

I'm Not Stressed! Effective Stress Coping Techniques



Everyone feels stress daily in multiple ways. Relationships, work, holidays, tragedy, special events, school, housework, and traffic are just some of the many stressors we experience at some point. Stressors may not always be easy to identify, but they are still present.

Experiencing stress may be the cause of various mental and physical symptoms as well. For example, as the holidays are approaching, you may feel anxiety, muscle pain, and lack of sleep due to the need to get shopping done, cookies baked, and gifts wrapped before the deadline.

If we interpret the events in our lives as stressful, our lives will be stressful. We have a choice in how we respond to stress and what responses we use to cope with the stress.

What Is Stress?

Perceived stress is defined as a situation that is beyond a person's available resources and coping capabilities (Chao, 2011; Dyson & Renk, 2006). For example, being in a relationship that is filled with conflict and constant fighting may be perceived as stressful because one or both parties in the relationship may feel it is beyond their control.

Who Gets Stressed?

Everyone! Children, adults, college students, the elderly, neighbors, friends, family; everyone experiences stress at some point.

Although everyone feels stress at some point, the type of stressor often depends on the stage of life. For example, new college students experience stress because of the transition from home to college life (Dyson & Renk, 2006).

Adults, especially older adults, stress about aging, chronic illnesses, and death. Other stressors such as taking care of aging family members, raising children, balancing work and family life, and issues within personal relationships are also often experienced by adults (Boswell, Kahana, & Dilworth-Anderson, 2006).

Children experience stress by having to perform in front of peers and friends, struggling with homework, and even being around others who are stressed (Kostenius & Öhring, 2009). If a child knows what stress is, then he or she is more capable of coping with it.

What Is Coping?

Coping is the method we use to adapt to stress (Boswell, Kahana, & Dilworth-Anderson, 2006). Coping is generally defined as problem-focused or emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping is when we attempt to change the perceived stress (Chao, 2011). Emotion-focused coping is when we try to reduce the negative emotional responses associated with stress such as embarrassment, anxiety, or fear (DeLongis & Holtzman, 2005). Coping strategies are important in the successful reduction of stress.

How Do We Cope?

Everyone copes with stress in their own way. While many turn to quick fixes that make the stress go away temporarily, such as drugs, alcohol, gambling, eating, etc., these temporary negative coping strategies can potentially create more stress and problems in the long run.

A more positive way to cope with stress includes: a) identifying the stressor(s), b) managing our thinking as we interpret the stressors, c) considering the consequences of our actions, and then d) changing our thinking to healthy ways of coping. We can also practice healthy stress management techniques. How individuals apply these techniques may be very different for every person.

For example, children may cope with their stress by choosing to be doers, such as taking charge of the stressful situation and thinking positive thoughts (Kostenius & Öhring, 2009). Older adults may turn to their spirituality, such as finding inner peace and harmony, to cope with stress. Young adults may choose a healthy lifestyle, such as exercise, to deal with the stressors in their lives (Boswell, Kahana, & Dilworth-Anderson, 2006). College students also cope with stress in their own ways by seeking social support or taking time out for a hobby or fun leisure activities (Chao, 2011; Dyson & Renk, 2006).

Consider implementing some of these common research-based techniques that have been found helpful (Leyden-Rubenstein, 1998; Singer, 2010; Weiss, 2003; Wheeler, 2007).

- **Breathe deeply.** When people are stressed, they sometimes have a tendency to hold their breath or breathe quicker than normal causing their bodies to react and get tense. Taking deep breaths from the diaphragm, rather than the chest, can help calm nerves and anxiety (Weiss, 2003).
- **Visualize calm.** Go to a happy place or think of calming scenes such as a warm tropical beach or a cabin in the snowy mountains.
- **Exercise.** Physical activity releases the happy positive chemicals that can help fight against illness and help individuals to feel better naturally. When stressed, take a walk, stretch, and focus on having straight posture. It can also be helpful to roll the shoulders backward and forward five to ten times slowly to relax the neck and shoulder muscles.
- **Take up a hobby.** Spend some time doing something enjoyable such as knitting, playing a sport, or reading. Taking part in a hobby can help with thinking more clearly and feeling more energized in order to take on daily challenges.
- **Just say no.** When individuals realize they can't do everything, they often feel more at ease and capable to deal with the stress they can control and handle. Singer (2010) suggests making a list of attainable goals for the week and working toward achieving one goal every day. Crossing off a completed goal on that list can boost self-confidence! Hint: assign tasks to friends and family who are available to help. If no one is available, prioritize tasks and check each one off as it is completed.
- **Have fun!** Learning to laugh at ourselves and see the humor in any situation can reduce stress. Smiling (even when not feeling happy) and laughing are good for the body because they help generate the positive chemicals in the body and help it to physically relax.
- **Talk or write it out.** For many it helps to talk about what he/she is experiencing with a friend, loved one, or professional who can be trusted and is not involved in the stressful situation. People with little to no social support are more likely to engage in sedentary behavior, alcohol or drug use, and too little or too much sleep, which can often cause more stress (Chao, 2011). Others who don't want to talk about issues also find that writing a description of the stressor and feelings in a journal is often helpful in venting intense feelings and thinking more clearly (Wheeler, 2007).

- **Get pampered.** On occasion, some individuals find it can be helpful to do something nice for themselves that they normally wouldn't do, such as getting a massage or buying a treat.
- **Take a time-out.** Get away from the stressful situation and play a round of golf or go to a movie. While taking a break will not make the problem go away, having a positive temporary distraction can allow time to calm down and rethink the response to the stressor.
- **Learn to recognize the warning signs.** Everyone responds differently to stress, but recognizing common stress symptoms such as headache, insomnia, digestive issues, and anxiety can help individuals to take action to cope with stress earlier rather than later.

Take Action Against Stress

Stress is everywhere in our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. It is not something we can forget about or sweep under the rug. It is important to remember that how we cope with stress depends on how we interpret a stressful situation. The next time you feel tension in your neck and shoulders or feel a situation is beyond your control, step back, relax, rethink how the situation affects you, and find a healthy way to cope.

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