

# Coping with Stress

Stress can come into our lives in many ways. Some we can anticipate and others take us by surprise. Because we may not be able to avoid stress, it's important to have strategies for managing it. Building your resilience can help you manage on a day-to-day basis. Resilience is the ability to adapt well to difficulty, change, or other sources of stress. Being resilient doesn't mean that you will not feel stress or anxiety. It does make it more likely that you'll be able to manage that stress and feelings of anxiety or uncertainty.

## RECOGNIZE YOUR PERSONAL RESILIENCY AND PUT IT TO WORK FOR YOU. THIS INCLUDES:

- **Positive thinking.** Staying optimistic during dark periods can be difficult, but maintaining a hopeful outlook is an important part of resiliency. Learning to control worry and hopelessness are important skills. How we think is how we end up feeling. The power of positive thinking is a very real force in how much stress we experience.
- **Maintain a strong social network.** Having caring, supportive people around you acts as a protective factor during times of crisis. It is important to have people you can talk with. Research has identified the main benefit clients get from mental health therapy is, "I had someone to talk to."
- **Nurture yourself.** When we are stressed we tend to neglect our own basic needs. Eating poorly, ignoring exercise, and not getting enough sleep are common reactions to crisis situations. Developing ways to maintain these basics will boost your resiliency and improve your ability to survive well.
- **Develop your problem solving skills.** Research has shown that people who are able to come up with solutions to a problem are better able to cope more effectively and reduce needless time spent worrying unproductively. Whenever you encounter a new challenge, make a quick list of some of the potential ways you could solve the problem. Experiment with different strategies. Focus on developing a logical way to work through common problems.
- **Find a sense of purpose in your life.** Victor Frankl provides excellent guidance in this area. During world war two Frankl was imprisoned in a Nazi death camp. He observed that the few inmates who survived had one resiliency factor in common. Those who survived had found the "meaning" in their lives. They had a clear idea of what it was that they were living for. What was really important to them. They drew a lot of strength to keep going and keep fighting. They had clear reasons to overcome and continue on.
- **Creativity and Humor.** This includes creative thinking. Keep an open mind to problem solving. Think outside the box. Find creative ways to express feelings and emotions (for example: paint, write poetry, keep a journal, dance, drama, etc.). Keep a sense of humor. Laughter is powerful medicine for stress.





## Practical Ideas for Feeling Better

**Take control.** It may seem that there is nothing you can do about stress, but you have more control than you might think. In fact, the simple realization that you are in control of your life is the foundation of stress management. Managing stress is all about taking charge of your thoughts, emotions, schedule, and the way you deal with problems.

**Take one thing at a time.** An unexpected event or crisis can make an ordinary task seem unbearable. Completing a project, for example, may seem overwhelming. Instead of giving up, break a project up into smaller tasks. Remember that a stress reaction is a temporary condition you can work your way through, one step at a time.

**Give yourself permission to feel what you are feeling.** Feelings are neither right nor wrong. There is nothing heroic about holding back tears or denying your feelings. Find a healthy, safe outlet for expressing yourself.

**Get enough rest and eat regularly.** Lack of sleep and poor eating habits can lead to physical, emotional, and mental symptoms, such as fatigue, mood swings, and poor concentration. Taking good care of yourself will increase your ability to handle stress.

**Find someone you trust.** Don't carry your burden alone. Find a family member or close friend that can be a support to you. Consider having a friend stay with you for a day or so.

**Practice relaxation or meditation.** Find a quiet place to listen to guided relaxation tapes. Spend time in meditation or prayer. Allow your mind and body time to slow down and relax. Take a few minutes to take a mental vacation: close your eyes and see yourself at a favorite vacation spot or quiet haven.

**Take control of your environment.** If the evening news is making you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic's got you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping on line. If someone you know stresses you out, limit the amount of time you spend with that person.

**Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.** Make daily decisions as you are able; this will give you a sense of control over your life. Be realistic. Avoid making major decisions based on the stress you feel right now.

**Learn how to say "no".** Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities when you are at your limits of time and energy. Taking on more is a surefire way to thwart your other stress management efforts.

**Adjust your standards.** Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be OK with "good enough."

**Escape for a while.** Sometimes it helps to get away temporarily from whatever is causing the stress. You might escape by taking a short trip or losing yourself in a book or movie. This can allow you to get a new perspective on things so that when you return, you will be better able to deal with the situation.



## Healthy Responses to Stress

Experiencing a traumatic event often causes people to make behavior or lifestyle changes in an attempt to cope with the resulting stress. You can prevent stress from getting the best of you! Here are some suggestions that may help you minimize any long-term negative effects of stress.

Behaviors to Avoid	Benefits of Choosing a Healthy Response
Sleeping too much or too little	<b>Get enough rest</b> to promote clear thinking, increase ability to cope with stress, and improve concentration and memory.
Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol or using other drugs	<b>Limit alcohol use</b> to decrease the likelihood of mood swings, sleep problems, and health problems.
Skipping meals; eating for comfort	<b>Eat nutritious meals</b> for adequate energy levels.
Withdrawing from others	<b>Develop a good support system</b> of family and friends who can listen and encourage you.
Increasing caffeine intake	<b>Limit caffeine use</b> to decrease agitation and irritability.
Reducing leisure activities, hobbies	<b>Engage in hobbies and activities you enjoy</b> as a healthy way of reducing stress and improving your mood and energy.
Staying away from work	<b>Prioritize your tasks and communicate with your supervisor if you need assistance.</b> Returning to work allows you to focus on tasks and be productive. Recovery is a balance----it is not healthy to spend excessive amounts of time alone doing nothing and it is not healthy to try and stay busy every second of the day.
Thinking you can handle your problems alone	<b>Seek professional help</b> if you want extra support or if your symptoms are not improving with your own resiliency and stress management efforts.
Expecting easy answers or a quick resolution to your problems	<b>Take one day at a time, one step at a time.</b> Patience decreases anxiety and increases one's sense of control.
Pretending everything is fine if it's not	<b>Be honest about how you feel.</b> All human beings experience physical and mental symptoms from high stress and trauma. These symptoms improve the most quickly when we allow ourselves some self-care.



## Helping Children Deal with Stress

Traumas can directly or indirectly affect employees' children. Just like adults, children's life experiences will affect how they handle difficult situations. And just like adults, children may try to make sense of traumatic events. When responding to children, be as open and honest as possible. Be very careful, however, about the information and messages you send. When adults are dealing with their own anxiety and uncertainty, children can sense their fear. Children look to adults for security and reassurance.

### Tips for talking with children:

- **Consider your child's age and developmental level when talking about a traumatic event.** Young children think in concrete terms, so use accurate language like "dead" instead of "asleep." When we say that young children have "concrete thinking" we mean that they tend to think one simple thought at a time and that they do not tend to see how everything connects into the "big picture", so with young children keep it simple. Answer their questions with simple responses. Do not attempt to go into a lot of explanation or details. If the small child has additional questions, they will ask but often they only need a simple answer to help them understand.
- **Children will need basic reassurance.** Children often fear that another traumatic event will occur or that they will be separated from those they love. Provide reassurance and comfort. Accept that children may be a bit "clingy" at first.
- **Encourage children to talk about their concerns and to express their feelings.** When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term "violence" but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them. Encourage them to express their feelings through talking, drawing or playing. Sometimes, talking while doing an activity like playing "catch" or "house" sets a more relaxed tone that encourages children to open up and talk.
- **Listen to your child.** Make sure you understand what he or she is saying. Since children may use words differently, summarize and repeat back to them what they have said. For example, "It sounds like you are feeling really mad about that." Avoid any urge to judge, blame, lecture, or say what you think your child should have done instead. The idea is to let your child's concerns and feelings be heard.
- **Validate your child's feelings.** Feelings are not right or wrong. How we act on our feelings is what is important. Chances are good that you are experiencing some of the same emotions. Share that with your child and talk about how you handle those feelings. If you don't know the answer to a child's question, be honest and say you don't know.
- **Teach by example.** Deal with stress in healthy ways and encourage your child to do the same. Take him or her with you for walks, watch silly movies, play games, and draw pictures. If there is a specific problem that's causing stress, talk together about what to do. Encourage your child to think of a couple of ideas. These are the first steps in your child learning problem solving skills.

### Consider seeking help from a medical or mental health professional if, over a few weeks:

Sleeping patterns do not return to normal; nightmares persist; clinging behavior does not gradually diminish; fears or anxieties become worse.