

Managing the Stress in Your Life

Learn to Have Healthy Relationships

This subject could fill an entire book. In the limited space of this newsletter, let's look at the key components of this stress-reducing strategy.

1. **Identify the sources of stress in your relationships.** Write about them in a journal. Make a list of people who cause you stress and explore what the issues are.
2. **Resolve the underlying issues.** For each of the situations identified in step 1, assess what needs to happen to resolve it. Make a list and design a plan to improve the situation.
3. **Learn skills to improve relationships.** Relationship skills are learned. We are not born knowing how to get along well with others, and most of us learned only limited skills from our parents. Identify the skills you need to develop, and make a plan for yourself. You can learn these skills by reading books, taking classes, or working with a therapist.
4. **Avoid toxic people and situations.** Some people have a toxic effect on you. If you can, limit the amount of time you spend with them. Look for opportunities to decline their invitations. When these people are family members, remind yourself that you don't have to feel guilty about avoiding anyone who makes you feel bad about yourself. In work situations, look for ways to rearrange your schedule or your workspace to avoid interacting with such people.
5. **Seek out positive people and situations.** This step is the reverse of the previous step. Look for opportunities to spend more time with people and in situations that make you feel good. Think about people who make you feel good about yourself and look for ways to increase time with them.
6. **Watch what you eat.** Some substances amplify the stress response. These include:
 - **Caffeine** stimulates the release of stress hormones. This increases heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen to the heart. Ongoing exposure to caffeine can harm the tissue of the heart.
 - **Refined sugar** and processed flour are depleted of needed vitamins. In times of stress, certain vitamins help the body maintain the nervous and endocrine systems.
 - Too much **salt** can lead to excessive fluid retention. This can lead to nervous tension and higher blood pressure. Stress often adds to the problem by causing increased blood pressure.
 - **Smoking** not only causes disease and shortens life, it leads to increased heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration.
 - **Alcohol** robs the body of nutrition that it might otherwise use for cell growth and repair. It also harms the liver and adds empty calories to the body.

During times of high stress, eat more complex carbohydrates (fruits, vegetables, whole breads, cereals, and beans).

7. **Get moving.** The human body was designed to be physically active. However, in most jobs today, people are sitting down most of the time. They hardly move at all except when it is time for coffee break or lunch. When faced with stressors, we respond with our minds, not our bodies. It is no wonder that many of us have a difficult time responding to stressful events.

Exercise is one of the simplest and most effective ways to respond to stress. Activity provides a natural release for the body during its fight-or-flight state of arousal. After exercising, the body returns to its normal state of equilibrium, and one feels relaxed and refreshed.

8. **Look for ways to let go of tension and anxiety.** Meditation and progressive relaxation are two valuable ways to regenerate and refresh yourself. You can purchase meditation and relaxation audiotapes or record your own. This is especially important because your health and long life depend on minimizing stress and achieving a sense of balance and well-being.

Suggested Reading

Jeff Davidson, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Stress*. New York, NY:Alpha Books, 1997.

J. Barton Cunningham, *The Stress Management Sourcebook*. Los Angeles, CA: Lowell House, 1997.

Peter G. Hanson, *Stress For Success*. New York, NY:Doubleday, 1989.

Peter G. Hanson, *The Joy of Stress*. Kansas City, MO:Andrews &McMeel, 1985.
