

Stress: Part III

Dealing effectively with life's demands



By Tamara Mitchell
Edited by Sally Longyear

The way people cope with stressful events may be at least as important as the stressors themselves in determining health or illness.¹ Negative psychological traits can intensify the effects of stressors, while positive ways of coping may buffer the body from stress.¹ Long-term and repeated stress causes many physical problems as described in Part I.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe at the University of Washington School of Medicine tested more than 5,000 people to develop a method of correlating the events in people's lives with their illnesses. They showed that the more stress a person experienced, the more likely it was that he or she would become sick over the next several months.¹ They found that when life brings many stressful changes at once, even happy ones, a prolonged, intense, and potentially dangerous stress reaction is more likely.¹ Since then, many studies have looked at the connection between stressful events and illness, including more recent research by Holmes and Rahe. There appears to be no direct correlation between stress and illness because the same stressors do not cause all people to get sick.

Anxiety Disorders

Individual reactions to stress can be as drastic as a panic disorder or a generalized anxiety disorder.² Panic disorder involves a discrete episode where a person feels that they are going to die or that they are having a heart attack.² The feelings are very real and it is often very difficult for the individual to accept that this episode was the body's response to a stressor. Generalized anxiety disorder is not an individual episode; it is a chronic condition.² These people experience rapid heart rate and chest pains.² Such people tend to overreact to everyday occurrences.² Nearly 15% of Americans will suffer from one of these anxiety disorders.² The severity of the problem and the overall health of the individual determine the treatment plan. Finding help that is right for the individual, working with a mental health professional and a doctor, and getting support from friends and family is important.²

Dealing With Everyday Stress

The first step in dealing with stress is to recognize the signs of the stress-response, admit there is a problem, and identify the situations most responsible for it.^{2,3} There are really two aspects to stress: external and internal. While it is always worth trying to change external situations that are destructive, we have a choice in how situations affect us.⁴ Changing the external aspect of stress does not improve our ability to handle future problems.⁴ Quitting your job, moving, or ending a relationship may be necessary in some cases, but it is important to affect the internal aspect of stress. Learning how to relax, protecting yourself from the harmful effects of stress, and dealing with the external aspects of stress is most effective.⁴

Not all stress is bad and handling stress successfully makes us stronger mentally and physically. Some of these positive effects include:⁵

- Increased energy and motivation
- Increased self-confidence
- Increased drive and productivity
- Enhanced work performance
- A feeling of excitement and a sense of purpose and challenge

Too little stress results in boredom and inefficiency.⁶ Some people with sedate working lives seek stress that is exciting, such as downhill skiing, watching suspenseful movies, or riding a roller coaster.⁶ While some stress is stimulating and increases efficiency, there is a threshold that is different for each person at different points in life.⁶ Beyond this peak, efficiency drops and tasks that were once easy are difficult to complete. If you are experiencing stress symptoms, you have gone beyond your optimal stress level and you need to reduce the stress in your life and/or improve your ability to manage it.^{2,7}

Self -Care

Our thinking is often backward when we experience symptoms that cannot be explained by medicine.⁸ After visiting a long list of doctors, we are often relieved when we finally find one who can give us a diagnosis.⁸ We would welcome even a dire diagnosis of physical disease than to admit that the problem may be stress-induced.⁸ A great deal of this has to do with the fear of being classified as a hypochondriac or mentally disturbed.⁸ Medicine is very slow to embrace the mind as a factor in health; it continues to attempt to identify specific factors that cause an illness and find pills and procedures to alleviate it. Now, about 75% of physicians are recommending mind/body approaches, but they do not embrace a multidisciplinary approach that includes self-care.⁸ It is considered radical to ask people to stop smoking, manage stress, exercise, and eat a healthy diet, but commonplace to perform heart bypass, angioplasty, or prescribe powerful drugs.⁹ Drugs and surgery can be life-saving in a crisis. People need permission to decide what course of action is right for them. The worst that can happen if someone practices stress management is that they learn to deal with stress. Unlike surgery or medications, there are never any serious side effects.⁹ It should be quite clear after reading the first two articles in this series that science now understands that the emotions of stress have very definite physical manifestations as peptides (hormones and other chemicals) are released and received throughout the body.

People who practice self-care and take control of their health become empowered. Self-care is multidisciplinary involving nutrition, stress management, personal outlooks, values and beliefs. Habits of a healthy lifestyle work together and do not follow the illness paradigm (i.e., the “pills/surgery” model).⁸ For example, lifestyle changes can improve blood flow to the heart in approximately one month.⁹

Three decades after stress started to emerge as a potential source of physical ailments, we are still more apt to run to the medicine cabinet to relieve aches and pains than to try relaxation or stress-management techniques.⁸ We must learn to rely on prevention and self-healing, and to appreciate the natural healing properties of our bodies.

Successful Aging and the Hardy Personality

Suzanne Kobasa at the City University of New York has studied and identified psychological coping strategies she calls *hardiness*, which is associated with resistance to illness.¹ Kobasa identifies five characteristics of the hardy personality. These are:^{1,10}

1. *Commitment* – Has a purpose in life and is being true to one’s values. An active participant in life, not a bystander.
2. *Control* – Sets goals and priorities, works on first things first and checks them off as they are completed. Master of one’s own destiny, not the pawn of fate.
3. *Positive Attitude* – Sees life as both good and bad, but emphasizes possibilities over problems, strengths over weaknesses, and potentialities over deficiencies in the situation and in self. Energized and focused to achieve goals
4. *Perspective* – Doesn’t go into full-fledged fight or flight mode to every minor problem, hassle, or obstacle. Makes sure this is a hill worth dying on, all else is viewed with tolerance and patience. Believes matters of style, taste and individual differences enrich the world. In the final analysis, most matters are small matters.
5. *Relationships* – Gives love and is beloved by all creatures great and small. Facilitates caring relationships at home or work, and in the community. Concern for others is the most important characteristic. The physiological responses generated are life enhancing and life prolonging.

Lifestyle Changes

There are numerous strategies for modifying lifestyle to reduce stress. However, throughout the research there seems to be some agreement on basic changes that work in every situation:^{2,11}

- Determine what is stressful^{3,2}
- Be conscious about slowing down²
- Exercise^{9,2}
- Eat right^{9,2}
- Follow the principle of moderation.³
 - ❖ Experience stimulation in your life that is satisfying without being destructive.
 - ❖ Avoid excesses and extremes; strive for balance.
 - ❖ Seek balance between rest and work.
 - ❖ Enjoy others company, but take pleasure in solitude as well.
 - ❖ Do something every day for each dimension of your being: spirit, mind, and body.
 - ❖ Moderation is especially important when you are sick.
- Make long-term changes that work for you.
 - ❖ Biofeedback and meditation have proven helpful to a majority of people.^{2, 12}
 - ❖ Cognitive behavioral therapy can teach people to change how they think and respond to stress. 6-8 weeks of therapy is typical. It can be very helpful for panic attacks.²
 - ❖ Medication may be helpful if you experience panic attacks that interfere with life.²
 - ❖ Support groups can help discover tips to deal with feelings of stress, isolation, and loneliness.^{2,9}

Another look at stress reduction options based on our current knowledge of health risks of stress suggests the following five approaches to life:³

1. Find an outlet for life's frustrations and set aside time to do it regularly. This should be something you find personally compatible - whether it's prayer, meditation, ballroom dancing, therapy, or sports – and that works for you in your life. Clearly, asking a homeless person or someone struggling with two jobs and a family to take up a hobby is ridiculous, but silent prayer or meditation while riding the bus could help.
2. In the face of terrible news beyond your control, beyond prevention, or beyond healing, some denial may be the only means of sanity. With less severe problems, hope for the promise of improvement is most effective without denying that things may not improve. Being hopeful, but prepared for the worst, will protect you from the damaging effects of total denial.
3. Seek control, but do not assume control over the past, things that are uncontrollable, things that are not broken, or things that are broken beyond repair. When faced with a large wall of a stressor, assume the wall can be scaled step by step, not with a single breakthrough.
4. Seek predictable, accurate information at a time and in an amount that is helpful. Too much or unnecessary information makes stressful situations worse. Information that is too early or late is also counter-productive.
5. Find sources of social affiliation and support, but recognize who are true friends rather than just social acquaintances. Being married is associated with numerous positive health outcomes, but being in a bad marriage is associated with immune suppression.

Personal Style

Deciding where to start and which things will work best for you is sometimes daunting. A series of studies found that different people actually need to accomplish stress control skills in a different order, based on their own personal style.¹¹ People who started working on the wrong skill actually increased their stress, so where you start is quite important.¹¹ These studies identified five basic, proven stress control skills:¹¹

- Clarifying your personal values and daily satisfiers
- Being able to relax at will, anywhere, any time
- Developing rewarding relationships
- High-performance nutrition
- Essential exercise

The first step is to identify your dominant Stress Type. Next, focus on the two skills from the above list that are most important for your type, which will give you 65% progress. Later, identify your secondary Stress Type and focus on the skill associated with that type.¹¹ Note that these are lists of very broad and negative characteristics. The authors of this article actually hesitate giving this information because it's

difficult for people to identify with a negative stereotype. However, it may be helpful, in a general sense, to determine the specific areas on which to focus, even if you don't fit any of these Stress Types very well.

The results of the 3224 participants in this study were impressive in measures taken four and eight months after starting the program.¹¹ The numbers below are the percentage of participants showing a given improvement.¹¹ The average "body age" decrease was 3.5 years at 4 months and 11.4 years in 8 months.¹¹

| Measure of improvement | % at 4 months | % at 8 months |
|---|---------------|---------------|
| Decrease in work absenteeism | 42 | 56 |
| Decrease in doctor visits | 28 | 53 |
| Below target blood pressure | 51 | 91 |
| Immunoglobulin A increase | 24 | 31 |
| T cell increase | 21 | 28 |
| Triglycerides within target range | 43 | 64 |
| Increased comfort with self – 6 factors | 41 | 62 |
| Anxious mood and depression improvement | 32 | 68 |
| Stress hyper-reactivity decrease (EMG and GSR measures) | 41 | 49 |
| Stress recovery time decrease (EMG and GSR measures) | 28 | 38 |
| Increase IN ability to relax at will (EMG and GSR measures) | 17 | 37 |

Stress Type 1: The Speed Freak

Characteristics of this stress personality are:

- Constant foot to the floor on stress accelerator
- Borderline workaholic or perfectionist
- Everything must get done 110% effort, no matter how unimportant the task is
- Rapid speech; interrupts others frequently
- Periods of deep fatigue after all-out effort

Two most important skills:

- Clarify life goals you value most
- Learn autogenic relaxation to control how you invest energy in those goals.

Stress Type 2: The Worry Wart

Characteristics of this stress personality are:

- Has trouble turning off their thoughts
- Drive themselves at high RPM, rarely put themselves in gear for action
- Paralysis by analysis; useless spinning worry
- Frequent anxiety; tension headaches
- Slow to recover from high-stress situations

Two most important skills:

- Psychological relaxation or reframing
- Clarifying values and goals

Stress Type 3: The Drifter

Characteristics of this stress personality are:

- Tend to spread energy across many options
- In perpetual "mid-life crisis": feels dissatisfied; something is missing in their lives
- Doubt their existing goals
- Don't buy into anything very deeply

Two most important skills:

- Self-affirming relationships
- Identify the satisfying experiences you value most in those relationships. Plan one or two enjoyable activities that really benefit from having a partner.

Stress Type 4: The Loner

Characteristics of this stress personality are:

- Giving or receiving relaxed closeness or intimate sharing is difficult
- Feel uncomfortable with others; often masked with a smile
- Feel lonely, often unfulfilled in relationships
- Feel alone in carrying burdens or worries
- Often cancel social events at the last minute

Two most important skills:

- Clarify what you value and truly enjoy in work or personal life
- Cultivate relationships that affirm you

Stress Types 5 and 6: Basket Cases and Cliff Walkers

Characteristics of Basket Cases are:

- In constant “energy crisis”: Energy often fades by midday
- Frequent aches and pains in muscles or joints
- Sometimes depressed; feel most activities are too much to do

Characteristics of Cliff Walkers are:

- A walking risk factor chart – high blood pressure, smoking, alcohol misuse, no exercise
- Believe it will never happen to them
- Usually have a somewhat worn appearance
- Difficulty sustaining energy

Two most important skills for both Basket Case and Cliff Walkers are:

- High performance nutrition
- Essential exercise

The secondary Stress Types for these two types is usually different.

Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are ways of dealing mentally with stressful events, as opposed to stress management techniques which are long-term lifestyle changes. Lifestyle changes are important from the “big picture” standpoint, but coping strategies can help you learn to deal with life’s ups and downs in the immediate situation.

One study in the 1960’s looked at parents of children with cancer and identified several coping styles associated with reduced glucocorticoid levels, the measure of stress experienced.³ These things appear to help people mentally deal with potentially devastating news.

1. Displace worry from the worst outcome to something less threatening. In the case of this study, this could be: “If I go away, the child might miss me” rather than: “If I go away the child might die”.³
2. Denial works...sometimes. If the child went into remission, the parent who felt the battle had been won and the child would be healthy did better than the parent who anxiously fretted over the child, watching for signs of illness. Unfortunately, in all cases remission did not last. Those who had used denial had the highest stress response.³
3. Have faith. Parents who felt that they had been chosen because they were best able to handle this task did better than those who had no religious beliefs or denied there is a god. The person who believes that God has a plan has the benefit of attribution. A person who follows certain rules or rituals and believes that things will be better has the benefit of both attribution and predictive information. If the belief is both of these things, and that God responds to your entreaties, there is the additional benefit of control. Finally, if a person believes that God is loving, there is the greatest reduction in stress.³

The following are coping strategies that are timeless and apply to all people.¹⁰

1. **Set priorities.** Follow the 80/20 rule. 80% of the value of something comes from 20% of its elements. For instance, 80% of what you value usually comes from 20% of what you do, so prioritize your activities and work on the top 20% first. Consider what is important to you (e.g., work, family, education). If you don't do the most important things, you will always feel frustrated and unfulfilled.
2. **Don't try to be superhuman.** Tolerate some imperfections and don't try to be all things to all people. Avoid over promising, over scheduling, and over committing (a very common problem of Type A personalities). Learn when, how, and why to say *no*. Most people can handle a maximum of four major commitments at any one time and do them well, such as family, work, education, and community service. Adding another major commitment leaves no room to deal with inevitable emergencies.
3. **Share the load.** Delegate tasks. When you are overloaded, get others to help. It has major benefits: it develops other people, overall performance increases, and personal health improves.
4. **Escape for a while.** Leave room for needed breaks; don't always rush from place to place without time for a rest or pause. Changing your activity long enough to recover breath and balance is usually sufficient. Breaks can be small (e.g., the "coffee break") or larger, such as a day of rest or an annual vacation. All pauses are refreshing.
5. **Use a "decompression chamber" technique.** Learn to leave the pressures, conflicts, and frustrations of one part of your life behind you when you enter another part. Leave work at work and home life at home by structuring a decompression chamber into your daily life. This can be on your commute back and forth to work, or simply setting aside time between activities where you review past events, rehearse upcoming activities, and relax.
6. **Talk with others.** Discussing things that bother you with a person you trust can relieve tension, add perspective, and help you figure out what to do. Some people find this very difficult to do, but the more isolated you become, the more desperate your situation may seem. Only 10% of the people you know probably care and want to help, so choose who you talk to carefully. Turning to an authority figure may or may not be the right thing to do, but family and friends, especially having a family meeting, can be a very effective coping technique.
7. **Go easy with criticism.** Do not be too demanding of yourself, expecting perfection. You may have trouble feeling good about accomplishments if everything doesn't turn out well, which results in lowered self-esteem and depression. If you expect others to be perfect, you will feel disappointed, angry, and frustrated when they fail to measure up. Type B people usually go easy on criticism and typically take a live-and-let-live attitude.
8. **Worry less and do more.** If you can solve a problem, do so, but don't worry about what you cannot change, no matter how important it is...and definitely don't worry about unimportant matters.
9. **Enjoy the little things in life.** There are many small pleasures available to us. Happiness is generally found in these experiences rather than expecting big peaks of ecstasy. If you need help with this, please refer to our article on Mindfulness (<http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/Mindfulness.pdf>).
10. **Help another person.** Thinking about yourself is healthy, but self-absorption can lead to a loss of concern for the external world, especially the health and well-being of others. Related to this is strong personal commitment. Decide who and what is really important to you and take action that supports your values and goals and strengthens your relationships.
11. **Handle hassles healthfully.** There are often predictable times when hassles tend to be high such as holidays, certain meetings, and family get-togethers. In dealing with these, be realistic and don't expect every moment to be perfect. Keep things simple, and share the tasks. Ask yourself these questions: What is the worst that can happen, on a scale of 1-10? Who and what are important? How does this hassle affect them? A month from now, will you remember this hassle?
12. **Have a hobby.** Find an activity that is intrinsically satisfying to you (e.g., reading, gardening, church, volunteer work, or music). Consider what you enjoyed doing when you were young!
13. **Accentuate the positive.** Do not close your eyes to the truth, but avoid negative thinking. A positive attitude helps you tolerate life's ups and downs and it is contagious to others you are around. Reframe or change the way you interpret an event or situation; rather than seeing an upheaval, see an exciting adventure or challenge. Instead of saying "I'm too old", say "I'm experienced and capable".
14. **Improve job proficiency.** In the workplace, developing technical skills, increasing practical experience, and learning better skills for communication, teamwork, and effective use of time are all very helpful in reducing stress. For management, improving leadership, delegation, and coaching skills help reduce job stress for you and your employees.

15. **Trust in time.** Although time may not heal all wounds, it often helps. You may even be stronger for having experienced a painful or stressful time.

This article and all of our articles are intended for your information and education. We are not experts in the diagnosis and treatment of specific medical or mental problems. When dealing with a severe problem, please consult with a healthcare or mental health professional and research the alternatives available for your particular diagnosis prior to embarking on a treatment plan. You are ultimately responsible for your own health and treatment!

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