



mind
matters

Stress Toolkit

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What is Stress?

Stress is a normal physiological and psychological reaction that all human beings experience. It is triggered when: (1) changes occur in our environment and (2) we perceive that our resources are insufficient to cope with those changes and therefore our well-being is threatened.

Some examples of life stressors are :

- Losing your job
- Losing a loved one
- Getting married
- Divorcing
- Moving to a new place
- Being or taking care of someone chronically ill or injured
- Experiencing, yourself or your loved ones, a traumatic event (e.g., violence, discrimination, natural disaster)

How to deal with stress?

On the spot techniques: Reduce the stress response

1. If you can, go for a **brisk walk** outside
 - a. Why it works?
 - b. Brisk walking is a form of aerobic exercise. Aerobic exercise helps combat stress by releasing « feel good » hormones and neurotransmitters, which reduce feelings of anxiety and depression as well as your sensitivity to stressors (source).
 - c. It also asks you to stand straight (vs slumping) while walking, which has been shown to improve resilience to stressors by improving your psychological and physiological states (study). More precisely, an upright standing posture while walking improves your resistance to stress by decreasing negative emotions, emotional arousal (that feeling of overwhelm), sleepiness, pain, blood pressure and by increasing self-confidence.
 - d. Brisk walking is one of the easiest aerobic activities available on-hand. It needs little preparation, minimal effort, no special equipment, and can be easily squeezed in between two meetings or tasks.

2. Try 5 minutes of diaphragmatic breathing (Belly Breathing)

- a. Diaphragmatic breathing is a form of deep breathing that fully engages the stomach, abdominal and diaphragm muscles. Compared to regular breathing, diaphragmatic breathing is achieved by consciously filling your lungs with deep, long breaths. As a result, you'll notice that your belly, in addition to your chest and shoulders, is also rising and expanding.
- b. Diaphragmatic breathing is an effective way to control your physiological responses to stress. When under stress, upper chest and shoulders breathing is part of the typical fight-or-flight response. This type of breathing disrupts the balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your body, which may prolong feelings of anxiety and worsen the physical symptoms of stress. By consciously taking slow, deep breaths, you gently help your body to find its balance back by sending feedback to your nervous system that it is ok to relax and that your life isn't in danger.

Here is a step-by-step guide to get accustomed to diaphragmatic breathing:

- Sit or lie down comfortably. You may want to set a timer to 5 to 10 minutes to ensure you belly breathe long enough to tell your body it can relax.

- Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach (just beneath your rib cage).
- To inhale, slowly breathe in through your nose, pushing your hand on your stomach while using your other hand to make sure your chest remains still.
- To exhale, gently push air out of your lungs and through your mouth by contracting your stomach contract and tightening your abdominal muscles. Your chest should remain still during exhalation too.
- Aim for 4-count inhales and 6-count exhales until your timer is up.
- What if you are in a situation where you cannot do a full 5 minutes of diaphragmatic breathing?
- Just focus on exhaling longer than you inhale. It will slowly help you to rebalance oxygen and carbon dioxide levels, which will help you feel better.

Problem-solve your stressors

This technique has been shown by the Center for Studies on Human Stress to reduce the presence of stress hormones and depressive symptoms that often occur concomitantly with chronic stress in adults as well as with teenagers.

1. Recognize that you are stressed: When you are stressed, your body activates the ‘fight-or-flight response’ to help you overcome the threat you perceive. Some of the most common short term symptoms are increased heart rate, hypervigilance (increased awareness of your surroundings) and suddenly feeling full of energy.

However, when you experience chronic stress over a certain period of time, you may develop physical, emotional and behavioural symptoms. Those are signs that chronic stress is taking a toll on your health:

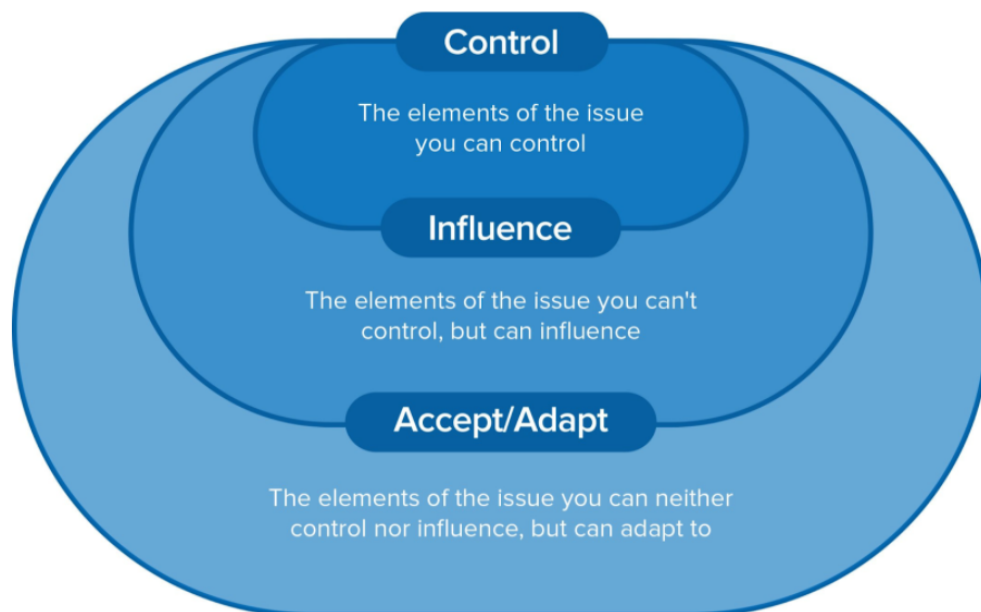
Physical symptoms	Emotional symptoms	Behavioural symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aches and pains • Chest pain or feeling like your heart is racing • Trouble sleeping • Feeling easily exhausted • Headaches • Dizziness • Trouble digesting • Trouble having sex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability • Sadness • Anxiety • Panic attacks • Depression 	<p>Mostly engaging in unhealthy coping strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drinking alcohol • Smoking • Overeating or undereating • Procrastination • Using drugs • Gambling

2. Identify the cause of your stress: Although stress and anxiety share the same symptoms, they are generally differentiated by the type of triggers that cause them. Stress is typically caused by external triggers (e.g. deadline, breakup, conflict, death), while anxiety is generally caused by internal triggers (e.g. thoughts, emotions, conflicting desires).

Learn to take a step back instead of acting out of urgency

When under stress, we often get caught in a feeling of urgency. It's easy to feel overwhelmed in those situations. You can use the Control-Influence-Accept tool will help you to take a step back, consider the situation rationally and explore what options are available to you.

1. List everything you think you have to do about a situation and what makes it a stressful situation
2. Sort and place each element you listed in the Control-Influence-Accept diagram



The Control Influence Accept Model: from '**The Critically Reflective Practitioner**' by Thompson, S. and Thompson, N. (2008) © Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

3. Take action by starting with the things you can control, then moving to the ones you can influence, and finally by accepting there are certain elements you can only accept.

Additional Resources

1. Well stressed: Manage Stress Before It Turns Toxic, by Sonia Lupien PhD (2014)
2. Stress-Proof: The Ultimate Guide to Living a Stress-free Life, by Mithu Storoni, MD, PhD (2017)
3. Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers, by Robert M. Sapolsky (2004).

Exercise workbooks

1. The Strengths-Based Workbook for Stress Relief: A Character Strengths Approach to Finding Calm in the Chaos of Daily Life, by Ryan N. Niemiec (2019).

