

Working with Stress

Stress is closely related to a variety of emotions, including anger, fear, anxiety, and excitement. The stress response developed as a strategy for dealing with threat. When you are threatened in a primitive environment, the best option is usually either to fight or to run away. Those who could fight the hardest or run the fastest lived to reproduce; others did not. This created an advantage for those who could make themselves stronger and faster when they felt threatened.

When the stress response is activated, blood is diverted away from the skin and digestive system to the large muscles. Blood pressure and the heart rate rise. Respiration increases to maximize oxygen availability. Glucose is released into the bloodstream by the liver. Sweat is released in anticipation of heat generated by fighting or running. We may feel anger, fear, anxiety, or excitement. Concentration narrows, the senses sharpen. Between these and other changes, the overall effect is to improve our ability to survive an immediate physical challenge.

At some point in your life the stress response is likely to prove very helpful. It may even save your life. But most of the time when you feel threatened, beating someone up or running away won't help.

Instead, most modern stressful situations are best dealt with by sitting down, thinking through your options, selecting one, and calmly putting it into action. This might mean discussing the family finances with your spouse, thinking through a new strategy for dealing with a child's misbehavior, coming up with a good way of asking for a raise, or pulling a chair up to your desk and working on your tax return. To do any of these things effectively you need to calm down the stress response, which will hinder rather than help your efforts.

During depression, most people find that their stress response is more active than usual. They are nervous and jittery. They worry a great deal, endlessly replaying "*what if?*" scenarios that keep the stress response going. Consequently, for many depressed individuals it is important to learn to manage stress effectively.

How is this done? We can think of stress as involving four elements. Coping can occur at any or all of the four.

- **Situation.** This is the event or series of events that trigger the whole process. You can cope with the situation by restructuring your life, managing your time, reducing demands, being assertive, and so on. It can also be extremely useful to insert a gap away from the trigger situation to allow you to calm down. "*Mind if I take an hour at my desk to think about this one?*"

- **Interpretation.** This is your appraisal of the situation, which often makes situations seem more threatening than they really are. You can cope with your interpretations by becoming aware of your underlying assumptions, examining your automatic thoughts, and replacing distorted, unhelpful, or overly negative ideas with more reality-based ones.
- **Response.** This is the fight or flight response itself, with its attendant physical and psychological changes. You can deal with the stress response directly by using it as a cue to engage in a calming procedure: either physical exercise (to burn it off) or relaxation training (see below).
- **Resistance.** This refers to your underlying physical resistance to stress – the degree to which your stress response is on a “hair trigger.” You can increase your physical resistance to stress by limiting your caffeine intake, eating a healthy diet, exercising, and getting enough sleep.

Here we'll mainly consider the strategies for coping with the stress *response*. There are many relaxation techniques, some well-researched and others not, some technical (such as biofeedback) and others traditional (such as a warm bath). Which strategy should you use? The ones that work the best for you.

- **Exercise.** Regular exercise helps lower susceptibility to stress, but it can also be a useful calming strategy. The stress response prepares you to engage in vigorous physical activity. If you just sit there the physical symptoms will take time to pass. An alternative is to do exactly what the response intends you to do: Get some exercise. A run, a swim, a squash game, a brisk walk – all of these can help burn off the nervous energy that the stress response brings, leaving you calmer and more able to deal with the situation at hand. The only caution: Don't overdo it and risk giving yourself a sports-related injury. Remember to stretch and warm up first, and hold yourself back a bit.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation training (PMR).** PMR is the most well-researched of the relaxation techniques. It involves increasing and then releasing the tension in various muscle groups in sequence. In general, the instructions request that you tense a specific muscle, focus on the sensations produced for five to ten seconds, then release as much tension as you can and focus on the developing sense of relaxation for 20 to 30 seconds before moving on to the next muscle. PMR is particularly helpful for those who feel they want to “do” something during their relaxation training, who characteristically hold a great deal of bodily tension, and who find other exercises vague or difficult to master.

- **Passive relaxation.** This technique is similar to progressive relaxation but omits the tensing. Instead, you are asked to focus on a muscle group, sense the tension already being held there, and then concentrate on releasing it over 20 to 30 seconds. This strategy is widely preferred by those who suffer from chronic pain and those hoping to use relaxation to get to sleep. On the down side, it leaves some users feeling that they're "not doing anything", some people can't relax easily without tensing first, and still others find that the drifting sensations that are produced can be anxiety-provoking at first.
- **Autogenic training.** This strategy focuses on sensations of warmth and heaviness in various parts of the body. As such, it may work by having users tune in to peripheral blood flow rather than muscle tension. (The stress response tends to inhibit blood flow to the extremities, resulting in chilly hands and feet.) It has been demonstrated to be an effective stress-reducer and, not surprisingly, may be the treatment of choice for those complaining of cold extremities.
- **Diaphragmatic breathing.** Whereas the above techniques typically involve a 20-minute-or-so practice period (often using a recorded instruction tape, at least initially), diaphragmatic breathing is usually practiced in several shorter periods spaced over the course of a day. Described below, it is designed to slow and deepen the rapid, shallow breathing most people practice when under stress or in the lead-up to a panic attack.

All of these strategies benefit from personal training by a professional, but they can also be learned on your own. They all require several weeks of daily practice before beneficial effects are felt. Although you might feel relaxed during an exercise sooner than this, the intent is not really to help you relax while lying on your bed. Instead, the plan is to develop skill at relaxing on the spot in stressful situations.

What's the agenda of relaxation? Is it to rid of stress forever and keep it from returning? Not at all. As we have seen, stress is an essential, useful, and normal part of your physical and emotional makeup. Indeed, one of the goals of therapy is often to help people open up to the harmless elements of stress. But prolonged, grinding stress is typically unhelpful, and prolonged activation of the stress response can aggravate many ailments and suppress immune function. Consequently, the goal is to help the individual relax away unnecessary stress.

If you opt for relaxation training, consider the following:

- **Commitment.** Decide in advance to practice on a daily basis, *without expecting results*. You won't get any for several weeks. You will need to practice anyway.
- **Schedule.** Build relaxation into your everyday routine. You should practice at the same time each day. If it's not routine, it won't get done.

- **Communication.** Let everyone in the house know what you are doing, and have them agree to leave you alone unless a major emergency arises.
- **Get help.** Consider seeking out relaxation training from a professional therapist.
- **Evidence.** Your first choice should generally be an evidence-based technique such as one of the ones above, rather than one of the dozens of other strategies.
- **Give it time.** For the first few weeks, don't try to apply your relaxation skill to stressful situations. It won't work. You need to practice at home in a calm environment before you can relax during a stressful meeting, in traffic, or during an argument with your spouse.
- **Trim.** To make the transition between relaxing on your bed and relaxing under stress, gradually shorten your exercise, trimming it down to the basics you require in order to achieve a deep state of relaxation.
- **Introduce gradually.** Begin applying relaxation by practicing a subtle form of your exercise in calm situations such as riding the bus, walking, sitting at a desk, or shopping. Scan your body for tension and gently release any that you find while breathing slowly and deeply.

Relaxation instructions and tapes can be purchased at many stores or can be supplied by many mental health professionals. A good resource for detailed relaxation instruction is *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Davis, Eshelman, & McKay.

A diaphragmatic breathing exercise

We breathe using two sets of muscles. One set pulls the ribs forward (making the chest appear bigger). The other set lowers the diaphragm (a sheet of tissue separating the chest from the abdomen). This makes your stomach stick out when you inhale. When you are under stress, you tend to rely more on the chest muscles than the diaphragm. This can result in a light-headed or dizzy sensation, a feeling of tightness in the chest, tingling in the hands and feet, and shortness of breath.

This breathing exercise uses both the chest and the diaphragm. To do the exercise you may find it helpful to imagine that you actually have two sets of lungs: One set in your chest and the other in your stomach. If you have asthma or other breathing difficulties, please consult your physician before trying it out.

Place one hand on your abdomen and the other hand on your upper chest. Then proceed through these four steps:

1. **Stomach.** Breathe in deeply using your diaphragm. Your stomach should expand and your chest should remain still. Imagine that the lungs in your stomach (which feel like they exist, even though they don't) are inflating, while your chest lungs remain inactive.

2. **Chest.** Without breathing out, breathe in further – this time using the muscles of your chest. Your chest should expand (moving forward and slightly up) while your stomach remains inflated.
3. **Release.** Breathe out slowly and naturally. Don't push or blow the air out. Simply relax and let go.
4. **Pause.** Pause for a few seconds before starting the whole process over again. Since you are getting more air with each breath you will need to breathe at a much slower pace than usual.

Repeat the procedure for at least five breaths. Some people notice a sensation of dizziness or tingling as they do this type of breathing. This means that they are breathing too quickly. Welcome these harmless sensations and use them as cues to slow down your breathing. Just lengthen all four of the steps.

Practice the exercise twice a day for several minutes each time. Keep this up until you can do it sitting up without having your hands in place. Then practice while walking around your home. When you can do that, you may be ready to begin using the technique in stressful situations to relax yourself.



If you want to calm the stress response, what's your usual strategy? Hint: If it's to have a drink, you probably need to learn an alternative.

Do any of the options above appeal to you? If so, which exercise seems most interesting? How could you go about this?

Consider whether you have the will to practice on a daily basis to give the strategy a good trial. If not, then leave this idea until you can make such a commitment. A few days of relaxation training may be worse than useless, because it can leave you thinking *"I tried that and it didn't work."* It takes effort to learn a technique to the point where it becomes useful to you in stressful situations. Is now the time?