



# Stress Management Techniques

## What causes stress?

Stress can be caused by any event or situation, good or bad, that requires us to adapt or change. Since such events can occur throughout our lives we need to know how to manage stress. We often think of stress management like going on a crash diet, as a short-term change or a break before we go back to our usual routines. We know how well crash diets work! Stress management just like weight management requires lifestyle change and daily adjustments to maintain our desired state of mental health.

## Self observation

Taking a look in the mirror to fine-tune our physical appearance is something that most of us do daily, but we fail to look at our mental health and wellbeing with that same critical eye. If we do not look at our own state of mental well-being as often as we check our physical appearance, we will miss the signs of stress and the onset of poor mental health.

## Load limiting

We often bite off more than we can chew, and are then surprised when we feel overwhelmed. In our daily lives, it is important that

we recognise when we can do no more, and limit our already full schedules. Asking for help or refusing additional tasks when already at full capacity is extremely important for maintaining a healthy balance.

#### Effective Communication

So how do we ask for help or refuse additional tasks? That requires us to communicate effectively. Effective communication can reduce stress by preventing confusion and misunderstanding, expedite task completion, allow for venting of negative emotions and aid problem solving. We ought always to speak to others in a way that is respectful to the listener and maintains our own self-respect. Thinking first of what we wish to communicate, not speaking when too angry or emotionally upset, stating clearly what we want the listener to know, and speaking calmly are all things that help to get our message across. Did you know that listening is also a part of effective communication? Hearing the other person's point of view is an essential part of communicating effectively.

#### Time Management

Like health, time is a precious resource, and as many busy people know, we never seem to have enough of it! Sometimes, that feeling comes from not effectively managing the time that we do have. We often set ourselves up for failure by creating unreasonable to-do lists. It is important to be clear on what we can reasonably accomplish in a given time and not assign ourselves unrealistic deadlines, because failing to meet them leads to feeling stressed, defeated and unproductive, even though there was no way from the outset that we could have achieved those unrealistic goals. It is much better to plan a reasonable schedule for ourselves, using available time wisely and allowing enough time in any schedule for self-care and relaxation.

#### Relaxation Techniques

It is important that we spend some portion of every day relaxing. People find many different activities relaxing, including yoga, gardening, spending time in nature, meditating, listening to music, or playing sports or games. Whatever works for you, it's important that you find some in every day to allow your mind and body the opportunity to relax. As long as what relaxes us is not hurting us in the long run, we need to embrace relaxation as a daily part of our stress management regimen.

## Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms

Sometimes the things that we do to cope can be harmful. Specialists call these things maladaptive coping mechanisms. They include things like use of alcohol, caffeine and other drugs, binge-eating, impulsive risk-taking behaviour like speeding, or even denial that a problem exists and procrastination. These things may reduce anxiety or other negative feelings in the moment, but they have a negative effect on our physical and mental health as well, so they are not healthy ways of managing stress. Solving problems should not result in creating new ones.

## Problem Solving

Worrying and problem solving are not the same thing. Denial that a problem exists and procrastination are also unhealthy. Problem solving involves taking well-planned steps towards a solution. Some people use the **IDEAL** method: **I**dentify the problem; **D**efine it in clear terms; **E**xplore possible solutions; **A**ct on the solution that seems most likely to resolve the issue; **L**ook back at your results- you will either have learned a solution that you can use for similar problems in the future, or you may need to return to the drawing board and try another solution. Whatever the outcome, problem solving is an active and well thought-out process.

## Positive Thinking

It has been said that the quality of our thoughts determines the happiness of our lives. It may seem corny or simple, but thinking positively improves our emotional state. When faced with challenges, which we all will be from time to time, approaching them with a positive mindset can help us to move forward and reduce our stress levels. Of course, thinking positively without taking action will not result in a desired end. In addition, ignoring signs of danger and not accounting for obvious risk is not sensible, so blind optimism is not what is called for either. We have to use all of our stress management techniques along with the mindset that we will be successful in order to reach goals. Positive thinking is a part of the balanced diet of stress management.

## Final thoughts.....

In order to maintain good mental health, we need to have a balanced 'diet' - time for work, time for relaxation, quality time with loved ones, time for self-observation, self-care and relaxation, maintaining physical health through exercise and a healthy diet, avoiding coping skills that adversely affect our health, and getting adequate rest/sleep.

