

# STRESS? WHAT **STRESS???**



It seems there is nothing you can do about your stress level. The bills aren't going to stop coming, there are never going to be more hours in the day for all of your errands, your career or family responsibilities. There will always be more demands than there is time to meet them. But you have a lot more control than you might think. In fact, realizing that you are in control of your life is the foundation of stress management.

Managing stress is about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment and how you deal with challenging situations. Of course, the ultimate goal is to achieve a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation and fun -- plus the ability to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on.

## Dealing with Stressful Situations: The Four A's

If your methods of coping with stress do not contribute to your greater emotional and physical health, it's time to find healthier ones. There are many options, but they all require change. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it's helpful to think of the **four A's: avoid, alter, adapt or accept.**

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no "one size fits all" solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

Change the situation:	Change your reaction:
✚ Avoid the stressor	✚ Adapt to the stressor
✚ Alter the stressor	✚ Accept the stressor

## STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

### Strategy #1: Avoid unnecessary stress

- ✚ **Learn how to say "no"** – Know your limits and stick to them. Taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.
- ✚ **Avoid people who stress you out** – If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with them or, if possible, end the relationship entirely.
- ✚ **Take control of your environment** – If the traffic's got you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If the news makes you anxious, change the channel or turn off the TV.
- ✚ **Avoid hot-button topics** – If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.
- ✚ **Pare down your to-do list** – Analyze your schedule, responsibilities and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your plate, decide between the "shoulds" and "musts". Drop tasks that are truly unnecessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

## Strategy #2: Alter the situation

- ✦ **Express your feelings instead of bottling them up** – If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- ✦ **Be willing to compromise** – When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.
- ✦ **Be more assertive** – Don't take a backseat in your own life. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. If you've got a project to complete and your chatty co-worker wants to review their entire weekend at length, just say you're really busy and only have five minutes to talk.
- ✦ **Manage your time better** – Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. But, if you plan ahead and make sure you don't overextend yourself, you can alter the amount of stress you are under.

## Strategy #3: Adapt to the stressor

- ✦ **Reframe problems** – Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.
- ✦ **Look at the big picture** – Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
- ✦ **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 okay with "almost perfect".
- ✦ **Focus on the positive** – When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.



## Strategy #4: Accept the things you cannot change

- ✦ **Don't try to control the uncontrollable** – Many things in life are beyond our control – particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over the uncontrollable situation, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- ✦ **Look for the upside** – As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger". When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
- ✦ **Share your feelings** – Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist (or contact EAP). Expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic, even if there's nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation.
- ✦ **Learn to forgive** – Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on. That also goes for finding forgiveness for yourself.

## Strategy #5: Make time for fun and relaxation

- ✦ **Set aside relaxation time** – Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don't allow other obligations to get in the way. This is your time to take a break from all the responsibilities and recharge your batteries.
- ✦ **Connect with others** – Spend time with positive people who enhance your life. A strong support system will buffer you from the negative effects of stress.
- ✦ **Do something you enjoy every day** – Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano, or sewing.
- ✦ **Keep your sense of humor** – this includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Healthy ways to relax and recharge	
✦ Go for a walk.	✦ Play with a pet.
✦ Write in your journal.	✦ Release tension with a good workout.
✦ Work in your garden.	✦ Listen to music.
✦ Soak in a bubble bath.	✦ Watch a comedy.

Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

## Strategy #6: Adopt a healthy lifestyle

- ✦ **Exercise regularly** – Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week.
- ✦ **Eat a healthy diet** – Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress, so be mindful of what you eat. Start your day right with breakfast, and keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day.
- ✦ **Reduce caffeine and sugar** – The temporary “highs” caffeine and sugar provide often end with a crash in mood and energy. You'll feel more relaxed and sleep better, by reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate and sugar snacks in your diet.
- ✦ **Avoid alcohol, cigarettes and drugs** – Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief is only temporary. Don't avoid or mask the issue at hand; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind.
- ✦ **Get enough sleep** – Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally.



## Related links for stress management:

- ✦ **Preventing Burnout:** Signs, Symptoms, Causes and Coping Strategies
  - [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/burnout\\_signs\\_symptoms.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/burnout_signs_symptoms.htm)
- ✦ **Stress at Work:** How to Reduce and Manage Workplace and Job Stress
  - [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/work\\_stress\\_management.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/work_stress_management.htm)
- ✦ **How to Stop Worrying:** Self-Help Strategies for Anxiety Relief
  - [http://www.helpguide.org/mental/anxiety\\_self\\_help.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/anxiety_self_help.htm)
- ✦ **Stress Symptoms:** Effects on your body, feelings and behavior
  - [http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-symptoms/SR00008\\_D](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-symptoms/SR00008_D)
- ✦ **Stress Assessment:** <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-assessment/SR00029>