

Stress Mastery for Health: Integrating Self-Care Practices

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Stress is a universal experience. You may not know your stress is high until you notice yourself being irritable with your loved ones or grinding your teeth. Even then, doing something about your stress level may not cross your mind. People often minimize the importance of stress management or their need for it. Citing various reasons for not implementing stress management techniques, most people act as if their elevated stress is getting in the way of using stress management strategies already in their behavioral repertoire.

Stress is not a minor annoyance. It can make you very sick. Stress, both a physical and psychological response to our resources being depleted, can profoundly impact our physical health by initiating a fight or flight reaction that triggers a cascade of physiological reactions in the body. Chronic and unmanaged stress creates hormonal imbalances, affecting other functions such as metabolism, immune response, and reproductive processes. Chronic stress makes the body more susceptible to infections and illnesses by suppressing the immune system. It can trigger an inflammatory response linked to conditions like cardiovascular disease, arthritis, and autoimmune disorders. The continuous release of stress hormones can elevate your blood pressure and increase your heart rate, which can contribute to the development of cardiovascular problems, including hypertension, atherosclerosis, and an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes. Digestive system problems such as indigestion, irritable bowel syndrome, and other gastrointestinal problems are related to stress. The muscle tension created by stress, can result in pain, headaches, and migraines. Chronic stress disrupts sleep patterns, which, in turn, impairs the body's ability to recover and regenerate, contributing to a cycle of heightened stress and declining health.

Everyone should take stress seriously. While the impact of unmanaged stress may not be as scary as a Mack truck headed straight for us going

the wrong way on the highway, it is, nevertheless, a threat. Unlike the acute threats that trigger the "fight, flight, freeze, or fawn" responses, our routine stressors tend to be more chronic and diverse, ranging from workplace challenges to family issues. Unrealistic beliefs that one should effortlessly handle all stressors without seeking additional resources impeded our ability to take action. This mindset hampers coping skills.

Making routine lifestyle adjustments to incorporate stress management as a component of self-care (like brushing your teeth) involves changing how you look at it and adjusting your response to it. An appropriate response to elevated stress is an increase in self-care. Cognitive therapy helps identify and challenge distortions (e.g., "I don't have time for stress management") that hinder effective problem-solving. Increasing your self-care will improve your stress management and vice versa. Exercise, rest, proper nutrition, assertiveness, and addressing emotions promptly, are all self-care and stress management activities. Effective stress management requires proactive measures to lower stress levels and enhance overall well-being.

When you understand that intensifying and broadening your self-care activities can reduce your stress and benefit your health in the short run and the long-term, it may not seem like extra items on your "to-do-list." Self-care involves intentionally prioritizing one's physical, emotional, and mental health. When individuals engage in regular self-care practices, such as exercise, proper nutrition, and adequate rest, they enhance their resilience to stress. Physical well-being is fortified, providing a solid foundation for effective stress management.

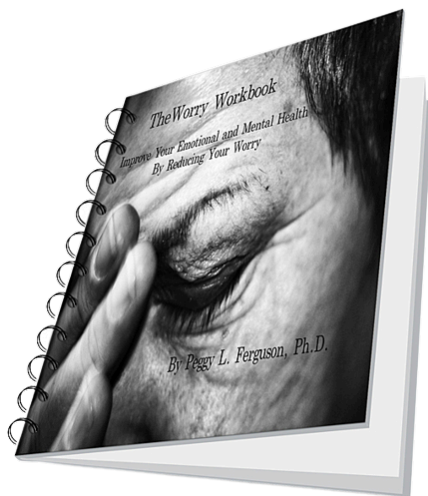
Effective stress management, including mindfulness, deep breathing, or cognitive restructuring, contributes to emotional balance and mental clarity. This mental resilience, in turn, facilitates a more proactive approach to self-care. When stress is managed effectively, we are more likely to engage in positive self-care behaviors, recognizing the importance of maintaining their well-being.

Self-care empowers us to withstand the impact of stressors, while stress management equips us with tools to navigate and alleviate stress when it arises. Combining self-care and stress management activities helps create

a holistic approach to well-being. Physical health, emotional balance, and mental clarity form a robust defense against the harmful effects of chronic stress.

Engaging in self-care promotes resilience to stress, making it easier to manage, and effective stress management, in turn, encourages ongoing self-care practices. This reciprocal relationship contributes significantly to an individual's overall health and well-being, fostering a more sustainable and balanced lifestyle.

The profound impact of chronic, unmanaged stress on physical and psychological well-being is profound. Stress, often underestimated, can lead to serious health issues. Recognizing and actively targeting elevated stress through stress management and self-care activities can fortify physical, emotional, and mental resilience, fostering a holistic approach to well-being. Breaking the cycle of stress through proactive measures and creating a positive feedback loop contributes significantly to an individual's overall health and balanced lifestyle.



\$4.95

"The Worry Workbook" by Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D. is a valuable resource designed to help unravel the complexities of worry, a persistent symptom of stress. This guide encourages self-awareness and reflection, assisting you in identifying the causes of concerns and offers practical solutions for reducing worry. The workbook goes beyond cognitive and emotional components, incorporating lifestyle adjustments for a holistic approach to stress reduction. With real-life examples and actionable worksheets, "The Worry Workbook" is a hands-on guide to reducing worry and helping manage stress.