

STRESS LESS

"I'm so stressed out". I'm sure you've either heard that or said it many times. What makes people say this though? One way of thinking about stress is that it occurs when our demands outweigh our resources. The demands of life include things such as work and school, managing interpersonal relationships and trying to balance our budget. Demands also include the expectations we place on ourselves, especially when these are unrealistic. Resources which help us deal with these demands are things such as good coping skills, having a positive self concept, the presence of social support and managing our lifestyle so we are in optimum health.

When demands outweigh resources and we become stressed, this can manifest itself in many different ways. Some people will have disturbed sleep, others will get angry or anxious, or may have difficulty concentrating or being productive at work. Still others will get headaches or have upset stomachs. For others it is being indecisive or feeling that they want to withdraw from their friends. Some people consume food, alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs excessively when stressed.

So if you or someone you know are "stressed out", what can you do about it? Begin by being realistic about the fact that

there will always be situations that place demands on us. A stress free life just does not exist! Having said that though, we can learn to handle our stress in such a way that we maintain good mental and physical health despite the demands placed on us. Here are some suggestions.

Start by examining the Situation

Many situations feel hopeless but *using a problem solving approach* could lead to making changes that can reduce stress. For example if you have a deadline that you don't see how you can meet, you may decide to try to renegotiate the deadline with the person in charge. Alternatively, you may choose to deliver the item on time but know that it will not be as well done as if you had additional time. In some situations, you may be able to avoid the stressor altogether by *choosing to say no* to certain opportunities e.g. if you are already over-committed then you can avoid stress by declining to be president of the club you belong to (even if you are the best candidate!). *Planning, prioritizing and using time management skills* are all ways that can help us handle stress better.

Continue by focusing on your Self

Sometimes our situation cannot be changed but we can handle our stress better by changing our reactions to the situation. I am sure you know the famous Serenity Prayer, " Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to

change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference". The principles in this prayer are a wonderful brief recipe for stress management. Note though that the key factor is that the person is not asking God to change the situation but to give him/her the ability to handle the situation by taking the right attitude. The *perspective we choose* will have a lot to do with whether we experience an event as overwhelming or simply as challenging. Learn to *look for positives* instead of focusing only on problems; take *the long-term view* – many things we are so upset about today will not be significant in a year's time; see *yourself as capable of dealing with situations* rather than as a victim of circumstances.

Another important part of focusing on our selves is *making the time to take care of ourselves physically, mentally and spiritually*. Physically, we need to make sure that we get sufficient rest, eat nutritionally balanced meals and get regular exercise. We can also learn specific relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Time away from the regular routine is also helpful to "recharge the batteries". This does not have to be expensive, a weekend at a friend's house in the country may be all it takes. Mentally, we need to take time for thinking and dreaming about the future – setting goals, making specific plans. We also need to give ourselves sufficient stimulation - boredom

can cause stress too. So learning a new hobby or taking a class for fun are also ways of lowering stress. Spiritually, taking the time to be clear about our philosophy of life can give us a framework that is useful when difficulties occur. For many people their religious beliefs are an important source of comfort during difficult times.

Move on to enlisting your social Support

You may have heard the saying “**A problem shared is a problem halved**”. For most of us there is significant relief in being able to talk about our problems with others. That means being sure we build and maintain friendship networks so that in times of stress we are able to find someone we are comfortable sharing our difficulties with. Many people keep their worries to themselves for fear of burdening friends, but these same people will put themselves out for others. If we are willing to give a listening ear we should realize that others are willing to do the same and so be able to ask for help when needed.

For some people, part of their stress is the lack of a good social support system. In that case you need to make the first move rather than wait for others to come to you. **Get involved** in some association or group that interests you, volunteer your time to help others less fortunate, visit a church regularly. As you do these things look for opportunities to build closer links with the people who you meet there. At other times

you may need to consider getting specialist support by **utilizing the services of a professional** whether that is a doctor, counsellor, financial advisor or other person with specialized training in the area that concerns you.

Remember that stress is a normal part of life but you don't have to become or remain “stressed out” if you commit to regularly utilizing appropriate stress management strategies.

Reference: Tubesing, N. & Tubesing, D. (Eds.) (1986). *Structured Exercises in Stress Management Volume 3*. Duluth, MN: Whole Person Press.

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