

# Reducing Stress



## Your Vulnerability to Stress

**Directions:** The following survey was developed by Psychologist Lyle H. Miller and Alma Deil Smith at Boston University Medical Center. Score each item from **1** (Almost Always) to **5** (Never) according to how much of the time each statement applies to you.

	<b>1 - 5</b>
I eat at least one hot, balanced meal a day.	
I get seven to eight hours sleep at least four nights a week.	
I give and receive affection regularly.	
I have at least one relative within 50 miles on whom I can rely.	
I exercise to the point of perspiration at least twice a week.	
I smoke less than half a pack of cigarettes a day.	
I have fewer than five alcoholic drinks a week.	
I am the appropriate weight for my height.	
I have an income adequate to meet basic expenses.	
I get strength from my religious beliefs.	
I regularly attend club or social activities.	
I have a network of friends and acquaintances.	
I have one or more friends to confide in about personal matters.	
I am in good health (including eyesight, hearing, teeth).	
I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried.	
I have regular conversations with the people I live with about domestic problems (chores, money, daily living issues).	
I do something for fun at least once a week.	
I am able to organize my time effectively.	
I drink fewer than three cups of coffee, tea, sodas a day.	
I take quiet time for myself during the day.	
<b>Total</b>	

To get your score, add up the figures and subtract 20. Any number over 30 indicates a vulnerability to stress. You are seriously vulnerable if your score is between 50 and 75, and extremely vulnerable if it is over 75.



## More Vulnerability to Stress

**Directions:** The purpose of this brief survey is to help you predict how much stress you have experienced in the past year. If you answer “No” to the question place a 4 in the box. If you answer “Yes” to the question, circle the point value associated with that item.

<b>Changes: Has there been a change in ...</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Your eating habits?	o	8
The frequency of family gatherings?	o	8
Your sleeping habits?	o	8
Your social activities?	o	9
Your church/faith activities?	o	10
Your recreational habits?	o	10
The schools you attend?	o	10
The location of your residence?	o	10
The hours or condition of your work?	o	10
Your living conditions?	o	13
The level of your responsibilities at work?	o	15
The frequency of arguments with others?	o	18
Your career direction?	o	18
Your financial status?	o	19
The health of a family member?	o	22

<b>Financial and Legal Problems</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Have you taken a loan/mortgage under \$10,000?	o	9
Have you taken a loan/mortgage over \$10,000?	o	16
Has your loan or mortgage been foreclosed?	o	15
Were you cited for a minor violation of the law?	o	9
Have you served jail time in the past year?	o	32

<b>Health Issues and Deaths</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Has a close friend died?	o	19
Did you experience a pregnancy?	o	20
Did you have an illness or personal injury?	o	27
Has a close member of your family died?	o	32
Has your spouse/domestic partner died?	o	50

<b>Family Problems</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Did your spouse/partner start or stop a job?	0	13
Did you have any trouble with your in-laws?	0	15
Did one of your children leave home?	0	15
Has there an addition to the family?	0	20
Did you go through a marital reconciliation?	0	23
Did you get married?	0	25
Did you go through a marital separation?	0	33
Did you get divorced?	0	37

<b>School, Business or Personal Stress</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Have you been on a vacation in the past year?	0	7
Have you had any trouble with your employer?	0	12
Have you revised any of your personal habits?	0	12
Have you started or finished school?	0	13
Have you accomplished a significant personal achievement in the past year?	0	14
Have you experienced any sexual difficulties?	0	20
Have you had a make a business readjustment?	0	20
Did you retire for work?	0	23
Have you been fired from your job?	0	24

**Stress Level Score Total**

**Directions:** After you have answered every question, add up all the circled scores. The total of all the circled scores represents your “Stress Level Score” based on the amount of stress you were exposed to during the past year. A score of 100 or more is strongly suggestive that you have encountered or are encountering a good bit of stress.

Adapted from Thomas H. Holmes, M.D. – Microfilm International Marketing Corporation

***The past is gone; the present is full of confusion; and the future scares the hell out of me.***

***- David L***

## Take a Moment to Consider...

What causes you stress?

What do you experience when you're stressed?

### Assess Your Stress

Not all stress is bad. Stress is your body's response to any change in its inner or outer environment. We expect things such as getting fired from a job or a death in the family to produce stress. But even good things, such as a promotion or a new baby, can cause stress.

Stress is as much a part of life as eating and breathing. The key to living well with life's stressors is making sure there are enough periods of relaxation to balance out the periods of stress. When we're faced with one stress period after another, with no time to relax in between, it can affect our physical and mental well-being.

Here are some common symptoms of too much stress and not enough relaxation. Put a check by any that have troubled you in the past month.

- ◆ Fatigue
- ◆ Sleeplessness
- ◆ Irritability, anxiety or depression
- ◆ Change in appetite
- ◆ Headache, backache or chest pain
- ◆ Noticeable negative attitude
- ◆ Numbness
- ◆ Feeling overwhelmed or out of control
- ◆ Poor concentration
- ◆ Little things bothering you
- ◆ Frequent crying
- ◆ Muscle spasms
- ◆ Constipation or diarrhea
- ◆ Shortness of breath
- ◆ Difficulty controlling your temper

***When we direct our thoughts properly,  
we can control our emotions.***

***- W. Clement Stone***

## Identifying the Source of Stress

1. *Should and must* statements
2. *Awfulizing*
3. *I can't stand it* statements

### Unwritten Rules – should and must

Believe it or not, most of us carry around a complex code of behavior, called unwritten rules, that govern our thinking, moods, and to a large degree – our happiness. The rules may sound like:

- ▶ *People shouldn't let me down.*
- ▶ *People should always be on time.*
- ▶ *People shouldn't talk in movie theatres.*
- ▶ *People should be polite.*
- ▶ *I must be accepted and liked by everyone.*
- ▶ *I must perform perfectly.*
- ▶ *People must treat me fairly.*

### Awfulizing

Another kind of distorted thinking pattern is awfulizing. Awfulizing is easy to recognize because your self-talk often includes the words awful or terrible.

- ▶ *My dentist appointments are awful.*
- ▶ *My boss is just terrible.*
- ▶ *That traffic jam was awful.*
- ▶ *Arriving late for that meeting was awful.*

### I Can't Stand It

Another pattern to watch out for includes the following statement in your self-talk, "I can't stand it."

- ▶ *I can't stand it when I get behind a slow driver.*
- ▶ *I can't stand it when I have to wait in long lines.*

## Your Words Become Your Reality!

## Unrealistic Expectations

1. It is unrealistic to believe that everyone is going to agree with us at all times, like us all the time, love us all the time. We should not expect it.
2. It is unrealistic to believe that there is any job or any task that doesn't have frustrations, discouragements, and disappointments. Some do more than others, some less, but they are always there.
3. It is unrealistic to believe we can be successful in every venture or that we can be perfect in all we attempt to do or be. No one has been, no one ever will.
4. It is unrealistic to believe there is any relationship in love, work or play that doesn't have some tension, stress, or differences. As long as we deal with people we will deal with some problems.
5. It is unrealistic to believe there is any place, city, church, neighborhood that is ideal; that is completely free from problems, or that there is any place or situation that does not need change or improvement. There is no such thing as Utopia.
6. It is unrealistic to think that we will ever be completely free from feelings of guilt, doubt, inadequacy, anxiety or anger. They are part of being human. They need to be understood and controlled, but they are always present.
7. It is unrealistic to feel that others should be blamed for all they say and do. All people have their own problems and tensions. Most people want to do better. If we understood the background we would probably understand the behavior.
8. It is unrealistic to feel that we are entirely victims of fate or outside circumstances, that we have no control over what we think, feel or do.
9. It is unrealistic to avoid life or to refuse to face life realistically and honestly.
10. It is unrealistic to feel that we are the way we are, that we are conditioned by past experiences or environmental circumstances and therefore cannot change.
11. It is unrealistic to believe we can achieve anything of significance quickly or that we can hurry change. Achievement and change are possible but they usually come slowly, and in small steps.
12. It is unrealistic to feel that there is only one solution to any given situation or that things are catastrophic if we do not find our solution.



## Mindless Chatter

- ▶ On average we think one thought per second – 3,600 an hour, 70,000 in a waking day.
- ▶ Most of those thoughts are recycled on a regular basis and serve no positive purpose.
- ▶ Most people waste precious energy:
  - Needlessly judging themselves and others
  - Focusing on what they want versus what they have
  - Trying to control things they can't control (circumstances, the future, other people)
  - Worrying (catastrophizing) about things out of their control
  - Fearing the future
  - Measuring themselves based on other people's opinions
  - Projecting their issues onto other people
  - Dominating "should's"
  - Churning their "to do" list over and over in their mind.

## You Are What You Think!

### The Vicious Circle

- ▶ People today are faced with external stressors unlike any generation before. Today's lifestyles have eliminated many of the natural de-stressors people before us had in their lives.
- ▶ When our body experiences mental stress hormone levels elevated for extended periods of time – leads to physical stress on our bodies.
- ▶ Stress is experienced not as much from what's actually happening around us – the real danger comes from what we're *telling* ourselves about what's happening around us.
- ▶ In order to survive 21<sup>st</sup> century living we must understand our physical and mental responses to stress and find positive ways to counter it.

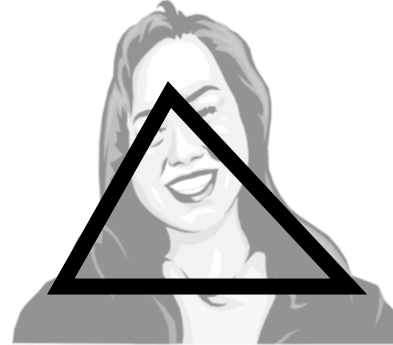
## Diffusing Stress

### Coping Skills: What Can You Control?

	CAN CONTROL	CAN'T CONTROL
Take Action		
Do Not Take Action		

### Watch your Words

- ▶ *I can do this.*
- ▶ *I can achieve my goals.*
- ▶ *Everything works out.*
- ▶ *This is easy.*
- ▶ *I have the power to change my life.*



### Relax Your “Stress Triangle”

The head, neck and shoulder area – which forms the “stress triangle” – are the places where we hold much of our tension. Learning how to release the tension in these muscles can help us relax.

**Neck roll.** Stretch your right ear to your right shoulder, keeping your left shoulder pulled down. Roll your head down so your chin is on your chest. Continue on to your left side. Do rolls from side to side. Begin with eight, build up to 16.

**Shoulder shrug.** Draw a big circle with your shoulders, one at a time. Start with four, build up to eight times, going forward, then back.

**Pick Fruit.** With one hand, reach up as if you were picking an apple from a tree slightly ahead and far above you. Go from one arm to the other, building up to eight times on each side.

**Massage yourself.** Use your right hand to work on your left shoulder and left hand on your right shoulder. Work your fingers gently but firmly, beginning with your shoulder blade, moving up toward the neck and including the scalp.

**Standing body roll.** Let your head roll forward until your chin is on your chest. Keep rolling down as your knees begin to bend. When your hands are hanging near your knees, rest there a moment and slowly roll back up. Work up to ten times.

## Stress Management Techniques

### Exercise

- Choose something you enjoy
- Choose something that fits into your current schedule
- Be realistic

### Social Support

- Accept help
- Spend time with people who lift you up
- Invest in relationships

### Have Fun

- Find things in your community that you enjoy doing
- Find hobbies outside of work
- Stay curious

### Organize/Balance

- Set realistic goals with realistic timelines
- Find ways to organize your life that work best for you
- Recognize that Life and work both demand our attention

### Meditation (Mindfulness)

#### An Effective, Easy to Use Tool

- ▶ Scientific studies are showing that meditation is one of the most effective, easy to use tools in our efforts to manage stress.
- ▶ It also provides additional benefits:
  - Reduces anxiety and tension
  - Help with chronic pain relief
  - Lowers heart rate and blood pressure
  - Relief for respiratory problems (asthma, etc.)
  - Managing headaches, PMS, irritable bowel, insomnia
  - Assists in physical healing
  - Counters depression
  - Quiets fears
  - Calms the mind
  - Decreases irritability and moodiness
  - Increases memory
  - Improved brain wave coherence (higher level thinking skills)

- Greater creativity
- Increases vitality, emotional stability, and happiness
- Spiritual development
- Increased sense of inner peace, balance, perspective.

### **Basic Steps**

Many ways to meditate but all fall into two basic categories:

#### **Concentrated**

- ▶ Beginning techniques to help you get started
  - Breath
  - Mental image (your happy place)
  - Mantra (sound, word or phrase – quietly or out loud)
  - Fixed gaze (practice any of the above with eyes slightly open)

#### **Mindfulness**

- ▶ Is developed with practice
  - Quiet mind
  - Greater awareness of body, thoughts and emotions
  - Present in the moment

#### **Basic instructions:**

- ▶ Sit comfortably, back straight, with your eyes closed
- ▶ Start with big inhale/exhale
- ▶ Continue breathing as deeply and comfortably as possible
- ▶ Begin to focus your mind only on what you've selected
- ▶ When it begins to wander, bring it gently back to your selection

#### **Practice:**

- ▶ Easy to understand – benefit comes from doing it.
- ▶ Concentrated breathing brings control over “chatter” and stress.
- ▶ Mindfulness teaches us to be present to all we experience in the moment.
- ▶ 5 – 15 minutes each day and/or 1 – 5 minutes whenever you can.
- ▶ Experiment with various techniques, find what works for you.
- ▶ No right or wrong way – goal not to achieve perfection – goal is to achieve peace.
- ▶ As you move into mindfulness, notice your thoughts, feelings, and sensory input but don't attach to it – let it go. Simply observe – don't judge.
- ▶ Do a mindfulness check as you move throughout your day – how present can you be to whatever you're doing: brushing teeth, walking, yoga, Tai Chi, cooking, eating, being with another person, etc.
- ▶ Occasionally (not during meditation), take some time to think about patterns that arise before, during or after your practice.

## Action Plan

Recognize how you respond to stress

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Be aware of your stress triggers

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Develop stress management techniques that work for you

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## Suggested Reading

- *Lighten Up: Survival Skills for People Under Pressure*, by C.W. Metcalf
- *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff: P.S. It's ALL Small Stuff*, by Michael R. Mantell
- *The Relaxation Response*, by Robert Benson
- *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*, by Martha Davis
- *The Three Minute Meditator*, by David Harp
- *Stress Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Wellness*, by Edward Charlesworth
- *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, by David Burns
- *Breaking the Stress Habit*, by Andrew Goliszek
- *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*, by William Bridges
- *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey
- *The Stress of Life*, by Hans Selye
- *Who Moved My Cheese*, by Spencer Johnson