways to make your life simpler, like doing some things less often. Then, decide how to use your time. And stick with your plan.



Managing Your Time

You can take charge of your life and reduce stress by managing your time well. Try these tips:

- Simplify your life by focusing on what you want and need to do.
- Make a list of your tasks each day. Focus on doing what's on the list.
- Combine similar tasks. For instance, use one trip to run a few errands.
- Ask people to set a time to visit you rather than "dropping by."
- If you have more tasks to do than you can handle, ask someone to help you.
- Break big tasks or long-range goals into small steps. Then try to take one step at a time.
- Give yourself enough time to do each task. And do just one thing at a time.



PREVENTING AND RELIEVING STRESS

To keep stress away, take some time to manage your day.



Curbing Stress with Activity and Relaxation

Take time each day to exercise and practice relaxation techniques. This can help you prevent stress. Whenever stress comes your way, you can relieve it. Do this by trying any of the activities or relaxation techniques described on these two pages.

PREVENTING AND RELIEVING STRESS



Aerobic Exercise

You can help fight the harmful effects of stress by doing aerobic exercise (fast walking, jogging, riding a bike, or swimming). Aerobic exercise:

- Burns up the extra energy you get from the fight-or-flight response
- Builds up your immune system, which can be weakened by stress
- Brings the body's chemical balance back to normal after stress hormones are released
- Makes you feel good by causing the body to release endorphins (the body's own painkillers)

Stretching and Yoga

Doing stretches and practicing yoga can prevent and reduce stress by:

- Slowing you down and helping you relax
- Loosening tense or tight muscles

Relaxation Techniques

Doing relaxation techniques can help curb the body's responses to stress by:

- Slowing the heart rate and breathing
- Bringing blood pressure down
- Loosening muscles

Practicing these techniques daily can help you think more clearly, feel better, and improve your performance.

Deep breathing helps relieve tension. To try this technique, follow these steps:

1. Inhale through your nose. Take in as much air as you can, while expanding your abdomen(lower belly).
 2. Exhale slowly through the mouth until your lungs feel "empty" of breath. As you do this, purse your lips to breathe out slowly.
 3. Repeat these steps 3 to 5 times.
- Or, you can repeat them more by setting aside a few extra minutes.

PREVENTING AND RELIEVING STRESS

Progressive relaxation helps your whole body relax. To try this technique, follow these steps:

1. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on your back in a quiet room.
2. Start doing deep breathing (see above).
3. Do steps 4 and 5 below with each of the muscles in your body. Start with your head and work down to your toes.
4. Inhale deeply and fully tighten the muscle. Notice how tense it feels. Hold the tension for 3 seconds.
5. Exhale while relaxing the tightened muscle. Notice how relaxed it feels.



Skill 3

SETTING SMART GOALS

You can't plan when stress will come yourway. And it's easy to fall back on old methods of responding to your stressors. But you can plan to manage stress better and break through your barriers. Use the SMART way to plan your approach. And then stick with your goals.

SPECIFIC

Be specific about your goals. Set goals that address the results you want. Your goals should challenge you. But they should also be within reach. What do you want to have happen? Example: My goal is to use public transit daily so I can relax while I commute to work.

MEASURABLE

Choose goals that have results you can measure. Give yourself a deadline, such as a week, a month, or six months from now. Example: I will use public transit for the next month.

ACHIEVABLE

Can you achieve your goals? You don't want to discourage yourself. Keep in mind that you can always raise the bar after you've reached your first set of goals. Example: I'll start by using public transit 3 days a week.

REWARDING

Give yourself nonfood rewards. How will you reward yourself along the way? Will it be when you achieve your goal? When you pass a milestone on the way to that goal? Example: After a month, I will go out dancing with a friend.

TRACKABLE

How will you track your progress? Doing so helps you see a slip as only a brief setback that you can easily overcome. Example: I'll write down how many days I use public transit over the next 6 months.

Skill 3

SETTING SMART GOALS

Break Through Your Barriers

Stress can be hard to live with and still harder to manage. It's easy to let old ways of coping with stress set in. You may face some roadblocks to success. But you can break through them. Below are some common barriers and tips to help you get past them. Check off the tips you want to try. Then write in your own.

Barrier: When stress hits, I forget the skills I've learned.

Barrier Buster: Take control of the situation!

- Know your stressors and how you respond to them.
- Make a plan for relaxing when stress comes on.

Barrier: I don't have time to manage stress.

Barrier Buster: It takes just minutes!

- Put one stress-busting activity on your daily to-do list.
- Spend 5 minutes a day on managing stress.

Barrier: Managing stress takes too much effort

Barrier Buster: It will get easier with practice!

- Choose one relaxation technique to learn.
- Practice relaxing at the same time each day.

Barrier: Trying to relax makes my stress level go up.

Barrier Buster: Reducing stress can be simple!

- Do something fun. See a movie or take a swim.
- Find a friend to help you stick with your plan.

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