

Stress & Anxiety Management: How to Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress and Anxiety

Identify the sources of stress in your life

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Your true sources of stress aren't always obvious, and it's all too easy to overlook your own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sure, you may know that you're constantly worried about school deadlines, but maybe it's your procrastination, rather than the demands of school and deadlines that are leading to your stress.

To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:

- Do you explain away stress as temporary (“I just have a million things going on right now”) even though you can't remember the last time you took a breather?
- Do you define stress as an integral part of your school and/or home life (“Things are always crazy around here”) or as a part of your personality (“I have a lot of nervous energy, that's all”).
- Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it, your stress level will remain outside your control.

Start a Stress Journal

A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the way you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, keep track of it in your journal. As you keep a daily log, you will begin to see patterns and common themes. Write down:

- What caused your stress (make a guess if you're unsure)
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally
- How you acted in response
- What you did to make yourself feel better

Look at how you currently cope with stress

Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life. Your stress journal can help you identify them. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.

Unhealthy ways of coping with stress

These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but they cause more damage in the long run:

- Overeating or not eating enough
- Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, etc.)
- Sleeping too much
- Procrastinating
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing the problem

Learning healthier ways to manage stress

If your methods of coping with stress aren't contributing to your greater emotional and physical health, it's time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they all require change. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it's helpful to think of the four As: Avoid, Alter, Adapt, or Acept.

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no "one size fits all" solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

Dealing with Stressful Situations: The Four A's

Change the situation:

- Avoid the stressor
- Alter the stressor

Change your reaction:

- Adapt to the stressor
- Accept the stressor

Stress management strategy #1: Avoid unnecessary stress

Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

- Learn how to say "no" – Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal life or at school, taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.
- Avoid people who stress you out – If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.
- Take control of your environment – If social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) make you anxious, log off or shut your phone/computer off.
- Avoid hot-button topics – If you get upset talking about certain things with friends and family, take them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.
- Review/revise your to-do list – Analyze your weekly schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts." Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

Stress management strategy #2: Alter the situation

If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the problem doesn't present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- Express your feelings instead of bottling them up – If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and **respectful** way. If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- Be willing to compromise – When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.
- Be more assertive – Don't take a backseat in your own life. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. If you've got an exam to study for and your friend is texting you, text them and tell them you can only text for five more minutes, and stop texting after that five minutes is up.
- Manage your time better – Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. Plan ahead and make sure you don't overextend yourself, you can alter the amount of stress you're under.

Stress management strategy #3: Adapt to the stressor

If you can't change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.

- **Reframe problems** – Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a huge project that was assigned, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to some music, or take a few minutes to do something you enjoy.
- **Look at the big picture** – Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself if it's worth your time and energy to get that upset over. Will you still be equally upset about it in a month? A year? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
- **Adjust your standards** – Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable but high standards for yourself, and learn to be okay with trying your very best on things.
- **Focus on the positive** – When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and characteristics. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

Adjusting Your Attitude

How you think can have a profound effect on your emotional and physical well-being. Each time you think a negative thought about yourself, your body reacts as if it were in a tension-filled situation. If you focus on good things about yourself and the situation, you are more likely to feel good; the reverse is also true. Eliminate words such as "always," "never," "should," and "must." These are telltale marks of self-defeating thoughts.

Stress management strategy #4: Accept the things you can't change

Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can't prevent or change certain stressors such as the death of a loved one and/or illness. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than continuing to focus on a situation you can't change.

- **Don't try to control the uncontrollable** – Many things in life are beyond our control— particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- **Look for the upside** – As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
- **Share your feelings** – Talk to a trusted friend, family member, your teachers or make an appointment to see your counselor. The simple act of expressing what you're going through can be very therapeutic, even if there's nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. Opening up is not a sign of weakness and it won't make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends and family members will be happy that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your relationship with them.
- **Learn to forgive** – Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

Stress management strategy #5: Make time for fun and relaxation

Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors.

Healthy ways to relax and recharge

- Go for a walk.
- Spend time outside
- Hang out with friends.
- Relieve stress by working out/playing a sport.
- Read a good book.
- Listen to music/play video games/go online.
- Watch a funny movie/TV show.
- Write in your journal/create art.

Don't get so caught up in the demands of your everyday life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Taking care of yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

- **Set aside time to relax** – Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don't allow other obligations to take away from that. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge.
- **Connect with friends/family** – Spend time with positive people who enhance your life. A strong support system will limit you from the negative effects of stress.
- **Do something you enjoy every day** – Make time for an activity that you enjoy, something that makes you happy and makes you feel good.
- **Keep your sense of humor** – This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. Having a good sense of humor about yourself and stressful situations helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Stress management strategy #6: Adopt a healthy lifestyle

You can increase your resistance to stress by strengthening your physical health.

- **Exercise regularly** – Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week.
- **Eat healthy** – Healthy bodies are better prepared to cope with stress, so be mindful of what you eat. Start your day right with breakfast, and keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day. Avoid foods with excessive fat and sugar. Instead of a bag of chips, enjoy a banana or an apple with some peanut butter.
- **Reduce or cut out caffeine/energy drinks** – The temporary "highs" caffeine and energy drinks provide often end with a crash in mood and energy. By eliminating or reducing or the amount of coffee, energy drinks and soft drinks you drink throughout the day, you'll feel more relaxed and you'll sleep better.
- **Get enough sleep** – Getting 7-8 full hours of sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally.