

Identifying and Reducing the Stress that Hurts You

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Most people have some level of awareness of when their stress level has reached a point where it gets their attention. Most self-aware people can identify their major stressors. Most people can even tell you some stress management techniques. Much of the time, these same people will tell you different reasons why they do not use those same stress management techniques. Excuses used include examples like, "I already have too much to do without adding more tasks", "I don't have time", "I'm too tired", or even "I'm too stressed out to manage my stress". The things that stress you out may not be the same things that stress out your spouse, your boss, or your neighbor across the street.

Stress is a physical and psychological response to your resources being taxed to the limit. Your body experiences a fight or flight response to perceived threat. In times past, the threat might be a predatory animal wanting to have you for lunch. In modern times, the threat is usually less acute and more chronic. The threat might be a boss' ill temper, recurrent overdue bills, sleeplessness with a baby that is still waking in the night, fear and worry about an aging parent's health, or a host of other contemporary daily living issues.

People often compound their stress with the belief that they "should" be able to handle all their stressors without experiencing stress. The belief that you "should" magically be able to rise to any occasion without the need to develop or to muster additional resources, reduces your ability to cope with those stressors. Why handicap your own efforts? Stress is best managed by maximizing your resources and using more of them when you are stressed out, rather than less.

It is helpful to conceptualize stressors as internal and external sources of stress. Internal sources of stress would be those beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive distortions that you hold that get in the way of effective living and problem solving. External sources of stress are things and events like traffic jams, deadlines for homework and reports, relationship conflicts, money problems, and the like.

To best manage the stressors that confront you, match up internal and external stressors with internal and external stress management methods. For external stressors, work to reduce the number and impact of external stressors. An example for traffic problems that cause stress, would be take a different route home where there is less traffic, to travel at a different time of day, and to play music that helps distract you or calm you down while driving. For internal sources of stress like perfectionism, identify the beliefs that you hold about the need to be perfect to be worthwhile, work to replace them with realistic appraisals and expectations, and work to improve self-acceptance and self-esteem.

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To maximize the impact of your increased efforts at stress management, change your lifestyle to accommodate and reinforce new behaviors and changing attitudes. Use cognitive therapy to identify and challenge cognitive distortions that exacerbate stress and reduce the probability of effective problem solving and stress management. One of the best stress management techniques is to increase your level of self-care by consciously considering what you need to do to be well. This usually involves exercise, rest, appropriate nutrition, being assertive, dealing with feelings appropriately when they occur, identifying and maintaining priorities, and replacing negative self-talk with positive self-talk. Effective stress management is more than being aware that you are stressed. It involves taking appropriate action to bring your stress down or to make it more manageable.

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