

Calming the Storm

Process for Gaining Control over Stress

Everyone experiences stress. Your body is usually equipped to manage day to day stress. However, your body will begin to suffer if stress builds up. Preventing all stress is an unrealistic goal for anyone. However, we can all work to prevent normal stress in our lives from becoming distress (stress overload, constant or near constant stress). The following is a simple process that you can use to help prevent distress.

1. **Recognize when stress is moving to distress – know the signs and symptoms.**
2. **Identify factors that are contributing to stress overload (distress).** Usually, there is not one single cause for distress. Rather than trying to pinpoint the *cause*, it might be more realistic to think in terms of the *contributing factors* of your stress.
3. **Plan how to manage the contributing factors.** This will usually involve regaining a sense of control. You might not always be able to remove the stressors, but you can gain control over how you respond to them.
4. **Take action.** Make and carry out a plan. This will allow you to address your stressors one step at a time.

Recognizing the Symptoms of Distress

On the reverse, you will find a partial list of symptoms you may be experiencing if you have reached your stress limit (everyone's tolerance for stress is different). If you have been experiencing ten or more of these symptoms for over a month you might need to make some changes in the way you are doing things. These changes may contribute to preventing physical illnesses, avoiding injuries, and enjoying life a little more. If you are experiencing many of these symptoms, it does not mean that something is wrong with you; it simply means that you have had too many things to handle recently.

The following symptoms can serve as indicators that you need to slow down, take stock, get back on track, and focus on what is REALLY important. *It should be noted that these symptoms may be indicative of issues other than stress.*

Mental Symptoms

Dull senses (taste, smell, sight, touch)
Loss of interest in enjoyable activities
Poor concentration
Negative attitude
Negative self-talk
Racing thoughts
Forgetfulness
Spacing out
Confusion
Boredom

Emotional Symptoms

Unpredictable crying spells
Quick to fly off the handle
Angry most of the time
Easily discouraged
Constant worry
Mood swings
Feeling blue
Nightmares
Frustration
Irritability
Little joy

Behavioral Symptoms

Intolerance
Loneliness
Resentment
Lashing out
Lack of intimacy
Hiding or isolation of self
Fewer contacts with friends
Lowered sex drive
Clamming up
Using people
Nagging
Distrust

Physical Symptoms

Fatigue
Rashes
Headaches
Restlessness
Teeth grinding
Pounding heart
Digestive upsets
Appetite changes
Colds that hang on
Trouble falling asleep
Muscle tension and aches
Weight changes (gain or loss)
Increased alcohol, drug, tobacco use
Waking up and being unable to go back to sleep

Spiritual Symptoms

Doubt
Apathy
Cynicism
Emptiness
Martyrdom
Unforgiving
Loss of meaning
Loss of direction
Looking for magic
Needing to prove self



Factors Contributing to Stress

This list can serve as a checklist that may help you and your family look more closely and specifically at situations that might contribute to being over-stressed or distressed. The first step in doing something about a high level of stress is being aware of the events or situations that may be contributing to it. Then you can begin to plan how to address the contributing factors. The effects of stress overwhelm most people, and all of the stressors start to build on one another. Being able to recognize the factors that are contributing to your distress will make your world a little more manageable. Please check the items that you know are contributing to your stress. Add those that may be particular to your situation.

Check the **three** items that are the **major** contributors to your present stress. **Do not check more than three.** You may recognize more than three contributors but you do not want to add to your stress by trying to address everything at the same time. You can always come back to this exercise and address other contributing factors.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Death of spouse | <input type="checkbox"/> Separation or divorce of son or daughter |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Death of close family member | <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble with in-laws or parents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Major personal illness or injury | <input type="checkbox"/> Balancing work and family responsibility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aging parent moving in with family | <input type="checkbox"/> Behavior problems with child |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Aging parent moving into nursing home | <input type="checkbox"/> Too little cash for necessities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Divorce or separation | <input type="checkbox"/> Adult child returns to live at home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Major increase in arguments with spouse | <input type="checkbox"/> Value conflicts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling disconnected from spouse or family | <input type="checkbox"/> Arrested or jailed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol or drug problems in the family | <input type="checkbox"/> Recent move or change in residence |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Demanding job (too much to accomplish in too little time) | <input type="checkbox"/> Disruption of important friendship or support system |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Demanding job (unreasonable expectations from superiors) | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of adequate transportation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Demanding job (difficulty with co-workers) | <input type="checkbox"/> Recent automobile accident |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Demanding job (problems with clients or customers) | <input type="checkbox"/> Recent change in weight (unwanted loss or gain) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hazardous work | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of rejection |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Recent loss of job due to lay-off, work site closing, or being fired | <input type="checkbox"/> Fear of confrontation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change in work hours | <input type="checkbox"/> Troublesome neighbors or neighborhood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Recent change of job (by your choice) | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of social opportunities or not taking advantage of social opportunities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Retirement | <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial difficulties (major debt for home or automobile) | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial difficulties (credit card debt) | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial difficulties (reduction of income) | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial difficulties (medical bills) | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial difficulties (cost of education/student loans) | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family member has serious emotional or medical problems | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |



WAYS OF PREVENTING DISTRESS AND DEPRESSION

The following is a list of suggestions that may help you plan how to manage the stressors or contributing factors you have identified.

Planning financial, family, and future goals. Give yourself clear direction. Maintain focus. Plans need to be written. Good plans include not only goals but also strategies for reaching each goal, tasks that have to be performed, and a “ballpark” timeline. You might involve those closest to you (particularly family members) in this planning process.

Eat Well. Eat regular, smaller meals with less fat. Limit sugar intake. Cut back on caffeine. Be careful with “comfort foods” – they can contribute to weight gain and add to stress.

Exercise regularly. Physical activity creates brain changes that promote emotional well-being. Find a physical activity that you enjoy.

Limit alcohol intake. Like sugar, alcohol may give you a temporary feeling of comfort, but it does not last very long. Excessive consumption of alcohol will contribute to health problems, relationship problems, and distorts self-perception.

Know the effects of medications. Make sure you ask your healthcare provider about the side effects of medications (prescription and over-the-counter). Some medications or combinations of medications can affect your mood and contribute to feelings of depression.

Get some rest. Make sure you get enough sleep to feel refreshed and energized. Take regular breaks during the day. That comfortable old chair can be a good friend as long as you do not wallow in it. A shade tree not only gets you out of the sun, but also provides an emotional retreat that can lift your spirits. Physical exhaustion leads to accidents, injuries, irritability, and impedes clear thinking.

Maintain focus on priorities. This means taking time to enjoy family and friends, reminding yourself frequently of why you are doing what you are doing, and making sure you are maintaining your health.

Seek support when needed. You are not going to be able to accomplish everything you want by yourself. Talk to a trusted family member or friend when you find yourself overwhelmed and irritable.

Address interpersonal problems head on. Worrying about interpersonal problems tends to make them appear to be a bigger deal than they really are. It also uses lots of energy that can be put to better use. Talk to the person(s) involved and decide on how you can address the issue(s) together.

Maintain a spiritual connection. This means different things for different people. Some folks achieve fulfillment by going to church, reading devotionals, saying prayers, or practicing meditation. Other people may find spiritual fulfillment by walking in the woods, enjoying a sunset, reflecting quietly, remembering people and events, gardening, talking with people, or a host of other activities.

Have some fun. Take time to do things that you enjoy. This may be a solitary activity or something you like doing with other people.

Create sets of loose routines. Structure in daily life can be comforting. You do not want to be rigid about your routine – this usually contributes to stress when the routine is broken. It is OK to have rules, but relax them a little to fit your life or the immediate situation.

Talk positively to yourself. It is OK to talk to yourself. Give yourself all of the credit you deserve. You are worthy. Energy and focus comes from positive self-messages.

Laugh. Particularly, laugh at yourself. Go on, laugh out loud. It is good for the body, mind, and soul.

Say “no”. Avoid taking on more responsibility than you can comfortably handle. Do a good job with what you can handle and feel good about it. There is no need to feel guilty for taking care of you – whether at home or at work.

Let go of efforts to be a superman/woman. Perfection is a dream; no one gets there. Expecting perfection from yourself and others will usually lead to frustration and disappointment. Be realistic about how much you can get done with a reasonable amount of time and energy.

Limit criticism. Too much focus on all the things that go wrong only raises your level of anxiety. Try to look at the things that seem to be going well. If something is wrong and change is needed, work toward the change.

Let go of stored-up resentments. Hanging onto resentments and anger will begin to have negative effects on your body. Forgive and let it go. Holding on to resentments and hurt feelings is only hurting you. Love yourself enough to let it go.

Keep daily aggravations in perspective. One way to do this is to ask yourself if the situation providing the irritation interferes, in any way, with your life plans. If it doesn't, then it doesn't merit your energy. If it does, then keep the plan in mind and you will be better able to manage the situation and know why you are bothered.

Avoid personalizing everything that happens. As hard as it may be for some of us to accept, some things just have nothing to do with us. Most of the time people around us are responding based on their own “stuff.” Empathize with them, but don't make their “stuff” become your “stuff.”

Take responsibility for your own actions and reactions. Stress is not something someone else does to you. It is a result of how you respond to other people and situations. It is your reaction that creates stress. Stop trying to control other people and situations. Exert control over your own reactions. This is not easy. It takes time to train yourself to switch your thinking around and look at stress in this way.

Approach the world with gratitude. This requires that you recognize the reality of positive situations, conditions, events, people, and tiny blessings around you everyday. “Stop and smell the roses” may be an old cliché, but it has certainly stood the test of time.

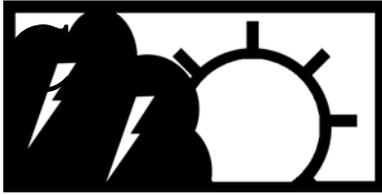
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Personal Plan for Controlling Stress

Use this sheet to **WRITE** your plan for *controlling stress* and *preventing distress*.

Contributing factor #1 _____

Goal: _____

(Ask yourself: Realistically, how do I want things to be?)

Tasks or activities to complete the goal:

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____
- E. _____

(Ask yourself: What do I need to do to reach this goal?)

Estimated Date of Completion: _____

(Ask yourself: How much time will I give myself to reach this goal?)

Who might be able to help you with these tasks or activities?

(Ask yourself: Who can I depend on to hold me accountable to fulfilling my goal?)

How are you going to celebrate when you reach the goal?

(Ask yourself: What can I do for myself to celebrate this accomplishment?)

Contributing factor #2 _____

Goal: _____

(Ask yourself: Realistically, how do I want things to be?)

Tasks or activities to complete the goal:

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____
- E. _____

(Ask yourself: What do I need to do to reach this goal?)

Estimated Date of Completion: _____

(Ask yourself: How much time will I give myself to reach this goal?)

Who might be able to help you with these tasks or activities?

(Ask yourself: Who can I depend on to hold me accountable to fulfilling my goal?)

How are you going to celebrate when you reach the goal?

(Ask yourself: What can I do for myself to celebrate this accomplishment?)

Contributing factor #3 _____

Goal: _____

(Ask yourself: Realistically, how do I want things to be?)

Tasks or activities to complete the goal:

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____
- E. _____

(Ask yourself: What do I need to do to reach this goal?)

Estimated Date of Completion: _____

(Ask yourself: How much time will I give myself to reach this goal?)

Who might be able to help you with these tasks or activities?

(Ask yourself: Who can I depend on to hold me accountable to fulfilling my goal?)

How are you going to celebrate when you reach the goal?

(Ask yourself: What can I do for myself to celebrate this accomplishment?)

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