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TIP SHEET: STRESS MANAGEMENT

12 Tools for Managing Stress

Exercise Exercise is one of the most effective ways to manage stress, and it works relatively quickly, too. To be most effective, try aerobic exercise that increases your heart rate, such as brisk walking, working up to 30 minutes at a time. Remember to contact your doctor before beginning an exercise program.

Applied relaxation While different people find different things relaxing, progressive muscle relaxation (tensing and relaxing major muscle groups in a systematic way--see our Relaxation Tip Sheet for more information) tends to be effective for quite a few people. Applied relaxation involves practicing progressive muscle relaxation (or PMR) and repeating a word (like relax or calm) each time you relax muscle groups after tensing them during PMR practice. In 6 to 8 weeks, the word (relax or calm) will start to elicit a state of relaxation when you say or think it.

Mindfulness meditation Like applied relaxation, mindfulness meditation requires practice to be fully beneficial in stressful situations. Mindfulness involves practicing being in the here and now. See our Tip Sheet on this topic for exercises to practice.

Problem solve Under stress, many of us become a little less rational and tend to forget that we can step back, analyze the situation at hand, and try to solve problems. Not all problems are solvable, of course, but usually some aspect of them is. Don't forget to enlist the help and advice of others, including experts. If you become wrapped up in solving the problem and are spending too much time on it, try to schedule time each day to work on it (and write down what you are thinking, don't just think about it).

Become better than the average person at dealing with uncertainty The most stressful situations involve uncertain, important outcomes (i.e., who knows what will happen, but what happens really matters a lot) and low perceived control (i.e., you believe you cannot really do a lot to influence the outcome). Recognizing this can help reduce stress, as can trying to control things that are controllable (and accept those that are not) as well as thinking about the drawbacks of trying to be 100% certain of life events.

Put things in perspective Daily hassles (things like being stuck behind a slow car) are just as stressful for us as major life events (things like a loved one dying). In fact, daily hassles have more of a negative impact on health than major life events. But daily hassles don't need to be such a critical part of our lives. Work on recognizing when minor hassles are making you stressed or irritated, seeing them for what they are, and let go of them.

Social support Asking others for support, whether it is emotional support (someone to talk to) or practical support (having someone do things for you, is important for many people to manage stress effectively. And yes, having pets does reduce stress for many people.

Face worries and reduce avoidance While distracting yourself is helpful, some of us take things too far and avoid problem(s) completely. This is rarely useful. Make a list of things that you are avoiding, and work on them a step at a time.

Reduce procrastination & manage your time Overload is a common cause of stress. All of us have experienced having too much to do and not enough time to do it. Prioritize and work on the most important tasks; it is okay if less important things wait. And remember that putting important things off rarely helps in the long run. Set aside an hour a day to work on an important task you have been putting off, and judge yourself not based on whether you finish a certain amount of it, but whether you worked on it for an hour. Then do this again the next day, and the next....

Examine what you eat and drink. Caffeine intake can in and of itself make you feel more stressed. Stress can also trigger alcohol abuse. Many people are drawn to higher fat, less healthy food when stressed; this tends to lead our bodies to cope less effectively.

Say no Setting boundaries and being assertive is especially important in times of stress.

Get enough sleep Easy to say, hard to do when a person is stressed. Over 50% of Americans currently have trouble sleeping due to stress, and lie awake at night. One of the best things you can do is not lay awake and worry in bed: This makes your bed a place of worry, not sleep. Instead, get up and do a calming activity, or

even write down some of the things you are worried about.

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