

Stress Management

Many common health conditions, such as anxiety, pain, depressed mood, fatigue, gastrointestinal, sleep, and weight problems are made worse by stress. This fact sheet describes how stress management techniques can help you manage some of your problematic health conditions in order to reach (and maintain) your employment goals.

Introduction

Stress is a normal part of life. When stress becomes chronic, however, it can affect our well-being. Researchers estimate that 70 to 80 percent of all disease and illness is stress related. Stress can take many forms. Emotionally, stress can come from anxiety we feel when we can't cope with life's events. Socially, stress can come from loneliness or conflict. Intellectually, stress may be boredom or confusion. Physically, it is the body's reaction to wear and tear. Spiritually, stress can represent a lack of inner peace.

Benefits of Stress Management

Learning to manage your stress can help you live a healthier and happier life. Decreasing stress can help you manage many different health conditions like depression, anxiety, and chronic pain. It can also help you with sleep problems, weight problems, and physical fitness problems.

Managing Stress

Managing stress isn't hard, but it takes



practice. People who manage stress well have become “strong” at doing it. Just as it takes work to become physically strong, it takes work to develop stress management strength. Breaking down our thoughts and reactions is one important way to manage stress.

Thoughts that Create Stress

Our thoughts influence how much stress we experience from events, such as deadlines. That’s good! It’s often easier to control our thoughts than the stressors that trigger them. The first step in learning to better manage stressful thoughts is to evaluate your thinking. Then, you can learn to change your thoughts to reduce stress. Although many types of thoughts can create stress, “fortune telling” and “magnifying the negative” are two of the most common.

Fortune telling

Fortune telling is when you assume something bad or stressful is going to happen. For instance, prior to a job interview, you worry about how you will deal with rejection. This type of thinking causes unnecessary stress.



Magnifying the negative

When you magnify the negative you jump to the conclusion that the worst is going to happen. When the car won’t start, you worry about paying for repairs before you know what the problem is. This can trigger other worries about money and create even more stress. A less stressful thought would be “Maybe I left the lights on and my car needs a jump.” Without more information, it’s not useful to dwell on the negative.



Managing stress producing thoughts

Changing your thoughts can lower your stress levels. Look at the following examples. For which thoughts, original or new, would you feel less stress in each situation?

Situation	Original Thought	New Thought
I'm late for work.	I'll be fired.	My boss and I can figure out a solution to the bus schedule change.
My car won't start.	I can't afford to fix it.	I probably left the lights on and killed the battery.
My mother is coming to visit for a week.	I'll go crazy!	Despite our differences, I'm glad Mom is interested in my family.

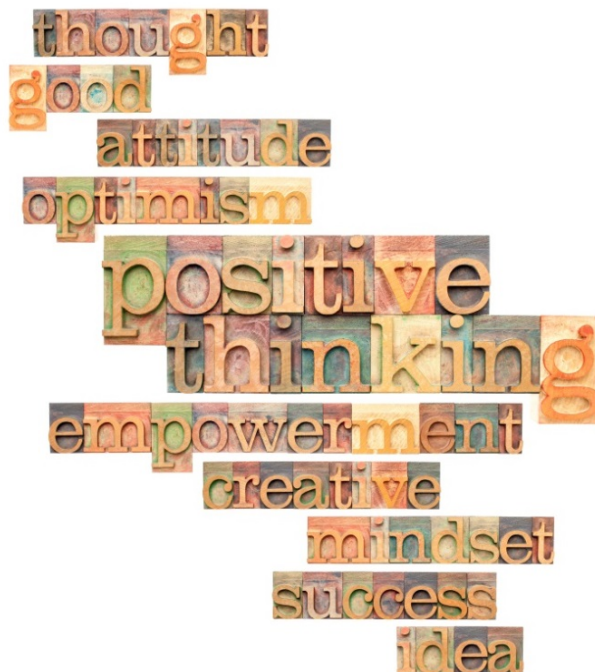
Balancing your perspective

Stressful events can be unpleasant, and it is easy to react with negative thoughts. These thoughts, however, can leave you feeling hopeless about the future. Your reactions don't need to be negative. You can learn to react more optimistically. Positive thinking can help you become more hopeful about the future and better manage life stress.

Reframing

Reframing is a skill that reduces negative reactions. If you learn to reframe, you will feel more positive. Learning to reframe your immediate reactions takes practice. The following steps will help you learn to reframe your reactions.

Step 1. Identify thoughts. In difficult situations,



identify your thoughts and feelings. Ask, “What am I thinking?” and “How am I feeling?”

Step 2. Find the silver lining. Once you can identify your thoughts, replace each negative thought with a positive one. Even terrible situations are opportunities for learning. Think about what is good in a situation.

Step 3. Be thankful. Find something to be thankful for in every difficult and stressful situation. Even the worst situations can teach valuable lessons. Being thankful for the opportunity to learn something is a good start.

Step 4. Name the positive things in your life. Learn to make positive statements about yourself and the world around you. These positive thoughts help to prevent any recurring negative thoughts.

Exploring Your Thoughts

A great way to explore stressful thoughts is to keep a journal. Keeping a stress journal can help you figure out what makes you stressed. Journals are most helpful when you write freely. Focus on getting your feelings out, rather than writing a perfect sentence.

The health and wellness organization [Helpguide.org](https://www.helpguide.org) provides tips for starting a stress journal. In particular, they suggest that each day you describe:

- What caused your stress (make a guess if you're unsure).
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally.
- How you acted in response to the stress you were feeling.
- What you did to make yourself feel better.



Additional Stress Management Techniques

Finding time to relax, spend time with friends, and participate in activities that you enjoy can help you decrease stress. Problem solving about your stressful situation is also helpful.

Think about what is stressing you, so you can take steps to reduce it. For instance, if you are having money problems, taking a class on money management might help. If you are having trouble communicating with a coworker, you could learn about active listening techniques.

Social Support Groups

Getting support and encouragement from people in your life can help reduce stress. Your social support group might include friends, family, health



professionals, or coworkers. Sometimes simply having someone listen to you or offer a new perspective can help. At other times, just knowing that you are connected to others can be helpful.

Time to Practice

Talking about stress management doesn't lower stress levels. We must make time to practice. Remember that if you don't take time for yourself, you won't be at your best. Take time to relax and to do the things you love. It helps you, and it is good for everyone around you too.



Physical Activity, Sleep, and Relaxation



Getting good sleep and exercising on a regular basis can help you manage stress. Check out the fact sheets in this series on Physical Activity and Sleep for additional ideas for managing stress.

Additional Resources

The National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD)

NCHPAD.org provides good information on stress management. To understand more about positive and negative stressors, read [A Primer on Stress Management](#). If you want to learn more about how your personality



type influences how you respond to stress, complete the [Stress Management Assessment](#).

Helpguide.org

Helpguide.org is a health and wellness resource. Check out the stress page to learn how to identify stressors in your life. This page also provides information on developing healthy ways to manage stress.

Mayo Clinic

The Mayo Clinic at MayoClinic.org provides a variety of information on stress in the patient care and health information pages.

Set a Goal

Setting a health behavior change goal can move you closer to achieving and maintaining meaningful employment. When setting a goal to change your stress management habits, it is important to be realistic. Pay attention to your negative thoughts, and then think about how to reframe them into positive thoughts. Begin by making a few changes in your thought patterns, and work up to your goal from there. Remember to keep track of your progress and reward yourself for accomplishments.



Good Luck!

Prepared by: Catherine Ipsen, Bethany Rigles, and Casey Ruggiero

For additional information please contact:

Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities;
The University of Montana Rural Institute; 52 Corbin Hall, Missoula, MT
59812-7056; 888-268-2743 or 406-243-5467; 406-243-4200 (TTY);
406-243-2349 (Fax); rtcrural@mso.umt.edu; <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umt.edu>

© 2014 RTC:Rural. Our research is supported by grant #H133B080023 from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, U.S. Dept. of Education. The opinions expressed reflect those of the author and are not necessarily those of the funding agency.



Rural Institute
...we're about people

