STRESS MANAGEMENT AND RELAXATION
TECHNIQUES
SUSTAINABILITY OF SELF
It may seem that there’s nothing you can do about your stress level. The bills aren’t going to stop coming, there will never be more hours in the day for all your errands. Your career or family responsibilities will always be demanding. However, you have a lot more control than you might think.

In fact, the simple realization that you’re in control of your life is the foundation of stress management.

Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. *The ultimate goal is a balanced life*, with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun – plus the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on.
Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. It’s not as easy as it sounds. Sources of stress aren’t always obvious, and it’s easy to overlook your own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sure, you know that you’re constantly worried about work deadlines. But maybe it’s your procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that leads to deadline stress.

To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:

• Do you explain away stress as temporary (“I just have a million things going on right now”) even though you can’t remember the last time you took a breather?
• Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life (“Things are always crazy around here”) or as a part of your personality (“I have a lot of nervous energy, that’s all”).
• Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it, your stress level will remain outside your control.
LOOK AT HOW YOU CURRENTLY COPE WITH STRESS

1. Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life.
2. Keeping a journal can help you identify them.
3. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive?

Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.
These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but they cause more damage in the long run:

- Smoking
- Drinking too much
- Overeating or undereating
- Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Using pills or drugs to relax
- Sleeping too much
- Procrastinating
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)
If your methods of coping with stress aren’t contributing to your greater emotional and physical health, it’s time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, 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 As: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

Remember: 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.

**Dealing with Stressful Situations: The Four A’s**

**Change the situation:**
- Avoid the stressor.
- Alter the stressor.

**Change your reaction:**
- Adapt to the stressor.
- Accept the stressor.
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’re close to reaching 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 that person or end the relationship entirely.

Take control of your environment – If the evening news makes 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 online.

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, distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts.” Drop tasks that aren’t truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.
STRESS MANAGEMENT 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 an exam to study for and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you 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’re under.
STRESS MANAGEMENT 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 “good enough.”

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.
STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGY #4: ACCEPT THE THINGS YOU CAN’T 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 them, 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. 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.
STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGY #5: MAKE TIME FOR FUN AND RELAXATION

Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you’ll be in a better place to handle life’s stressors when they inevitably come.

Healthy ways to relax and recharge

- Go for a walk.
- Spend time in nature.
- Call a good friend.
- Sweat out tension with a good workout.
- Write in your journal.
- Take a long bath.
- Light scented candles
- Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea.
- Play with a pet. Work in your garden.
- Get a massage.
- Curl up with a good book.
- Listen to music.
- Watch a comedy

NURTURING YOURSELF IS A NECESSITY, NOT A LUXURY.

Set aside relaxation time. Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don’t allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all 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 working on your bike.

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.
You can increase your resistance to stress by strengthening your physical health.

**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. Nothing beats aerobic exercise for releasing pent-up stress and tension.

**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 in with a crash in mood and energy. By reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugar snacks in your diet, you’ll feel more relaxed and you’ll sleep better.

**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.
SOME SPECIFIC NOTES ON RELAXATION

The Relaxation Response is NOT:

• Laying on the couch
• Being lazy

The Relaxation Response IS:

• A mentally active process that leaves the body relaxed
• Trainable and becomes more profound with practice
• Best done in an awake state

NOW FOR SOME TIPS ON EASY RELAXATION TECHNIQUES...
Deep breathing is easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. Deep breathing is the cornerstone of many other relaxation practices, too, and can be combined with other relaxing elements such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

*How to practice deep breathing*

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel. So the next time you feel stressed, take a minute to slow down and breathe deeply:

Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.

Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.

Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. Count slowly as you exhale. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
STARTING A MEDITATION PRACTICE

All you need to start meditating are:

A quiet environment. Choose a secluded place in your home, office, garden, place of worship, or in the great outdoors where you can relax without distractions or interruptions.

A comfortable position. Get comfortable, but avoid lying down as this may lead to you falling asleep. Sit up with your spine straight, either in a chair or on the floor. You can also try a cross-legged or lotus position.

A point of focus. Pick a meaningful word or phrase and repeat it throughout your session. You may also choose to focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes.

An observant, noncritical attitude. Don’t worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you’re doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don’t fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.
Self Massage

Scalp Soother – Place your thumbs behind your ears while spreading your fingers on top of your head. Move your scalp back and forth slightly by making circles with your fingertips for 15-20 seconds.

Easy on the Eyes - Close your eyes and place your ring fingers directly under your eyebrows, near the bridge of your nose. Slowly increase the pressure for 5-10 seconds, then gently release. Repeat 2-3 times.

Sinus Pressure Relief - Place your fingertips at the bridge of your nose. Slowly slide your fingers down your nose and across the top of your cheekbones to the outside of your eyes.

Shoulder Tension Relief - Reach one arm across the front of your body to your opposite shoulder. Using a circular motion, press firmly on the muscle above your shoulder blade. Repeat on the other side.

Pressure Points for Stress Reduction – Hold on each point for 1-3 minutes

• Center of head between the eyes
• Center of chest in the soft spot
• Laying down with a towel under your shoulders and press down
• Between the shoulder blades on both sides of the spine
• Where the neck meets the shoulders on both sides