

STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR THE STUDENT

Also known as:

Building Personal Resilience to Manage Stress

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Being a student – no matter what your age or grade level – can be both exciting and overwhelming. Sometimes, it seems that the overwhelming aspects outweigh those that are exciting -- and then we say we feel "stressed out."

If you have been feeling “stressed-out” lately, take a moment right now and write down ALL the things that you believe are causing your “stressed-out” feelings.

You may be feeling worried or stressed about:

- Family problems – parents fighting, an alcoholic parent/family member, a serious illness in the family, money worries, separation or divorce, legal problems, mental or physical abuse
- Death or other loss – perhaps someone close to you moved away or died recently (a special friend, a pet, a close relative)
- High expectations – everyone in your life seems to expect a lot of you now – parents, significant other, children, teachers, employers.
- Role confusion/Multiple roles – parent, spouse, friend, student, employee – Who Am I?
- School stressors – tests, assignments, instructors, grades, friends, feeling “in” or “out”
- Balance – how to find balance with school, work, family, social life
- Health and physical changes
- Future – what is my life going to be like? What am I going to do? Will I find a job when I graduate? WHY AM I DOING THIS???
- Past – “mistakes”

It is normal to feel symptoms of being over-stressed – especially if you are taking on new and challenging responsibilities in your life OR if you have been facing numerous obstacles, which you perceive are beyond your ability to control. The goal, however, is not to necessarily eliminate all your stress! Remember: Most situations that you might define as "stressful" and the feelings involved in such situations can be positive. They can increase your motivation to do well in whatever activity you are engaged. They can keep your life spicy and interesting. Reasonable amounts of stress can keep you moving toward your longer-term goals and allow more satisfaction with your life.

WHO DEFINES WHAT IS A "REASONABLE AMOUNT OF STRESS?"

Everyone has a different threshold of stress tolerance. What is overwhelming for one person may be considered a "piece of cake" for another. In other words, YOU define what stress is for you and how much of it you can tolerate.

There are plenty of ways to curb and cope with the stress in our lives. It is easy to access books, magazines, videos, classes or television programs at any hour of the day that describe every available stress management tool. Many of these tools are truly excellent. In fact, a person's knowledge of and ability to use many of these traditional "stress management tools" can have a pronounced effect on his or her definition of what is stressful and on his or her ability to cope with seemingly overwhelming stressors. I will briefly address some of the healthier of these traditional tools later on in this discussion. Right now, however, I want to describe and discuss some ideas that will be much more sustaining and effective for you as you begin to evaluate and possibly change how you live your life -- and ultimately your stress tolerance threshold.

THE RESILIENCE FACTOR

People who are considered "resilient" tend to be very flexible, adaptable, and optimistic. They seem more capable of withstanding what others might perceive as tremendously stressful. Resilient or "hardy" people possess characteristics that appear to allow them more ease as they go through life. Hardy people seem to be better prepared physically, socially, and emotionally to handle much of what life throws at them. We have all heard stories about resilient children who have gone through the most tragic hardships and yet are able to thrive and become quite successful and satisfied adults. We have also heard of children who have had traumatic upbringings and are unable to function as an adult. Why is this?

BUILDING PERSONAL RESILIENCE TO MANAGE STRESS

Research shows that some characteristics of resilience are biologically based. In other words, some people inherit certain "hardy genes" which may push them toward more resiliency. The good news is that one's level of resilience is also tremendously influenced by environment. This means that there are ways that people can strengthen their resilience, even if they were not "born" resilient or were not raised in a resilience-enhancing environment. **You can make changes now, or at any time in your life, to build your level of personal resilience and your stress-tolerance threshold.**

Resilient people possess many common characteristics. There are ten characteristics, however, which I witness over and over again as I work with students and their families. When a person possesses or is actively developing these characteristics, I see an enormous change in how this person lives, learns, thinks, feels and responds to seemingly stressful situations. The following ten characteristics are those that I began to describe earlier. When these characteristics are integrated into a person's life, one's response to life and one's perceptions of what is stressful change dramatically. By building these characteristics into your life, you can actually increase your ability to deal with "distress" because you are integrating into your everyday life preventative strategies to help you begin to perceive and handle life's challenges in a different way.

Evaluate for yourself where you stand as I describe each of these "resilience-building," "stress-managing" characteristics. Do you need to work on a particular area to improve your resilience? Are there some areas in which you are really strong?

TEN RESILIENCE BUILDING CHARACTERISTICS

1. ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION

Our interactions with other people can be a source of considerable stress in our lives. By beginning to learn how to communicate assertively with others, even when they are not communicating assertively with us, we can learn to control our reactions, stand up for our rights and reduce the amount of stress reactions we experience in our relationships.

2. CHANGING FAULTY OR IRRATIONAL THINKING HABITS

We are constantly engaging in self-talk. Our self-talk tells us and others a lot about how we perceive the world. Those who have positive, accurate, and realistic self-talk function in much more healthy ways than those whose self-talk is irrational and negative. Changing just the way we think or "talk to ourselves" is a giant step in the direction of preventative care for being overwhelmed with stress.

Our body tenses and becomes more stressed when we use irrational thinking patterns. If this is an area of difficulty for you, some keys to making changes are to: 1) become aware and sensitive to your own self-talk; 2) determine which parts of your self-talk are irrational; 3) identify how "talking" this way makes you feel; 4) begin disputing irrational statements; 5) replace your irrational statements with those that are self-affirming, rational and positive; 6) continue to practice disputing and replacing irrational statements until the new statements become a natural part of your self-talk. Change in this area does NOT occur over night! Counseling professionals state that it takes approximately 16 weeks for new self-statements (which are repeated constantly) to "take hold." It takes even longer for these new self-statements to become a natural part of one's belief system.

3. HEALTHY DIET AND EXERCISE

In addition to the benefits of burning calories and strengthening muscles, exercise is a critical piece to reduce the daily, negative by-products of our stressful lives. When you are taking care of your body through eating right and exercising, you are actively working to strengthen yourself physically, emotionally and spiritually. Those who value their whole selves take care of themselves physically.

4. EXPANDED SUPPORT SYSTEM

Healthy social support has been shown to help buffer people against the negative effects of stress. The chemical effects on the brain of a person who is going through a stressful situation are lowered in individuals with high levels of healthy social support. This might explain why individuals low in social support are more likely to develop depression in the presence of chronic stress. Social support also decreases the effects of stress on immune function. Social support via support groups has also been found to increase survival for patients with breast cancer and to reduce the complications associated with pregnancy and delivery.

5. RATIONAL PROBLEM SOLVING

People who know how to and feel confident in their ability to solve even life's most simple problems, tend to have more strength and confidence in solving life's bigger, more stressful problems. Learning how to weigh pros and cons and avoid quick, emotion-based decisions, allow people to face life's problems more realistically, optimistically and confidently.

6. GOAL SETTING AND TIME MANAGEMENT

Tools for effective time management have been successfully used to minimize deadline anxiety, procrastination and overall fatigue. Many of us are very familiar with these traditional "time management" tools: completing daily time analyses, making/following a calendar, and checking off items on "to-do" lists. Sometimes using these tools can be very helpful. No time management tool will be useful, however, if you don't first know what your life's "big picture" is. People who know and follow their chosen "big picture" tend to go through life in a less hurried, more positive and directed way. These are people who know what their short and long-term goals are and are actively pursuing these goals in their day-to-day life. Honing time management skills is not as critical as is discovering and then spending more time on activities we value -- on activities that follow the

pathway to our "big picture." When we spend more of our time doing those things that are truly important to us, we tend to have more energy and enjoyment in accomplishing any task in our life.

7. SENSITIVITY TO YOUR BODY'S PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Your body registers stress long before the conscious mind does. Muscle tension is your body's way of letting you know that you are under stress. Tension in your body is often overlooked because most people's awareness is directed to the outside world. Becoming keenly aware of early signals of physical reactions to stress (chronic headaches, back pain, muscle stiffness, and gastrointestinal distress) can give you a jump on taking care of the external problem before it becomes overwhelming and you become "stressed out."

8. AWARENESS OF FIGHT OR FLIGHT TRIGGERS

Most of us are quite aware of the events in our lives that throw us into a state of distress. Many of these events cannot be avoided (e.g., driving in heavy traffic, studying, relationship conflicts, etc.). Although we may not have power to control some of these events, we do have the power to control and prepare ourselves for such events. If, for example, you know that driving in traffic ALWAYS irritates you and puts you into a negative mental state, prepare for your driving excursions by giving yourself extra time to get to your destination, listen to relaxing music or self-help tapes in the car, and utilize positive self-talk to help keep yourself calm. Discover what you can do to eliminate your overwhelming distress in situations that cannot be changed.

9. HUMOR

There are many problems that happen in our lives that definitely warrant serious attention and a lot of energy. There are also a lot of problems that don't -- and yet many of us put as much energy into solving the silly, miniscule problems as we do the larger, life-changing problems. Remember: Humor melts stress. Not everything warrants serious attention. There are some things that are just not important enough to fuss about. Save your energy for those things that are very important -- and remember that laughter is an awesome medicine.

10. RELAXATION

It is very difficult to remain in a stressed out state of mind when the body is relaxed. The ability to fully relax and calm one's mind and body is CRUCIAL. Any program that you are following to reduce stress related disorders must contain some sort of relaxation training. Relaxation is more than just sitting in front of the TV on a comfortable recliner. Yes, this activity can be relaxing, but it doesn't make as profound a difference in dealing with anxiety as regular, daily, active, deep muscle relaxation and deep abdominal breathing. As stated in the text, *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, by Edmond J. Bourne, PhD: "Deep relaxation refers to a distinct physiological state that is the exact opposite of the way your body reacts under stress or during a panic attack" (p.65). Dr. Bourne goes on to remind us that, "Regular practice of deep relaxation for 20-30 minutes on a daily basis can produce over time, a generalization of relaxation to the rest of your life. That is, after several weeks of practicing deep relaxation once per day, you will tend to feel more relaxed all the time" (p.65). ' So the question is, why wouldn't EVERYONE want to practice deep relaxation EVERYDAY?

If you wait until you're feeling overwhelmingly stressed before you employ a stress management technique, it is already too late. It is important to regularly work on strategies like those listed above so that you can be proactive and strengthen yourself on a continual basis. If you turn to the concepts listed above throughout the day, this changes your threshold of stress tolerance -- and ultimately builds your hardiness and resilience.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Warning Signs

When people perceive that the events in their lives are getting out of hand -- or they feel that they do not have the resources to handle demands – challenging situations can often seem unbearable. Here are some warning signs, which might indicate that things are getting out of hand, and perhaps one's resilience is wearing thin:

- Constant feelings of sadness, discouragement
- Sleeping too much or not at all
- Withdrawing from your friends/family
- Work habits/performance decline
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, medications
- Emotional outbursts
- Family problems begin or increase in severity
- Physical problems arise or increase in severity

Quick Fixes versus Resilience Builders

Probably the least effective stress management techniques are those that are considered "quick fixes." They have no staying power. Smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, bingeing on food, abusing drugs...they may give the impression that they are relieving tension, but they will not work over time. They do not help to strengthen resilience. If you consistently practice these "quick-fixes," you may notice you are not working through many of your issues, nor are you feeling a whole lot better overall; instead, you are "spinning your wheels." It may seem like you're doing something to relieve stress, unfortunately, what you are doing is not getting you anywhere better.

You cannot plan for many of the "bad" or extremely stressful situations that may occur in your life. But if you have been working hard at building your resilience all along, your ability to handle very stressful situations is greatly improved. In addition to building your resilience over time, there are also several short-term stress management tools that can be employed when you are in the midst of an overwhelming situation. These tools are not "quick fixes," though. These are healthful strategies that not only give relief in a pinch, but also have staying power. In other words, they, too, can help strengthen your resilience.

- Deep, abdominal breathing exercises
- Here & Now Thinking, Positive Thinking (self-talk)
- Humor
- Squeezing a ball
- Crying
- Talking to supportive people
- Journaling
- Praying, Meditating, Yoga
- Getting away from the situation for a little while
- Seeking an objective ear – from a counselor, clergy person, physician, etc.
- Engaging in healthy physical activity – walking, jogging, calisthenics, etc.
- Engaging in one's favorite pastimes or hobbies

ADDITIONAL RESILIENCE BUILDERS SPECIFICALLY FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

Here are a few more tips that can also help build resilience and increase success in school (and life!).

1. *Learn how to best schedule your time.* Some have found it helpful to schedule “study time,” “family time,” “me-time,” and if you are working, “work-time.” Allocate your time to make the best use of it. Early burnout occurs when people try to cram in part-time paid employment, full-time school, full-time extra curricular activities, and demanding relationships. School for the most part should be enjoyable, not a burden. You can only do so much. Better to do a little less and feel good about what you’re doing, than burnout half way to your goal and quit.
2. *Talk to and work with your family.* Talk about the struggles you are facing. If you feel your family just does not understand you, it could be because they don’t know what you’re going through. Talk about what you need from them during this time in your life. Find out what they need from you as well. Remember that communication and planning WITH each other helps to prevent blowups. Remember the words “compromise” and “negotiate.”
3. *Use healthy peers to gain support.* There are people very similar to you who have been or are going through the same challenges as you. Talk to people. Seek others out. Maybe they can at least be a sounding board for you and at best, they can give you suggestions on what worked for them.
4. *Work to be successful in each class.*
 - a. Find out what is required – tests, papers, presentations – so that you can plan ahead.
 - b. Attend all classes.
 - c. Sit up front (if possible).
 - d. Form a relationship with your instructors so that you can gain comfort and confidence in speaking to him/her about questions or concerns that may develop.
 - e. Prepare for class by at least scanning your notes and text before class.
 - f. Ask questions during class.
 - g. Take good notes. Review them often.
 - h. Study regularly instead of cramming.
 - i. Hand work in on time.
 - j. Be aware of any extra credit that may be offered by your instructor.
5. *Use the resources at your school. You don’t have to do it all alone!*
 - a. Counseling Services - for mental-health and academic counseling.
 - b. Academic Assistance centers – for tutoring, study skills, math assistance, reading and writing enhancement.
 - c. Your instructors.

And How About Twenty More Resilience Builders?

(The following material, originally entitled “Twenty Stress-Crushers” is grounded in resilience building. I use these ideas quite often both personally and professionally. Unfortunately, I do not know the original source of this “Stress Crusher” list. My apologies and gratitude to the author.)

1. **Play pinochle, ring toss, or dominos.** They're better for you than the other games people play like “Who's got the biggest house, most important job, or highest priced car?”
2. **Don't hold onto dynamite after it's lit.** Walk away from quarrels, fights, or squabbles when tempers are touchy. Go wrestle a fireplug. Don't argue. Discuss.
3. **Train, don't strain.** Increase workloads and responsibilities gradually. Don't take on more than you can handle.
4. **Love they neighbor as they old slippers.** *Be casual and comfortable with people.* Accept them as they are. Enjoy others.
5. **Find your funny bone.** Laugh at yourself and at situations. **HUMOR MELTS STRESS.**
6. **So, who cares?** Maybe today, but 500 years from now? Or even five years from now? *Put things in their right perspectives.* They may not be as important as you think
7. **Don't tie tin cans onto dogs' tails.** Be kind. Respect the feelings of others. Be nice to everyone. **Let relationships run smoothly.**
8. **Go to the North Pole** – Or a cave, attic, or bomb shelter where you can be by yourself. Try to be alone for a few minutes each day just to relax, meditate or read.
9. **Avoid leaping contests with kangaroos.** Don't compete with everybody doing everything. Refuse to compare yourself to others. Set your own standards.
10. **Are you a magnet or flypaper?** Do you attract positive things and people to your life, releasing them easily and naturally if they aren't right for you? Or, do you get stuck with a lot of nuisances and burdens that won't go away?
11. **Be a big spender** – With love, that is. The more you give, the less stress you will have.
12. **Pity the poor worms** – They get eaten by birds. And big fish gulp down little fish. Pour out your sympathy on those little creatures, but not on you.
13. **Don't buy the cow to get a glass of milk.** You don't have to buy an airline to visit your Aunt Emma. Don't make big deals out of everything. **Simply life.** Take on a little bit at a time.
14. **Get lost in a dream.** Always be working on something larger than the weeds by the rosebush, car payments, or dusty closet shelves. Tomorrow's dream takes stress out of today's problem.
15. **Retire from the Supreme Court.** Get out of the human judgment business. Why add to your stress level by useless, critical opinions of others?
16. **Pretend you're on four wheels** – You'd never abuse your car like you do your body! Exercise. Get sleep. Booze, coffee and cigarettes don't reduce stress – they increase it.
17. **Pin a medal on yourself** – Reward yourself when you've worked hard. Have some lobster. Go out dancing. See a show.
18. **Get a babble buddy** – Find someone who will listen. Talk about your problems, anxieties and fears without shame.
19. **Ride a rainbow** – See something pretty in what's about you. It's really quite a lovely world if you take time to look at it.
20. **Take slowpoke training** – Slow Down. Allow more time for tasks, getting to appointments, eating meals, and relaxation.

Laughter is a tranquilizer with no side effects.

Eat dessert first!
After all, life is uncertain.

CLOSING

There are so many things that you can do to increase your stress-tolerance threshold. By building your personal resilience to manage stress, you can take an active role in strengthening and preparing yourself for the challenges and demands of life. No, you do not always have control over stressful situations. You do, however, have control over your perceptions and your responses to seemingly stressful situations.

Go back and take a look at the item(s) you listed earlier that you believe are causing your “stressed-out” feelings.

Now, jot down one possible thing you might be able to begin doing to take care of this difficulty OR prevent the difficulty from getting in your way of success. In other words, what can you do to manage yourself more effectively with this challenge and at the same time, build your hardiness and personal resilience?

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WEB SITES OF INTEREST

<http://greatday.com/motivate/index.html>

"The Daily Motivator is a brief motivational message that is published each Mon-Sat. on the web and by e-mail. Each daily message...can easily be read in a minute or two. The Daily Motivator provides a fast, regular and reliable positive boost each day."

<http://www.projectresilience.com>

Sybil and Steven Wolin's website which "teaches a strengths-based approach to education, treatment, and prevention."

<http://www.stress.org>

Comprehensive articles and insight on stress, compiled by The American Institute of Stress.

"Come to The edge," Life said.

They said, "We are afraid."

"Come to The edge," Life said.

They came.

It pushed Them...
...and They FLEW.

Author Unknown

"Whether you think you can or you
can't - you are right."

Henry Ford

*"Nothing is good or bad but
thinking makes it so."*

William Shakespeare

Only in quiet waters do things mirror themselves undistorted. Only in a quiet mind is adequate perception of the world.
Hans Margolius

*"Whenever I am successful, I know I have chosen,
consciously or unconsciously, to use the positive
thoughts that created my success." (p. 34)*

The One Minute Sales Person
Spencer Johnson, M.D.

"This time, like all times is a
very good one, if we but know
what to do with it."

Ralph
Waldo
Emerson

"We become
what we think about." (p. 71)

The One Minute Sales Person
Spencer Johnson, M.D.

**If you don't like something,
change it. If you can't change
it, change your attitude .
Don't complain .**

Maya Angelou

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent. Eleanor Roosevelt

"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

Chicken Little

"What you see is what you get."

Flip Wilson

"We are what we think. All
that we are arises with our
thoughts. With our thoughts
we make the world."

Buddha

*If you find it in your heart to care for
somebody else, you will have succeeded.*

Maya Angelou

**FALL SEVEN TIMES,
STAND UP EIGHT.**

Japanese Proverb

The best place to find a helping hand, is at the end of your arm. –Swedish Proverb