UT Southwestern Employee Assistance Program
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How to Manage Your Stress

Stress is pressure from external circumstances that can cause internal tensions. It can work for you in the form of light pressure or drive that stimulates you to your best effort. However, it can also work against you when too much of it raises your blood pressure, causes you to lose sleep, or makes you anxious, irritable, or depressed. One of the main causes of stress is change, especially abrupt or disagreeable change. These changes can occur in the form of personal loss, illness or injury, change in lifestyle, job changes, financial difficulties, marital and family changes, or retirement. Too many changes or those that are too drastic may cause excess tension which, in turn, produces anxiety and depression. Even though the causes of too much stress are often beyond our control, we can learn to keep stress within reasonable limits so that it works for and not against us. The following are some suggestions on how to effectively manage stress:

- **Deal with the cause.**

If tension comes from your relationship with a person, talk out your differences. If tension comes from an unfinished task, restructure your priorities so you can get the responsibility out of the way.

- **Talk out your troubles.**

Talk your problems over with a level-headed person you can trust. It can release pressure, make you feel better, help you see worries in a clearer light, and often help you see what you can do about it.

- **Learn to pace yourself.**

You can't be in high gear all the time. Instead of fighting for the impossible, allow for rest points. Set goals and then take time out to reward yourself once you've reached them.

- **Escape for awhile.**

Sometimes when things go wrong, it helps to escape from the problem for awhile; lose yourself in a movie, a book, a game, or a brief trip for a change of scenery. It is perfectly realistic and healthy to escape long enough to recover breath and balance. But be prepared to come back and deal with your difficulty when you are more composed, and when you and others involved are in a better condition to deal with it.

- **Realize your limits and plan around them.**

Don't take on more than you can handle. Less stress is caused, in the long run, by turning away tasks than by leaving work unfinished – that's less stressful on you and on others.

- **Take one thing at a time.**

If you have a number of must-do tasks, tackle them one at a time and in order of their urgency, while setting aside all the rest for the time being.

- **Work off your anger.**

A physical workout is a great way to release tension . If you feel like lashing out at someone who has provoked you, try holding off that impulse for awhile. Pitch your pent-up energy into some physical activity you like, such as walking, gardening, cleaning out the garage, racquetball, carpentry, or some other do-it-yourself project.

- **Give in occasionally.**

If you get into frequent quarrels with people and feel obstinate and defiant, give in once in awhile. Stand your ground for what you know is right, but do so calmly and ask yourself, "Is this really worth fighting for?" If not, give in. Yield occasionally, and you'll usually find that others will too. The result will be relief from tension, the achievement of a practical solution, and a feeling of satisfaction.

- **Do something for others.**

If find that you are worrying about yourself most of the time, try doing something for somebody else. You'll find this will take the steam out of your own worries and – even better – give you a feeling of having done well.

- **Eat sensibly and get plenty of rest.**

When your body is run down, a lot of things look worse than they really are and your ability to cope with them is also reduced.

- **Don't try to be perfect.**

Go easy on yourself. Trying for perfection in everything is an open invitation for failure. No one can be perfect in everything. Give the best of your effort and ability, but don't take on a task that is nearly impossible to achieve. Remember to give yourself a pat on the back for the things you do well.

- **Go easy with your criticism.**

Don't expect perfection from others. It can only make you feel frustrated, let down, and disappointed when they don't measure up. Each person has his or her own unique virtues, particular short-comings, and special values. Instead of criticizing others, seek out the good points and help with their self-development. Both of you will be more satisfied and you may gain a better perspective on yourself as well.

- **Give the other person a break.**

When people are under emotional tension, they often feel that they have to "get there first" to edge out the other person, no matter how trivial the goal is. Competition is contagious, but so is cooperation. When you give the other person a break, you often make things easier for yourself. If he or she no longer feels you are a threat, he or she will most likely stop being a threat to you.

- **Make yourself available.**

Many of us have the feeling that we are being "left out," slighted, neglected, or rejected. Often, however, other people are only waiting for us to make the first move. Instead of shrinking away and withdrawing, it is much healthier to make some of the overtures. Of course, don't push yourself forward on every occasion; there is a middle ground.

- **Plan for change.**

Coping with the unexpected is a great source of stress. But you don't have to be caught off guard. You have control over many elements of your life. Whenever possible, plan to avoid too many big changes coming at the same time, and try to accept and prepare for changes that are inevitable.

- **Have fun.**

Recreation is essential for good physical and mental health. Plan to do something you enjoy as part of a set routine. Be it a hobby or a night on the town, regularly schedule something you can throw yourself into with pleasure, forgetting all about your work.

- **Develop a positive attitude and disposition.**

If you look at the bright side of things and beyond yourself, you are more likely to concentrate on successes rather than failures. Positive emotions help fight stress, while negative ones can produce or intensify stress. Something as simple as remembering to smile can go a long way towards improving your overall mood.