



Managing Stress

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Millie's life started feeling "out of control." She felt pressure at work. Her boss had required extra projects and had been asking her to do more. Even the commute was getting to her, as the traffic had been increasing and slowing her journey on both the morning and afternoon commutes.

At home, she felt harried too, trying to manage the usual household routines of making dinners, doing the laundry, and cleaning, as well as meeting the needs of her two children. It seemed the two boys always had someplace they needed to be. They had sports games to go to, or needed a ride from a friend's house, or wanted something from the store.

In addition, Millie just wasn't feeling well. At first, she felt like she had no energy. To combat this, she would drink an extra cup of coffee or a soda just to get a boost. But the pressure got worse. She started feeling overwhelmed, anxious and tense, and she began experiencing headaches and having trouble getting a good night's sleep.

Many of us have a similar story. We feel stressed.

Some of us experience a level of stress that's serious enough to cause health problems. Too much stress for too long a period of time can compromise our physical health and take a toll on our mental and emotional health as well.

What Is Stress?

Stress arises whenever we face a situation in our lives that forces us to cope with something new, or something more. Stress can come from something out of the ordinary that adds pressure to our daily lives, or it can arise when too many routine tasks pile up on us.

In itself, stress is not good or bad. In fact, some stress is good. It can motivate us. But too much stress can be a problem. In the above example, Millie had too much stress.

In her case, as with many of us, stress arises from the cumulative effect of many minor stressors. But life brings us some major stressors too. If we experience one or more of these, we're sure to feel overwhelmed.

In their hallmark 1967 study and later follow-up studies, Dr. Thomas H. Holmes and Dr. Richard H. Rahe researched the impact of different stressors on our lives. They developed the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, which showed the relative power of stressful events. Here are a few of the top stress-inducing events, each with a rating of their impact on our lives, called "Life Change Unit" (LCU).

The death of a spouse has the highest LCU rating of 100. It's followed by divorce (73), marital separation (65), jail term (63), death of a close family member (63), and personal illness or injury (53). These are the top six. But then, the seventh most stressful life event is marriage at 50 LCU, the ninth is reconciliation with spouse (45), the tenth is retirement (45), and the twelfth is pregnancy (40).

All of these events cause significant stress. But not all are negative. Indeed, most people view marriage, pregnancy, and retirement as happy occasions. As it turns out, the amount of stress an event causes is based on the amount of change it creates in our lives.

When we experience stress from events that come and go, we can usually manage to bounce back. But when stress becomes chronic, it starts causing deeper problems. It begins to affect our immune reactions and we're more likely to become sick. Research shows that at least 50% of visits to medical doctors are for problems related to stress.

Ways to Reduce Stress

So what can you do when feeling overwhelmed? Here are a number of coping skills that can help:

- Breathe deeply. Deep breathing has a calming effect. Try taking 15 to 30 deep breaths in a row. For each breath, breathe in slowly and steadily, and then breathe out just as slowly and steadily.
- Exercise. A good workout, even walking at a steady pace, burns off excess muscle tension. What's more, exercise causes our bodies to produce endorphins, which relax us and create peaceful feelings.
- Shift your focus. Paying too much attention to the stressors just makes us more anxious. Instead, think about something calming like a beautiful landscape or that great vacation you had last year.
- Practice relaxation. Take some time for yourself in a restful, quiet place. Turn off the lights, sit comfortably, close your eyes, and let go. This is not the same as a nap; naps are good also, but not necessarily relaxing.
- Talk to people. Share your thoughts and concerns with someone. There's consistent, strong evidence that telling someone about our problems helps to reduce their impact. If you don't have a good friend you can confide in, consider talking with a therapist.
- Use artistic expression. Write about your feelings, draw a picture of your feelings or sculpt your feelings in clay. All are powerful methods for releasing emotion.
- Eat right. Certain dietary changes can actually improve your mood. Add more fruits and vegetables to your diet, and healthy sources of protein such as beans, nuts chicken or fish. Also, for carbohydrates, eat whole grains such as whole wheat bread, brown rice, or oatmeal. Perhaps most importantly, cut out drugs and alcohol, and cut back or cut out caffeine and sweets. When Millie started drinking the coffee and soda, it was only a "quick fix." It worked for the moment but, in the long run, she had less energy overall.

Methods such as these actually work better than mood-altering medication when dealing with stress. The medication diverts people from making real changes in behavior.

So, when stressed, try these methods and see which works best for you.

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