



mental
health
literacy.org

HEALTHY STRESS MANAGEMENT

UNDERSTANDING THE STRESS RESPONSE

We use the word stress as short hand for the stress response, which is the way your brain and body let you know you have a challenge or problem that needs to be addressed. This is the signal that underlies adaptation and is key for the building of resilience.

UNDERSTANDING & MANAGING THE STRESS RESPONSE

The stress response is the way our brain tells us that there is a problem in our environment that we need to deal with. This is the signal that causes us to adapt and become more resilient. The word “stress” has been used as short-hand for the concept of the stress response, but it has taken on a negative connotation that leads to unhelpful ways of thinking about and managing our stress response. **Using clear language to describe our experiences helps us learn how to use the stress response to promote, instead of reduce, our health and mental health.** People also often substitute the word “anxiety” when they mean the stress response; however, anxiety (which is a constant state of hyper arousal) is not the same thing as the stress response.

THE MYTH OF EVIL STRESS

Until recently, most people believed that the stress response was bad for you and consequently, was something that should be avoided whenever possible. We have been bombarded by media and product marketing that has made us believe that stress is our enemy and that our focus needs to be avoiding or decreasing the stress response. Just type the words “avoiding stress” into Google and you will see how common this perception is and how many products sell themselves as essential for stress relief! The reality? **Most stress that we experience daily is actually good for us and avoiding it could be harmful.** The only stress that can really cause us harm is toxic stress – like abuse, neglect, violence, poverty; especially if we are experiencing it for a prolonged period of time. Regular everyday stress? That actually makes us stronger. Each time you a) experience a stressful situation and b) successfully cope with that situation, you’re making yourself stronger and more resilient. You are learning how to better cope with the challenges of life and developing skills that you can use in the future. The next time a similar stressor comes along, you’re better equipped to handle it and it likely won’t feel as stressful as it did this time. **The key is not just reducing the amount of stress you experience, but learning how best to deal with the stress that comes along with being alive.** A caution about avoiding stress or expecting someone to change your environment so that you do not experience the stress response – both of those can actually be harmful to you. If you avoid stress or expect someone else to resolve the problem your stress response has identified, you don’t learn the skills you need to take on the daily challenges of life. Over time, these can lead to you feeling helpless and constantly “stressed out”. You’ve traded developing long-term resilience for short-term relief. Not a good trade.



TIP

Most people don't have exam anxiety. Instead, they're experiencing the normal stress response to writing an exam. It's a signal that you need to develop solutions in order to succeed at that task. How are you going to prepare to do the best that you can do? What skills do you need to develop to help yourself take on this challenge?



Check out this TedTalk by Kelly McGonigal to learn more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcGyVTAoXEU>



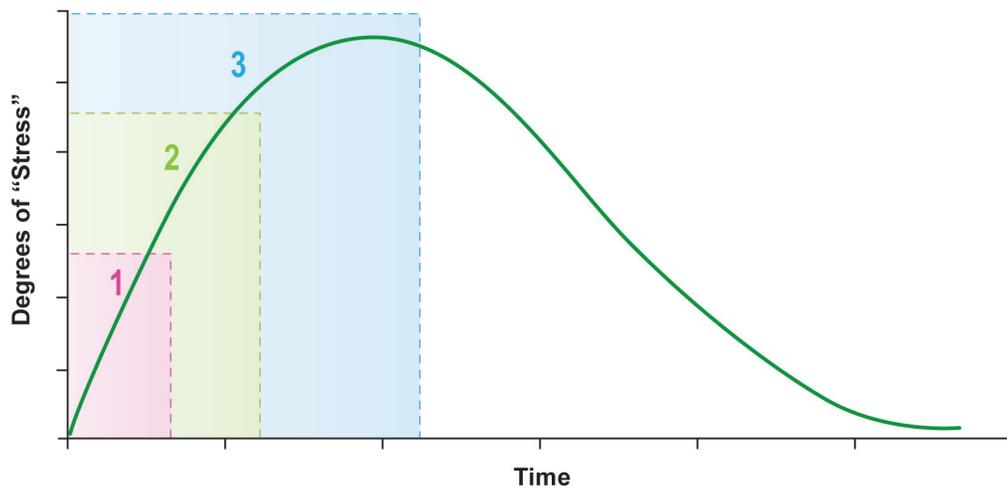
The good news is that even if you've become a stress avoider or have learned to feel overwhelmed or helpless when experiencing stress, you can reverse that and develop health-promoting ways to manage your stress. You can turn your stress from your enemy to your friend.

THREE STEPS TO HEALTHY STRESS MANAGEMENT

You can figure out how to manage your stress response in a way that is healthy, promotes adaptation and helps build resilience. Check out this diagram of the typical daily stress response curve. As you can see, in response to a challenge arising in your environment (called a stressor; for example: an exam, getting cut from the team you were trying out for, getting a poor grade, fight with a friend or intimate partner, etc.), your brain and body respond with the signal that tells you that you have a problem that needs to be solved. Notice that the stress response curve goes up, peaks, and then gradually goes down. On that curve are three stress management points, each of them should be used to help you successfully manage the situation.

Three Things To Do: The Curve

STRESS RESPONSE CURVE



- 1** At this point, **the focus is on how you are thinking about your stress response experience.** Research shows that if we see this signal as negative (such as: I feel stressed out; I can't handle this; I feel overwhelmed), our body's response is unhealthy, leading us to avoid the situation or expecting others to solve the problem for us. However, if we see the signal as positive (such as: I am being challenged to solve a problem; my brain and body are getting ready to help me tackle an important challenge; etc.) our body's response is healthy, leading us to prepare to adapt and change like the stress response intended.
- 2** At this point, **the focus is on determining what the problem is and developing solutions for solving it.** For example: the stress response to having to write an exam may lead you to seek out study skills help or meet with your professor or instructor to review some concepts you do not fully understand. When you solve the problem the stress response has identified, it goes away. And, you are left with a new skill that you can use in the future. You have successfully adapted.
- 3** At this point, **the focus is on the intensity of your stress response.** Sometimes our stress response can feel quite intense (especially if our previous pattern has been to avoid stress) and at this point, techniques designed to decrease our stress response may be helpful. This is the time to bring in the technique of box breathing. It uses your control of your diaphragm to decrease the stress signal. You can learn how to do it and then practice until it becomes second nature to you. Once you have mastered the technique, you can apply it in situations where your stress response is intense and you can do it in a way that no one else will notice. And guess what? Many of the fancy and costly stress reduction products and programs use this technique as part of what they are selling. But you can just learn this and use it – for free!



Check out this website for an excellent description of the technique and an interactive practice tool that you can use to learn how to apply it. <http://quietkit.com/box-breathing/>

In addition to the techniques described above that you can use when faced with a stressor, there are a number of different things that you can do to help yourself relax and enjoy life. These techniques are often marketed as “de-stressors” and you can pay a pretty penny to someone else or you can figure out what works best for you and do those things yourself. One important thing to remember: Figuring out what works best for you is not a static, one-time process. Don’t be afraid of trying out alternatives. Your brain will quickly tell you which things that you are doing work best for you.

The table below will show you different ways to help you manage your day to day challenges.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES	WHY?
Figure out what the problem really is	Take some time to think through the situation that is causing you stress. What about the situation is bugging you the most? What is the real problem? Identifying the problem is an important step to being able to develop a solution.
Consider the solutions	Is there a solution to the problem? Remember that even a difficult solution is still a solution. Solving the problem, even when it's difficult or when it takes a lot of time is always the best coping strategy. Ask people for help. After all, that is how human beings have solved problems for centuries.
Accept what you can't change	If there isn't a solution and you can't change the situation, you may just need to accept that and move on. Consider that door closed and start looking for another one that you may be able to open.
Be realistic	Try to put things in perspective. Not every stressor is the end of the world. Consider whether you're really going to be concerned about this in a week's time, a month's time, or a year's time. If this situation was happening to your friend, would you see the situation differently? What advice would you give them?
Acknowledge your feelings	It's OK to feel angry or upset once in a while. You don't have to bottle up your feelings. Admitting that something is really bugging you can often make you feel a lot better. But don't stop there. How can you mobilize your energy to help you meet the challenge? Move from feeling to thinking. Move from experiencing the problem to solving it.
Build healthy relationships	Anytime you're experiencing stress, talking to friends and family can make a big difference. Developing healthy relationships with people you can count on is an important part of preparing to deal with stress. Plus, many people have gone through what you are experiencing and can not only be supportive but can also suggest strategies that might help you solve the challenges you're facing.
Limit or avoid drugs and alcohol	Drinking too much or doing drugs will not solve the problem. They affect your ability to make good decisions and are only a temporary fix. When the substance wears off, your problems are still there and your stress may end up being much worse. Too much drinking or drug use can also lead to numerous physical and mental health problems.
Eat a healthy diet	A well-balanced diet makes you mentally and physically stronger. It gives your body the fuel you need to succeed. Limit foods that are high in fat or sugar, or that are highly processed. This isn't always easy to accomplish – especially if you're living off of cafeteria food or boxed mac and cheese. For help with healthy eating, check out: https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/healthy-eating.html
Be active	One of the best ways to relax and de-stress is to get active. Exercise is good for the brain and body. Research shows that for the biggest impact, 30 minutes of vigorous exercise per day (e.g., going for a run, playing soccer, spin class, or aerobics) is key. If you're not there yet, start out by making simple decisions, like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • walking to class, or to meet friends when possible. • getting off the bus a stop early or two, or parking further from campus and walking the rest of the way. • taking the stairs whenever available. • taking a walk with a friend instead of going for coffee or drinks. • <i>Remember that exercise is not about losing or maintaining weight - it's about keeping your body/heart/lungs/brain strong for now and for the future.</i>
Sleep	A good night's sleep is necessary for optimal mental and physical health. 8-9 hours of sleep per night is ideal for most people, but you'll know how much is right for you. Although pulling all-nighters seems like an essential college or university experience, binge studying is less effective than getting a good night's sleep and reviewing key points in the morning. If you're having trouble sleeping, you may need to work on your “sleep hygiene”. This includes things like going to bed and waking up at a similar time each day, having a consistent routine to prepare yourself for sleep, and avoiding screens (e.g., phone, tablet, TV or computer) for at least an hour before bed. For help developing good sleep hygiene, check out: http://teenmentalhealth.org/product/healthy-sleeping/ .
Time Management	Learn how to schedule assignments and other daily responsibilities - it will help you be more productive and keep you from feeling overwhelmed. When you know that you have time to do everything you need to do, it makes your day easier to manage.