

Planning Ahead for Stress

A key part of prevention is early recognition. The earlier you become aware that your mood is changing or that a stressful event is going to have an impact on your life, the quicker you can act.

Major life events can be important predictors of depressive or anxious feelings. Events that may have a negative impact on people include:

- Death of a family member or friend
- Relationship breakdown
- Transitions and separations (e.g., a child going away to university)
- Health-related events (e.g., illness or pregnancy)
- New responsibilities and adjustments (e.g., new child in the family, promotion)
- Work and/or school-related events (e.g., exams, returning to work after time off)
- Financial and material events (e.g., large investment, loss of money)

These events (and others like them) require a lot of adjustment in your life, which means additional stress.

Other factors that may predict a period of difficulty include:

- The onset of winter (for those with a seasonal pattern of mood problems).
- The end of a major project (with the sense of loss of direction that sometimes follows).
- A difficult milestone (such as the anniversary of a bad event in your life).

Perhaps you can think of others that might predict increased stress in your own life.

What should you do to cope with these times? What many people do is *hope*. “*I hope I can handle it.*” You’ve been reading this book long enough to know the answer to this idea. Don’t hope. Plan. In advance. Don’t wait until you feel overwhelmed. Begin coping *before* you have trouble.

- When possible, introduce the new stress gradually. For example, if you are starting back to full-time work after being on disability, see if you can go back part-time at first.
- Lighten up on your ongoing responsibilities – especially if you are about to get a lot of new ones. If you are about to have a new child, for example, let people know that you will be less available for other responsibilities. If you usually host dinners for the extended family, see if someone else will take over.
- Keep up your self-care. If regular exercise is one of the ways you keep balanced, figure out how to keep it in your life. If a weekly lunch with a close friend is important to you, work other things around it. Don’t give up the things that keep you going when you most need them. During times of stress you need them *more* than usual, not less.

- Relax some of your standards. If you slave away at keeping the house perfect, recognize that you might not be able to keep it as tidy while you are attending night school. Give up on non-essential responsibilities and devote the time you save to your favorite stress-reducers.

Can you predict a period of a few weeks when you will be under more stress than usual? What will cause it and when is it likely to come?

Try to develop a coping plan in advance. What can you do to help yourself get through this period?

Make a commitment to yourself to start coping before the event happens – and not to rely on hope. Planning is how hope gets turned into reality.