

Stress | *Tip sheet*

Stress and Worrying

Are you a chronic “worrier”? Or, do you live with someone who always seems to find something that is worth worrying about? Worrying has probably been a part of the human experience since humans evolved, however, there is some evidence to suggest that the frequency of worrying may rise as we lose more control. In other words, as daily life becomes increasingly complicated (and at times frustrating and difficult to manage) people may resort to the “act of worrying” as a form of pseudo control; we feel out of control or unable to respond to all that is affecting our lives and then we engage in worrying as a silent method to reclaim personal control. Unfortunately, it hardly ever alters the actual situation or outcome, even though worrying can help some people feel better for a brief period of time.

Chronic worrying can lead to significant anxiety, even depression, as the mind becomes preoccupied with potential negative outcomes. Worriers are constantly sending themselves signals or internal mind messages that cast a shadow over reality, often distorting reality. It is not uncommon for some troubled worriers to have actual physical symptoms such as dizziness, sweating, rapid heartbeat, fast breathing, or trembling. In these cases, worrying becomes a biological event in addition to having psychological and social consequences.

A number of psychologists have suggested that worriers may have a common personality profile and similar ways of thinking. See how you match the following profile:

- Tendency to exaggerate the importance of small events or traits.
- Over-generalization, e.g., one negative event will lead to a disaster.
- Predicting bad things before waiting to see what actually happens.
- A need to be perfect.
- Wanting to control too much, too often.
- Rigid thinking where there is always a “correct” answer.
- Tendency to be more creative; more vivid imagination.
- Often highly responsible and competent; very dependable.

Becoming a toxic worrier can lead to debilitating performance at work and a sure way to alienate friends and family members. While there is some evidence that certain worriers have a chemical or genetic predisposition to worrying excessively, the majority of us who engage in everyday “worry behavior” have learned a bad habit that indeed can be modified.

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Simple tips:

Take a deep breath. A simple relaxation technique may help you interrupt the chain of thoughts that can “escalate” anxiety during worrying.

Schedule worry periods. Allocate a 15-20 minute period once or twice a day. Do nothing but worry during that time (set a timer so you don't go longer). Don't allow any other thoughts during your worry period. But when it ends, don't allow yourself to dwell on any worries... instead delay them until your next worry period when you can review your list.

Make a list of negative outcomes or worries. People sometimes feel in better control over something if it is “contained” on paper. Making it concrete sometimes makes it seem less scary.

Gather other perspectives on the “problem”. People who worry often become locked into one way of seeing the “problem”. Alternative views may help you better challenge your assumptions.

Challenge your worries. Ask yourself just how likely this negative outcome really is. What are the chances that better outcomes may occur?

Make a list of positive outcomes. Challenge yourself to be fair about it and see how many possibilities exist that are better.

Few of us would argue that both our personal and working lives have become complicated and stressful. Change is a given in all walks of life so each of us must face the reality that stressors will always be present, or certainly on the horizon. The good news, however, is that some people choose to respond differently to the inevitable stress and do not suffer long-term symptoms. Does this mean we will never experience the unpleasant side effects of stress? Certainly not. What it does imply is that we can reduce the intensity and duration of the common symptoms associated with everyday stress.

We believe that there are many things an individual can do to reduce the impact of stress and curtail the negative effects of such common symptoms as anxiety, depression, insomnia, headaches, and loss of concentration, back pain, anger outbursts and many others.

There are many steps we can take to begin managing stress. Some of these may sound simplistic, but it has been our experience that most people do not engage in sudden dramatic change. Small steps, over time, lead to more lasting positive consequences.

20 Suggested Stress Busters:

Take 10 minutes each morning and afternoon—at home or at work—to clear your mind, focus on your breathing and to review the positives that exist in your life right now.

Get rid of chronic seriousness. Laugh more. Smile, even if you have to force the muscles of your face to engage in this complicated act!

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Once each week, do something compassionate for another human being.

Try to listen more, talk less.

Review what you have accomplished in your life that you are proud of.

Avoid spending time with people who constantly complain or are negative.

Listen to music at least 20 minutes each day.

Make certain that you increase your hours of sleep. Sleep deprivation and sleep disorders are epidemic in our culture and are causing a significant increase in depression.

Exercise 3 times per week for at least 30 minutes.

Read the Dalai Lama's book: [The Art of Happiness](#).

Practice some deep, slow breathing a few times per day. Close your eyes for a minute, take time out, and breathe.

Be silly with someone whom you trust or love. Play more. Be a kid for a minute and let some positive hormones flow through your brain's chemistry.

Stop making huge "to do lists." Make a short list and take some satisfaction at completing the tasks.

Volunteer.

Search out optimistic people; eat lunch with an upbeat, non-stressed person.

Stress Relief

Life can be stressful! You may experience stress due to work or family responsibility. You may find your morning commute unbearable due to distracted, aggressive drivers or construction noise. Perhaps you made a transition in your life like a change of career or a move to a new city. People experience stress for different reasons, and while it may be unrealistic to eliminate all stressful situations, it may be possible to control stress by consciously slowing down and taking a few deep, meaningful breaths.

Deep Breathing

Think of how you breathe if you've been startled, with a quick inhalation to the upper lungs. This shallow breath into the chest can be both the cause and result of stress. It is, unfortunately, how many people breathe most of the time. Habitual "chest breathing" is much like maintaining a startled state within the body.

Breathe through the nose

Nasal breathing warms and filters the incoming air. The greater resistance to air flow in the nasal passages compared to the mouth results in a naturally slower respiratory rate. Lengthen the exhalation relative to

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the inhalation. As you breathe in, count to four, and then exhale completely as you count to eight. This increases relaxation and may decrease the “fight or flight” response. Be careful, if you begin to struggle for breath, it is important to discontinue the practice and breathe normally.

These are subtle, simple techniques that are undetectable to others. Once you’ve mastered them, you can practice while sitting in traffic, standing in line at the grocery store, or sitting in a stressful meeting with your boss. The only requirement is an awareness of your breathing.

Abdominal breathing

Lie comfortably or sit in a relaxed position with your back straight. Place one hand on your abdomen and one on your chest. Make full use of your diaphragm (the muscle between the lungs and the stomach) by drawing air into the lowest and largest part of the lungs. As you inhale, the abdomen rises, and as you exhale the abdomen sinks down and in.

The 3-part breath

Sit in a cross-legged or other comfortable position with your back straight (it may be beneficial to sit against a wall). Place one hand on the abdomen and one hand on the ribcage. Inhaling slowly, feel the abdomen expand, then the ribcage, and finally feel the air fill the upper chest. As you exhale, the air will leave the lower lung first, then the middle, and finally the top. Think of inhaling energy and oxygen, exhaling tension and fatigue.

Simple Meditation Techniques

Even if you don’t realize it, visual and auditory stimulation from ringing phones, TVs and traffic noise may contribute to stress as they activate the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for “fight or flight” responses. When your sympathetic nervous system is called into action, it uses energy, your blood pressure increases, your heart beats faster, and digestion slows. For this reason, it may sometimes be beneficial to turn the senses inward. Some people may think of meditation as a spiritual practice involving sitting for hours in an uncomfortable position chanting unfamiliar sounds. However, the only real requirements for meditation are an intention to meditate, a quiet space to practice and a few minutes to do so each day.

The following are two techniques to try:

Shinay Meditation

Also called “calm abiding”, this is a practice where you simply sit, relax, and let go. Find a comfortable, quiet seat and simply be aware of whatever thoughts pass through your mind. You do not have to focus on the thoughts or try to block them. Do not criticize yourself for following after thoughts; it is natural for the mind to wander. This is a time when you can let go of worry. You do not have to prove anything, simply observe what comes and goes. Also note that it takes time to meditate, so begin slowly. It may not be practical for your lifestyle to spend 20 minutes a day in meditation. Start with just one minute and progress to three minutes the next day.

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“The Relaxation Response”

The following practice was developed by Herbert Benson, M.D. at Harvard Medical School. It appears in his book “The Relaxation Response” and is taught at The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body

Medicine:

Pick a focus word, short phrase, or prayer that is firmly rooted in your belief system, such as “one,” “peace,” “The Lord is my shepherd,” “Hail Mary full of grace,” or “shalom”.

Sit quietly in a comfortable position.

Close your eyes.

Relax your muscles, progressing from your feet to your calves, thighs, abdomen, shoulders, head, and neck.

Breathe slowly and naturally, and as you do, say your focus word, sound, phrase, or prayer silently to yourself as you exhale.

Assume a passive attitude. Don’t worry about how well you’re doing. When other thoughts come to mind, simply say to yourself, “Oh well,” and gently return to your repetition.

Continue for ten to 20 minutes.

Do not stand immediately. Continue sitting quietly for a minute or so, allowing other thoughts to return. Then open your eyes and sit for another minute before rising.

Practice the technique once or twice daily. Good times to do so are before breakfast and before dinner.

These practices are simple, but they do involve some time to learn. Allow yourself to relax for a few minutes, and progress gradually to 15-20 minutes daily. If you think that you are too busy to practice relaxing regularly, this is exactly why you need to.

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