



Top strategies for managing stress

1. Find outlets for frustration

Having ways to deal with frustration can lead to a smaller stress response. Outlets can be a distraction from the stressor, or can change body chemistry to turn off the stress reaction and turn on the rest and digest reaction. An outlet for frustration should be something positive, and should not be harmful to those around you.

Breathing

- It only takes 3 minutes to turn off the stress reaction and turn on the relaxation reaction with deep breathing!
- Deep breathing sends a powerful safety signal through the nervous system.
- Breathe into your belly and lower ribs, allowing the lungs to fill up completely
- Breathe out slowly, feeling the body relax

Exercise

- Enhances mood and decreases the stress response for a few hours up to a day after the exercise session.
- Exercise provides the body with an outlet for which it was preparing (i.e. running from a lion). On a regular basis – the effects for stress reduction only last 24 hours.
- Reduces stress so long as it is something you WANT to do – if you feel forced it will not have the stress-reducing quality.

Meditation

- Creates changes in brain tissues, especially in areas of memory and attention.
- Lowers muscle tension and glucocorticoid levels during the meditation itself.
- Try joining a class or using apps and CDs for guided meditations

Relaxation

- Can be informal, like taking a bath, journaling, or listening to music
- Can be formal, like progressive muscle relaxation or visual imagery

2. Gain social support

Research shows that when people experience a stress reaction with strangers, the reaction is larger and when with friends or other positive social support, the stress reaction is decreased. This effect is actually seen among all primates! When people have social support during a stressful event, the cardiovascular stress response and resting cortisol levels are lower.

- Spend time talking with people you trust and who support you.
- Give support to others – kindness to others is a protective way to feel a sense of control as well as social support and connectedness.



3. Create predictability and routine where possible

Predictability makes stressors less stressful. For example, think about being in the subway and suddenly it stops in the tunnel. If this happens every day, will it be more or less stressful? Probably less stressful, because it is expected and can be planned around, and less likely that there is an emergency. Even when a particular stressor isn't present, unpredictability of that stressor can trigger the stress reaction. Imagine being at the dentist and not knowing when the drilling is about to begin – just imagining this can cause a stress reaction!

- Create schedules and routines so the mental load of activities is lowered.
- Learn ways to budget.
- Seek support for stability in housing, finances, and work.
- Watch out for impulsive behaviour, like excessive shopping, alcohol and tobacco use.

4. Figure out where it is helpful for you to have control

Just knowing or feeling like you are in control can help to lower stress. Think back to the definition of stress earlier in this module: stress happens when there is a mismatch between the demands of a situation and perception of coping skills. When there is high demand and low control, stress can increase.

However, if people think they have control over a stressor that is not really in their control, they may blame themselves for not controlling the stressor. In these cases, it is not always helpful to have control – if there is not much you can do about something, thinking you are in control can lead to self-blame (for example, thinking, “I should just try harder.”) Be aware of trying to have control over events in the past (where things have already happened and are beyond your control).

- Create realistic SMART goals
- Learn how to be aware of your feelings

- Finally, practicing these strategies can help you to learn when a particular strategy will be useful, and to choose the right stress management strategy at the right time. Being flexible about your stress management strategies can help you to have more options.

Sapolsky, a stress researcher wrote, “When faced with the large wall of a stressor, it is great if there emerges one singular solution that makes the wall crumble. But often, a solution instead will be a series of footholds of control, each one small but still capable of giving support, that will allow you to scale the wall.” (2004, p. 416)