

Stress Management and Relaxation

Stress is an inevitable part of being alive.

Tolerable stress can help you to challenge yourself and achieve great accomplishments.

Intolerable stress—distress—is another matter.

It can negatively affect your health, your mood, your relationships, and your work.

Learning to manage stress, to increase relaxation, can greatly improve all areas of your life.

Notice your stress level! When do you feel stress, and when do you feel distress.

These are some symptoms of stress becoming distress: irritability or anger, apathy or disinterest, defensiveness or conflicted relationships, exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, avoidance, denial, compulsive self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse or gambling, poor self care.

Know that even positive things—a new baby, a new marriage or that coveted job—can increase stress, because change in itself is stressful.

Many people are not aware of the role stress plays in the physical complaints and emotional difficulties they experience. If ignored, these problems can get worse and worse. Is this you?

So much of how we feel depends on our attitudes and responses to events and others. Many people with chronic distress add to their own stress levels by the patterns of negative thinking and cognitive distortions they perpetuate: they have self-fulfilling negative expectations, they imagine the worst, over and over in their heads, they have habitual and ever present negative self-talk, they have unrealistic perfectionistic or controlling attitudes, or they have a pattern of reactive unexamined anger. Do these sound familiar?

Do you attempt to do too much at once? Do you have unrealistic goals? Do you procrastinate? Are you disorganized, or have trouble listening to others? Are you unable to say “no”? Do you micromanage or make impulsive decisions? Do you blame others for your life circumstances?

To effectively manage stress, you can learn to develop several life skills:

- To be aware of what you need and want in your challenging situations.
- To take responsibility for your own thoughts and behaviors.
- To let go of unrealistic responsibilities and efforts to control or care-take others.
- To be aware of your realistic human and personal limitations.
- To establish realistic boundaries and limit setting with others.
- To express yourself honestly and responsibly.
- To take care of yourself: body, mind, and spirit.
- To develop and pursue your life goals and beliefs.
- Learning other skills: problem solving, assertiveness, conflict resolution, time management.

It is physiologically *impossible* to be stressed and relaxed at the same time. So the best way to manage stress is to have a regular habit of relaxation.

- Take pleasure in life: get regular enjoyment in your days.
- Practice deep breathing, mental imagery, meditation, progressive relaxation, and exercise.