

Why Stress Management Strategies Work



Stress is a universally-experienced phenomenon. Although there are myriad causes, the methods of effectively managing the stress are generally the same. Why do these strategies work though? This fact sheet addresses this question, citing what research has found about why these commonly suggested stress management strategies work. They are divided into physical, mental, and social categories of stress relievers.

Physical Strategies

1. **Exercising** – Research has confirmed that being physically active leads to physical, mental, and emotional benefits, both immediately following the physical activity, as well as long-term. For example, studies have found that aerobic exercise can be as successful at decreasing depression as anti-depression prescriptions (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Exercise stimulates the release of “feel good” chemicals that help to improve your mood (Sharma, Madaan, & Petty, 2006). Additionally, a good workout makes it easier to sleep at night, another good stress reliever (mentioned below; Roveda et al., 2011). Many types of exercise involve repetitive motions, which allows the mind to relax, especially if paired with mindfulness (Robinson, Segal, Segal, & Smith, 2018). Exercise also helps to control weight and prevent many types of serious health problems, both of which can add stress to your life (Mayo Clinic, 2016a).
2. **Getting adequate sleep** – Getting enough (and high quality) sleep cannot be underestimated. This is because even slight levels of sleep deprivation can affect judgment, memory, and mood (APA, 2014). When you do not get enough sleep, the areas of the brain that result in anxiety and excessive worrying are impacted (Anwar, 2013). In addition, the American Psychological Association (APA; 2014) explains that while you sleep, your muscles are repaired and your memories are consolidated, preparing you for the next day. The APA adds that chronic sleep deprivation can lead to health problems, such as obesity and high blood pressure that add extra stress on the body. In addition, lack of sleep causes you to feel more overwhelmed, less motivated, and less able to concentrate, all of which contribute to feeling stressed. However, this relationship is cyclical as feeling stressed can also prevent you from falling and/or staying asleep, leading to more stress (APA, 2014).
3. **Maintaining a healthy diet** – The National Center on Health, Physical Activity, and Disability (NCHPAD; 2018) explains that certain nutrients, such as thiamin and folate, help with nervous system function. Thus, deficiencies in these nutrients can lead to irritability, depression, and poor concentration, all of which can potentially increase your feelings of stress. In addition, according to the APA (2014), your body stores more fat when you are stressed, so maintaining a healthy diet is important, especially when you are stressed. However, this is made more difficult by the fact that stress often leads to a desire for high fat, high calorie foods. When you overeat or eat unhealthy foods, you will tend to feel sluggish and think negatively about your body, contributing further to your stress (APA, 2014).
4. **Drinking enough water** – Shaw (2009) explains that when your body’s organs do not get enough water, the stress hormone cortisol is produced. In addition, feeling stressed makes it easier to forget to eat and drink, which can lead you to accidentally become more dehydrated. Shaw continues by explaining that stress and dehydration both affect each other and both have similar symptoms. This means that sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish whether the headaches and fatigue you are experiencing are the result of stress, dehydration, or a combination of both. Even though the cause may be difficult to determine, staying hydrated can stave off some of the physically uncomfortable parts of stress (Shaw, 2009).
5. **Taking breaks** – In order to not reach burnout, it is important to find an outlet that lets you relax and enjoy what you are doing (Mayo Clinic, 2016c). Taking a vacation (Joudrey & Wallace, 2009), listening to certain types of music (Chanda & Levitin, 2013), checking email less often (Kushlev & Dunn, 2015), and laughing (Mayo Clinic, 2016e) have all been shown to reduce stress levels.

Mental Strategies

1. **Meditating** – Meditation is helpful for reducing stress by relaxing the body through deep, controlled breathing, which helps fight off the physiological symptoms of stress (WebMD, 2014). In addition, feeling in control of just one thing in life—in this case your breathing—is empowering (HHP, 2018). Meditating increases your self-awareness and helps you gain a new perspective on stressful situations, focus on the present, and reduce negative emotions. It may be especially beneficial for health conditions that are made worse by stress (Mayo Clinic, 2017a).
2. **Cultivating spirituality** – Spirituality is not necessarily synonymous with being religious. It has more to do with finding purpose and context for your life through something larger than yourself (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Finding a sense of purpose that connects you to the world helps you to stay focused on what is most important and thus feel less stressed, healthier, and less alone (Mayo Clinic, 2016b). Spiritual people have been found to be happier, have better mental and physical health, cope better, have more satisfying marriages, use drugs and alcohol less, and live longer (Lyubomirsky, 2007).
3. **Writing** – Writing is a great way to calm the chaos of a stressful life. Because writing is, by nature, highly structured, it can help you put your chaotic thoughts together in a coherent manner, helping you to find meaning in your experiences. It also helps you to learn about yourself and to feel in control of your life (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Sloan, Feinstein, and Marx (2009) suggest that writing can allow you to see your situation from an outside perspective and recognize how silly the things you are saying to yourself are. Their research has found that consistent expressive writing results in less depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms.
4. **Thinking positively** – Negative thinking is the result of misconceptions you create because you lack information. Alternatively, positive thinking allows you to “approach unpleasantness in a more positive and productive way” (Mayo Clinic, 2017c). The Mayo Clinic (2017c) contends that positive thinking helps you resist mental distress by better coping with negativity and challenges. It improves your outlook on life and even leads to health benefits, such as greater resistance to the common cold and improved cardiovascular health. This goes hand-in-hand with the fact that optimistic people often have healthier lifestyles as well (Mayo

Clinic, 2017c). One specific approach to thinking more positively— incorporating more gratitude into one’s life— helps you unlearn the habit of focusing on failures and disappointments (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Social Strategies

1. **Talking to a friend** – Knowing that you are not alone in facing your stressors empowers you to face them (Lyubomirsky, 2007). The Mayo Clinic (2015) asserts that people with strong social support networks are healthier and live longer. This is likely in part because having a social support network increases your sense of belonging, your feelings of self-worth, and your sense of security (because you have resources to turn to in time of need; Mayo Clinic, 2015). In addition, others often have a different perspective on the stressful situations you are facing and may be able to suggest changes or coping strategies that you had not thought about (Mayo Clinic, 2016c).
2. **Spending time with a pet** – Animals reduce tension and improve mood, and can often be a nice icebreaker in social interactions. Doheny (2012) suggests that having a pet yields unconditional love, a diminished sense of being alone, physical contact (which is important for personal well-being), a consistent daily routine (often including exercise), and an increased sense of self-esteem (the result of responsibly caring for the pet). However, the benefits of having a pet are reduced if doing so causes excess worry, is too expensive to afford, or if you are not in a position to be able to care for the pet. Therefore, pet-keeping is not a one-size-fits-all solution for reducing stress (Doheny, 2012).
3. **Learning to say no** – Although it can be difficult, it is very important for your stress level to learn to say no when appropriate. The Mayo Clinic (2016d) proposes that saying no to one thing means you are saying yes to your commitment to another priority. Doing so can also open up opportunities for you to try new things, as well as opportunities for others to step up to what you are turning down (Mayo Clinic, 2016d). Being able to say no is a reflection of a healthy level of assertiveness and self-confidence (Mayo Clinic, 2017b). Always saying yes causes stress, which over time can lead to burnout, resentment, and even illness (Mayo Clinic, 2016d).

4. **Meeting with a professional** – While minor stresses of everyday life probably do not warrant seeing a therapist, if the stresses become overwhelming and burdensome, professional help may be needed. The Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA; 2016) explains that a good therapist may help you cope with the stresses or traumatic events you are experiencing by helping you identify the triggers and develop a plan to help you cope with and make sense of them (e.g. changing the thought patterns and behaviors that are perpetuating the distress). Depending on the situation, therapists may focus on you as an individual, or they may focus on your relationships with others (DBSA, 2016).

Stressful events and circumstances are not likely to go away anytime soon. Therefore, it is important that you learn healthy, effective ways to minimize the negative effects of the stressors in your life. Understanding the reasons for common stress management strategies makes them even more empowering. As you apply these strategies into your own life, your personal well-being and relationships with others are likely to improve.

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