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BREAKING FREE FROM STRESS

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# *Breaking Free From Stress*

Regardless of how you live, you're bound to occasionally experience stress. Whether you're always in the fast lane at work, juggling hectic family demands, or striving to navigate the waters of choppy relationships, tension is a natural by-product of life.

However, you probably can identify when stress is creeping up on you.

If you're like most of us, you just keep plugging away and trying to get everything done. But what if you actively took steps to manage your stress? Would your life be different? Would you feel better? Of course, you would!

Fortunately, there are some easy tips and tricks you can implement today to get a handle on your stress. This e-book will help you understand what stress is and why some of it is actually necessary to help you get through the day. You'll learn about how someone might react when under stress and you'll start to learn to identify your own signs and symptoms.

We will also review destructive ways you might be using to manage stress, that way you can be more aware of those behaviours. Finally, you'll be given a toolbox of effective stress management techniques that will aid you in squelching tension as soon as it begins.

# What is Stress Anyway?

You've probably heard the term "stress" used in a number of different contexts. In this e-book, stress is defined as mental or emotional strain you experience due to any tension-causing situation. The word "stress" is also used to describe challenges that bring about feelings of anxiety, tension, or worry.

These elements are also often included in various definitions of stress:

1. **Fight or flight response.** There are biological, physical roots of the development of stress in your body and mind. On a physical level, humans are animals. And most animals respond to a perceived threat in one of two ways: they either run or fight. This is known as the "fight or flight" response.

This biological reaction isn't usually in our control. Our bodies release hormones that cause us to want to either fight what's happening (the stressful event/situation) or flee from it. However, once we're aware of our reaction, we can usually choose how to act in response to it.

2. **Perceived loss of control.** One important element of stress is a sense that you don't have any control over an event or circumstance. If you're involved in a situation in which you feel helpless or like you have to wait for others to take care of whatever's happening, you're likely to experience some anxiety or tension while biding your time.

These situations are often when stress seems to hit hardest. Your mind and body remain in a constant state of tension when you feel you have no control.

3. **Change.** One of the most integral aspects of stress is change. Many people experience tension or worry whenever a change occurs in their lives. Even though a shift in some part

of your life might actually be good, you may still experience feelings of anxiety.

Stress is mental or emotional strain that triggers the fight or flight response. You might believe that you've lost control of a situation, or that you never had it to begin with. Also, when your stress response is occurring, a change in some aspect of your life has likely occurred or is anticipated to occur.

*"Stress is basically a disconnection from the earth, a forgetting of the breath. Stress is an ignorant state. It believes that everything is an emergency. Nothing is that important. Just lie down."* – **Natalie Goldberg**

## *Is There Such a Thing as Positive Stress?*

Even though you might not be aware of it, a certain amount of stress is positive. In fact, we all have beneficial tension in our life nearly every day. Positive stress compels you to do what you need to do throughout the day.

- For example: If your wife calls your name, you experience the stress of an unanswered communication attempt. You stop what you're doing, get up, and walk to the room where she's located. Positive stress helped you decide to go see what your wife wanted or needed. Clearly, this is beneficial to your relationship!
- When your alarm wakes you in the morning, a degree of positive stress gets you to roll over and turn it off. You know that the only way to bring the situation (a loud noise!) into your control is to make the noise stop. Then, more stress ensures you'll get up and get ready for your day instead of rolling over and going back to sleep!

So there is indeed such a thing as positive stress. And we all need it to provide momentum to accomplish our goals throughout the day.

*"Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one."* – **Hans Selye**

# What Does Stress Look Like?

Although stress is a universal feeling, yours might appear quite different from someone else's.

How you react to your emotions is unique to you.

You may even be unaware of your individual “fingerprint” of tension or worry building up inside of you. To give you an idea of what you're looking for, here are some common symptoms of untreated stress:

1. **Recurring physical ailments.** You might notice you're starting to get those nagging headaches again. Or maybe you occasionally deal with stomachaches that tend to occur whenever you're feeling tense and anxious about something.
2. **Sense of being in a rush.** Maybe you feel like you're always in a hurry. There just isn't enough time in the day to accomplish everything that must be done. You find yourself rushing to get from one place to another.

This can also manifest as impatience with other people. You're probably looking at a stress symptom if you feel like the people in your life are consistently not getting things done fast enough.

3. **Can't take a break.** If you notice you're finishing one task only to proceed directly to the next job and then the one after that, you're probably feeling stressed out. One key clue here is that your thoughts lead you to believe you can't stop to rest.



Humans are built to have periods of activity interspersed with periods of rest. If you can't allow yourself this basic need, chances are good that you're operating under stress.

4. **Recurrent symptoms of chronic illnesses.** When we're habitually stressed out, chronic medical conditions (diabetes, chemical dependency, Crohn's Disease, or obesity, for example) progressively get worse. Symptoms rage. Our physical bodies manifest the challenges our emotional experience.
5. **Overwhelming fatigue.** Tiredness may overshadow your days, but you find you can't sleep. You may feel as though you're pulling a dead weight everywhere you go. You're not sure how you're actually making it through each day because you're so exhausted. Is there no relief?

While this can be a symptom of depression or an underlying medical condition, stress alone can also cause fatigue.

6. **Negative emotional states.** Even your moods can be affected when stress comes for a visit. This can manifest in a number of different forms. Maybe you're crankier than all get-out. Or perhaps you're sullen, even angry at times.

Feel free to consult your friends and family if you're not sure what's baseline normal for you. They can often give you a more objective picture of whether your emotional reactions have been unusually strong lately.

7. **Episodes of crying.** Do you feel like crying all the time? Or are you crying more than usual? Do you feel like you're struggling to get your emotions under control? If so, you may want to take a look at your stress level.

8. **Stormy work relationships.** At work, you notice your co-workers are tactfully avoiding you. Your boss seems to be increasingly irritating. You wonder if he's doing that on purpose. While some of us naturally have challenges interacting with others, many only do when we're feeling stress most strongly.
9. **Grouchy toward your kids.** At home, your children just put their heads down and walk by you. Secretly, you don't blame them because lately you've been noticing and pointing out every little mistake they make. Or maybe you've been more reactive; when they do make a mistake, your visible emotional response is stronger.
10. **Your spouse confronts you.** Maybe your husband has already asked you what's wrong. Or maybe he's walking on eggshells around you, instead.

When assessing this symptom, ensure you're distinguishing between your stress and your partner's stress. If they're confronting you about new things because they're under pressure, maybe they would benefit from reading this e-book, too!

11. **Increased arguing and disagreements.** Lately, you just can't seem to get along with others. Sometimes, you or your partner silently retreat to the other side of the bed. For some reason, it seems like you just can't get along lately.
12. **Attitude changes.** Or maybe attitude hasn't been the greatest. You assume things won't go well. You feel yourself slowly starting to give up. Maybe you don't care anymore about that relationship, job, or family situation.

The key here is that if you deeply analyze your attitude, you're shocked that you're feeling this way about something or someone that's so important to you and your life. Having an attitude shift for constructive reasons, on the other hand, will seem well-justified.

13. **Obsessing.** When thinking about things, your mind gets stuck. Whether or not you're normally detail-oriented, you discover you're obsessing over the smallest things. For example, you believe you must make a homemade cake with fancy frosting instead of box mix or bakery cake for your Mom's birthday. You're the only person who can detail your car and "do it right."

14. **Feelings of futility.** When you're under pressure, you feel that no matter what you do, you can't get anything done. You know those hamsters in the little wheels going round and round? That's how you feel when you're under stress: going nowhere, fast.

As you've probably gathered, stress can be portrayed very differently, depending on the person experiencing it. Examine the above list and see what you notice about yourself when you're under pressure. Which signs do you show?

Take note of how stress manifests in your life. The more awareness you have about your unique expression of stress, the better your ability to manage it effectively.

*"Every stress leaves an indelible scar, and the organism pays for its survival after a stressful situation by becoming a little older."* – **Hans Selye**

# Causes of Stress

Interestingly, all kinds of things cause stress.

Situations, people, and events you dislike can trigger these emotions. Being constantly in a time crunch, involved in a stormy relationship, experiencing a divorce, leaving a job or moving might create anxiety, worry, or general psychological discontent.

As mentioned earlier, change is often a key factor in the development of stress. Tension, anxiety, and worry are often the result of change, especially when you feel that you have little control over a situation.

But did you know that events and circumstances viewed as positive are also stressful? Purchasing your first home, getting married, or bringing your first baby (or any baby!) into the world, although positive experiences, still induce tension.

So if you're assessing all the sources of your stress, remember to count the enjoyable or planned changes in your life as well.

*"My father's death, my move, and my frightening and difficult delivery created a tremendous amount of stress, pain, and sadness for me. I was practically devastated beyond recovery."*

**-Brooke Shields**

# Unhealthy Ways you Might be Managing Stress

First, the not-so-good news: you might be addressing your stress in ways that aren't helping you. Here are some signs that you may be able to choose more constructive ways of handling your stress:

1. Overuse of substances. Many people cling to their substance of choice when stress moves in. So don't be surprised if you're smoking more cigarettes than usual, drinking more alcohol than you should, or taking those over-the-counter sleeping pills every single night. In essence, stress may be encouraging you to turn more often to your preferred substances.
  - Remember: not all drugs come from the external world. Physical activity, especially aerobic exercise, produces lots of endorphins and other feel-good chemicals. While many people work hard just to get enough exercise, some abuse their bodies with it, driving themselves to exhaustion. Be gentle with yourself during times of stress.
2. Nutritional intake is imbalanced. Although we have different ways of doing this, many of us start making poor dietary choices when we're experiencing stress.
  - You might be eating fast food a lot when your schedule feels overcrowded. To avoid having to cook your own meals, you find yourself in a line for fast food on your way home several times a week. When you do this, you're adding to your body's stress level by eating high-fat, nutritiously inadequate foods.

- Or perhaps you're skipping meals here and there and even getting a little light-headed sometimes from lack of food. Stress can either cause you to forget to eat (you're too busy) or not want to eat (you're too tense). If this is the case, smoothies can be a quick and healthy way to ensure you get your needed calories.
  - Alternatively, you've gone completely in the other direction. Instead of skipping meals, you're over-eating to soothe stress. Food can act as medication, and many of us abuse it for this very reason. When you're about to eat, try asking yourself if a big, green salad sounds good right now. If not, you're probably not actually hungry.
3. Inappropriate remarks and communication. Perhaps you're short with others and use cryptic or sarcastic comments to express yourself. On the other hand, your response to stress may involve closing people out emotionally and giving them the silent treatment.

Spend a few minutes to reflect on ways you might be mishandling your stress. Vow to stop your use of unhealthy substances when you're stressed out—get help to do so if necessary. Take a long hard look at your nutritional intake habits to ensure you're eating as healthy as possible.

Finally, tune in to your verbal communications to ensure you're expressing yourself in appropriate ways. Remember that when you're under pressure, you could be engaging in habits and behaviours that serve to stoke the fires of stress rather than put them out!

*"Often when a person can't get past stress, she will turn to overeating, drinking or smoking, which can become a greater problem than the stress itself." – Marilu Henner*

# Effective Methods of Stress Management

Now that you've read about some less-than-perfect ways to deal with life's pressures, it's time to learn some of the best ways to manage your stress. You have abundant choices for learning how to effectively manage your stress.

## Try these strategies:

- 1. Take time for physical activity.** It's vitally important to have consistent exercise in your life. Not only does physical activity do great things for your body, but it also works magic on your soul. Exercising regularly is a great all-around stress reliever.
- 2. Practice meditation, relaxation, or yoga.** Eastern philosophies definitely got it right when it comes to successfully managing stress. Look into meditation, progressive relaxation, or yoga. Yoga is one of the most soothing ways to exercise and release tension at the same time.
  - Regardless of which of these methods you choose, you'll be amazed at their powers to reduce your stress level. Make a habit of any of them, and you may rarely experience much stress at all!
- 3. Take some down time.** Everyone needs to just chill once in a while. Plan some time every week to let your hair down and do what relaxes you most. Read a book, watch television, or go see a movie. Take time to enjoy those things you love to do. Nobody ever looked back at their life and said, "I wish I'd spent more time on my projects for work!"
- 4. Put down the technology.** If you find you're on the computer or playing with all the apps on your smartphone or tablet all

evening, take some time to engage with life without all the electronics. Gadgets are pretty awesome, and they can be great tools. However, they might also increase your stress level because of the amount of input they bring to your life.

- If you believe that you're getting over-involved or wired by your technology, maybe it's time to put down the gadgets, at least for the last hour or two before bedtime.

**5. Take up a hobby.** Hobbies have a wonderful way of balancing out our lives. If you've had an idea in the back of your head for a long time, why not make it happen? In the event you've wanted to join the local tennis league or book discussion group, do it. Regularly taking part in your chosen hobbies will help you manage your time and stress.

**6. Focus on your health.** If you have a chronic health condition like asthma, allergies, over-eating, or diabetes, you'll want to do everything you can to successfully manage it. To keep your stress level minimized, keep your conditions under control.

**7. Take your medicine.** One of the first things that people under stress do is discontinue or forget to take their meds. You'll hear a person experiencing stress say, "I just can't remember to take that pill" or "I'm never home when it's time to take my medicine." One crucial aspect of dealing with any chronic health issues is taking medication as prescribed.

- Closely related to number 5, above, regularly taking your prescribed medication will ensure that you're in the best physical and emotional condition possible. And being in good health will help to assuage any feelings of stress.

**8. Practice healthy eating to stay strong and vital.** Look around you. You'll see that your friends who take good care of themselves nutritionally are often dealing with their jobs, loved ones, and selves in healthy ways. Because they eat



right, they have the energy to deal with life's ups and downs and the confidence in themselves that they'll always be okay.

- 9. Reduce caffeine consumption.** If you require a couple cups of coffee to get going, your caffeine intake is most likely also contributing to your level of stress. Although this commonly-used drug is considered relatively harmless in small doses, it does contribute to tension and anxiety.
  
- 10. Get your rest.** You know what not getting enough sleep feels like. The day seems to drag by and you feel a bit punchy. Concentration can be challenging. To deal with ongoing stress, get good sleep for seven to eight hours a night.
  
- 11. Practice a healthy night-time routine.** Bedtime rituals are great stress-busters. Ensure that you have a bedtime routine that works for you and follow it.
  - For example, have a light, healthy snack no later than 8:00 p.m. Take a bath or shower at 9:00 p.m. and apply moisturizers and lotions. Next, read for 30 minutes to an hour. Then, lights out.
  
- 12. Give your schedule a long, hard look.** What can you get rid of? To reduce your feelings of tension, worry, and anxiety, trim down the tasks and errands you have to do.
  
- 13. Prioritize.** One of the best ways to handle stress is to have a good grasp on what your tasks are, and which ones are most important. Which responsibilities need to be done right away? Circle them in red and put a star by them on your list.

- Moderately urgent jobs that can wait a bit but not for weeks or months should be highlighted in yellow. For the tasks that are the least important, place no special markings by them. This method will help you see at a glance what you must do first (all the tasks with stars in red).
- After doing the most urgent priorities, you'll complete the highlighted jobs. Finally, finish up those listings with no marks.
- When you know that you have your tasks lined up in order of priority, you're free to focus on the one at hand. This reduces your stress by minimizing mental clutter. Instead of feeling stressed about how to get everything done, you can stay fully present with what you're doing in the moment.

**14. Delegate.** If you're in a position where you can distribute some of your work tasks to others, exercise that right.

- This can also be done at home. Can your children help with parts of the cleaning or the dishes? How about your partner?

**15. Get educated.** Whether you're learning to use new software that types out your spoken words for you, or figuring out how to send group emails to reduce time spent on the computer, take steps to reduce your stress by using technology efficiently.

- You've been there before: you've spent hours on a repetitious task that you eventually learned to do in minutes with the right software program or organizer app. Ensure that your technology works for you instead of the other way around.

**16. Communicate. Discussing whatever is troubling you helps to dissipate challenging feelings.** Give your best friend a call and pour out your heart to her. Get in touch with your brother and tell him about what's bugging you.

- Use communication to appropriately express how you feel, and get those emotions out of your head and onto the table, where you can look at them objectively.

**17. Just say “no.”** An often overlooked but effective method of managing stress is declining to take on more tasks or do more favors for others. Exercise your right to choose how you'll best spend your time by starting to say “no” more often. The more you say “no,” the easier it will become.

- Look at it this way: wouldn't you rather say “no” and always do your best work, than say “yes” to a task when you're overloaded and not able to perform as well as you'd like?

**18. Ask for help.** One of the best ways to successfully manage your stress is to actively take steps to obtain assistance. So, not only should you communicate your feelings, you should also speak up and ask for help.

**19. Write down your feelings.** Journaling is a wonderfully effective, inexpensive, and simple way to learn to understand, articulate, and therapeutically deal with your feelings. Why not try it?

**20. Seek professional assistance.** Although you might tend to avoid calling counsellors until you've exhausted all of your other options, consider doing so before you're totally buried under with stress. There's no shame in going after whatever is necessary to help you feel better and live more productively.

- Getting professional assistance shows you're smart. You can recognize when you're spinning your wheels and you know that there are people who can help you regain traction in your life.

You have a lot of choices when learning to successfully manage your stress. Try some of the approaches above as soon as you feel those feelings of tension and worry coming on.

*"In times of life crisis, whether wildfires or smoldering stress, the first thing I do is go back to basics...am I eating right, am I getting enough sleep, am I getting some physical and mental exercise every day." – **Edward Albert***

## Summary

Understanding what stress is and that a certain amount of tension is positive is your first real step to recognizing the impact of stress in your life. Knowing some of the main causes and being aware of how your stress expresses itself will help you avoid dealing with it in unhealthy ways.

When you practice awareness of your inner state, you'll be better able to identify the best methods to successfully manage your tension, anxiety, and worry. Use some of the tips and techniques listed above to successfully defuse any pressure in your life. You can break free from stress!

*"If you ask what is the single most important key to longevity, I would have to say it is avoiding worry, stress and tension. And if you didn't ask me, I'd still have to say it." – **George Burns***