Managing your Stress: Stress Self-Assessment and Stress Management Planning Guide

**Introduction:** Stress is a normal and affects everyone. Not all stress is bad, but long-term stress is harmful to your physical and mental health.

Stress is how the brain and body respond to any demand, commonly called a stressor. It is an automatic/instinctual response by the body and brain to help you respond and survive. Specifically, when we are stressed, the brain is triggered to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol which ramp up some bodily systems to address the stressor, while reducing others to allow the body and brain to act quicker. This was a great advantage to our ancestors when they ran into a predator, giving them an edge to surviving dangerous encounters. It can still be helpful today, imagine that extra bit of energy to be at your best.

The stress response is intended for short periods. Think of a deer encountering a bear. The deer’s stress response gives them the extra energy to flee, and then a few minutes later, their bodies return to normal. Stress becomes a problem when the stress response hangs around. Adrenaline and cortisol are not good for the body long term as they disrupt your body’s normal functioning to address a perceived threat. For example, the increased flow of blood to help ensure adequate oxygen throughout the body leads to high blood pressure and the production of glucose by the liver, which is a great quick burning energy for physical exertion, but over time, those high levels can cause diabetes. Because the stress response impacts so many systems in our body, the symptoms of stress effect our bodies, minds, emotions and behaviors.

We can’t avoid all stressors, but the good news is that humans are resilient, having the ability to bounce back. There are ways all of us can manage our stress response. We’ll talk about those areas in the guide which includes:

- Stress Management Self-Assessment – see where you stand now on your stress management
- Strategies List to Enhance your Personal Stress Management Toolkit
- Personal Stress Management Maintenance Plan

**Disclaimer:** This guide is a tool for personal reflection and change. If you are experience any of the following symptoms of stress distress for more than a few days in a row, or to the point of being unable to function at your normal level, you should seek medical assistance from your doctor.
  - Feelings of fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness, or frustration
  - Changes in appetite, energy, and activity levels
  - Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
  - Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
  - Physical reactions, such as headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes
  - Worsening of chronic health problems
  - Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

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Stress Management Self-Assessment:

**Directions:** Use this assessment to identify where you may be strong, or need to enhance your efforts at managing the stress response. During the assessment, it might be helpful to ask a trusted friend or family member to offer you additional insight of what they see or observe to help inform your answers.

**Rate your self-care – quieting your mind or refocusing your attention allows your body to ‘come down’ from the stress response when triggered.**

- Do you have 1-3 grounding techniques to help you calm and re-center when triggered?
  - 1 2 3 4 5
  - Nope Definitely

- Do you have 1-3 go to hobbies or activities that help you quite your mind or refocus your energy?
  - 1 2 3 4 5
  - Nope Definitely

- Do you take time to sit with your thoughts and sources of stress to question their validity and develop a more positive, focused outlook?
  - 1 2 3 4 5
  - Nope Definitely

- Do you schedule time for your hobbies and self-awareness activities on a regular basis?
  - 1 2 3 4 5
  - Nope Definitely

**Rate your sleep – sleep is an essential component for your body and brain to rest and recharge, especially around muscle repair and processing emotions**

- Do you set aside time for 7-9 hours of sleep per night?
  - 1 2 3 4 5
  - Nope Definitely

- Are you able to sleep through the night?
  - 1 2 3 4 5
  - Nope Definitely
Rate your level of activity – exercise helps your body work through the physical effects of stress, serves as a much-needed distraction, promotes sleep and release the brain’s ‘feel-good’ neurotransmitters called endorphins that help boost mood.

• Do you do an activity that raises your heart rate for 30 min, 5 times a week (chores can be included in this)?
  1  2  3  4  5
  Nope   Definitely

• Do you get outside for some of these activities?
  1  2  3  4  5
  Nope   Definitely

Rate your nutrition and eating habits – keeping your body and brain fueled with the essentials will help both combat the impact of stress!

• Do you drink 12-16 glasses of water per day?
  1  2  3  4  5
  Nope   Definitely

• Do you eat at regular intervals throughout the day?
  1  2  3  4  5
  Nope   Definitely

• Do you eat mostly whole foods such as vegetables, fruits, grains and lean meats?
  1  2  3  4  5
  Nope   Definitely

Rate your support – emotional support is an important protective factor can do a lot to buffer the impact of stress.

1. Do you have 1-3 individuals that you can call for support at any time?
  1  2  3  4  5
  Nope   Definitely

2. Do you have a broader network of contacts that provide some level of support to you? (spiritual, sports team, friends, family, colleagues, neighbors or others you know through a shared passion?)
  1  2  3  4  5
  Nope   Definitely

How did you do?

Notice where you scored a 1 or 2 and check out the next section for ways you might move it 3 or 4.

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Strategies List to Enhance your Stress Management Toolkit:

Strategies to help you calm, re-center and self-connect:

1. **Grounding activities.** Grounding activities are useful when you are emotionally triggered and need to calm down. Here’s a list to choose from.

2. **Hobbies.** Hobbies are an important means for stress management because they can offer unparalleled engagement, helping you unwind, relax, connect with others over a shared passion, and find happiness in an enjoyed pursuit. Distraction is a powerful stress-reliever and doing something you enjoy that requires some level of attention and focus can create a sense of control, calm and even ‘flow’. Hobbies can be solo or with a group, active or passive. Anything you find enjoyment or pleasure in should be listed on your hobbies list to pull out at different time when you need to redirect yourself. Here’s a list to get you thinking.

3. **Manage your self-talk.** Positive thinking in this context has to do with how you talk to yourself about stressful or unpleasantness situations. Self-talk is the endless stream of unspoken thoughts that run through your head. These automatic thoughts can be positive or negative. Some of your self-talk comes from logic and reason. Other self-talk may arise from misconceptions that you create because of lack of information. Learn more about the power of positive thinking in managing your stress reaction.

4. **Manage your focus.** Meditation is the practice of training our attention and awareness on a particular thought/activity or to bring awareness to the present and helping to find calm. Learn more about the power of mediation in managing your stress reaction.

Strategies for Improving Sleep (National Sleep Foundation):

1. **Stick to a schedule.** Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day (yes, even on weekends). This helps to regulate your body’s clock and could help you fall asleep and stay asleep for the night.

2. **Practice a relaxing bedtime ritual.** A relaxing, routine activity before bedtime conducted away from bright lights (your phone, tablet or laptop) helps separate your sleep time from activities that can cause excitement, stress or anxiety, which can make it more difficult to fall asleep. Think: reading, yoga or journaling.

3. **If you have trouble sleeping, avoid naps.** Power napping may help you get through the day, but if you find that you can’t fall asleep at bedtime, eliminating even short catnaps may help.

4. **Work up a sweat.** Vigorous exercise every day is best, but even light exercise is better than no activity. Exercise at any time of day, but not at the expense of your sleep.

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5. **Evaluate your bedroom.** Design a sleep environment conducive for a restful night. Your bedroom should be a cool temperature and free from any noise or light that can disturb your sleep. Consider using blackout curtains, eye shades, earplugs, white noise machines, fans and other devices.

6. **Sleep on a comfortable mattress.** This may seem obvious, but make sure that your mattress is comfortable and supportive. The one you have been using for years (or since childhood) may have exceeded its life expectancy – about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses.

**Strategies for improving your level of activity:**

1. **Start small and affordable.** Set realistic goals in line with your availability, income and fitness. Making it easy to start, will make you more likely to keep with it. [Here are some ideas to get you started.]

2. **Keep track.** In line with step one, seeing progress will motivate you to continue to act, whether that’s the stairs instead of the elevator or get off one bus stop earlier so you can walk more. [Get help getting your attitude where you want it to be.]

3. **Lean on your networks.** Pulling in others can make it more fun and enjoyable. Even a standing social engagement with a friend can become a walk rather than going to see a movie.

4. **Reframe daily activities.** Daily chores, home projects and playtime with kids all get you up and moving. Recognize and celebrate them for the good they do! Especially at work stand to take calls, take a walk at lunch, park a little farther away, take the stairs, stretch at your seat.

5. **Fit it in where you can.** Plan for your success, if you can’t take a 30 min do a walk. Take 5 min to do a couple jumping jacks or run in place during commercials. Set an alarm to make sure you get up and stretch, walk to get water every 30 min.

6. **Enjoy the outdoors -** Learning to appreciate the outdoors can help to incorporate exercise in your life as many outdoor activities involve physical activity. And the sunshine plus the exercise is good for sleep!

**Strategies for improving your nutrition and eating habits:**

1. **Take steps to improve diet.** The stress response dampens the immune and digestive systems Feeding your body and brain key nutrients can help offset this reaction, not to mention mitigate the symptoms of some other diagnoses. [Learn more about the latest research here. Here are some great resources to get started with changing food habits. Start small, swap out 1 meal, 1 snack or a specific ingredient for something more healthy.]

2. **Recognize your bad habits.** Stress eating is a thing, the cortisol released promotes appetite for those ‘comfort foods’ high in fat and sugars to fuel that fight, flight or freeze reaction which require quick, burnable energy. Unfortunately, these foods give quick, temporary bursts that offer little of the key nutrients needed to support your body’s functioning. Track your habit in a ‘no judgement’ journal to see what foods and activities tend to be involved in your stress eating and work to address.

3. **Drink more water.** Although not a nutrient, water is essential to keeping your body temp regulated, and moving nutrients throughout the body, keeping joints lubricated, and removing waste through urination, perspiration, and bowel movements. Increasing your liquid intake can help in managing your body regulation. [Here are strategies to help you make it a habit.]

**Strategies for improving your support:**

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1. **Inventory your networks.** Emotional support is an important protective factor for dealing with life’s stressors. Recognizing who is in your network of current or potential support is a good first step. Then begin to think how they can assist you in managing your stress or making healthier choices for stress reduction. Some examples include:
   - Helping with foundational needs – a ride, occasional babysitting, assist with a move or home improvement project.
   - Helping you process emotions – available for a quick call, empathetic ear, positive affirmations, a quick walk or coffee date.
   - Accountability source for habit changes – call to get you up, ask about a new habit, join the walking club with you.

2. **Communicate with your network.** Knowing what source of support each person in your network can offer is important but also ensure that what you are asking of them, is something they can do, and agree too. Don’t assume a friend will understand you just want an empathetic ear, perhaps for the 100th time about your stress about finances. Perhaps let them know, every month when I get my bills I get so stressed, can I call you for 2 min of venting and you tell me it will all be okay?

3. **Giving back.** Helping others, also helps to build your social network. Within your comfort zone and abilities, look outward to see how you can support others.

4. **Setting healthy boundaries.** Always remember the goal with social support is to help reduce your stress. Notice if someone, or a situation is adding more than giving. It’s also fair to let folks
Your Stress Management Maintenance Plan

**Directions:** Using the assessment as a guide, pick a few areas in which you would like to improve. List what you do currently, ever day or week, under ‘current practice’ and a specific or related tactic from the above list, that you will work to initiate as your ‘new practice’. In the next section we’ll talk about the barriers that might stall your efforts with new practices.

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**Directions:** Review your stress management tactics listed above and address the below questions so you have a plan for the challenges to change especially around how we deal with stress.

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<th>Barriers to maintaining my stress management tactics above</th>
<th>How will I address these barriers initially and ongoing to stick with my stress management efforts?</th>
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| Negative coping strategies I would like to use less, or not at all when stressed | What more healthy coping strategy will I do instead? |
| Adamant                                                                 |                                                                                                  |

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