OBJECTIVES

What you will discover by the end of this chapter:

• The meaning of stress
• The types of stress
• The effects of stress
• How to differentiate “good stress” from “bad stress”
• How to develop your very own two-step stress management system
Stress management is the one foundational skill that will increase your chance of having a healthy, happy, and successful journey through life. If your stress is out of control, so is your physical and mental health, academic and job performance, decision making, and personal relationships. Ironically, schools and employers are offering more and more stress management seminars, yet stress levels seem to keep on rising. Mastery of this skill is critical.

Many stress management systems are complicated and difficult to use. Have you ever read an article that gives you the 10 to 20 steps to a stress-free life? Just the idea of learning 10 to 20 steps is stressful! This text and CD present a simpler, more realistic two-step system. Another problem is that many of the stress management systems are cookbook recipes expected to work for everyone, even though everyone’s life is different. Just because a particular method works for the professional speaker who developed the program, it does not ensure that it will work for a student who is juggling multiple roles, such as being an employee, student, and single parent. This text and CD will help you assess and develop your own personalized stress management system. By reading this chapter, completing the exercises, and using the fun, interactive, and personalized CD, you will develop a simple and effective stress management system that will work for you in your academic, personal, and professional life.

**WHY LEARN THIS SKILL?**

Going to school and learning should be a positive and uplifting experience, but a lack of good stress management skills can make you feel like Figure 1-1. If you can relate to Figure 1-1, think about the following questions: Is the “after-school” picture how you really want to

**FIGURE 1-1**

*Do you sometimes feel like this?*

Before School

After School
feel for a large portion of your life? Do you think you will make good decisions, perform well academically, or even feel well if you remain in the after-school mode for extended periods of time? Unfortunately, some people are constantly stressed out and always feel like the after-school image. Keep this picture in your mind as you travel through this chapter.

Before you can look like the “before-school” picture, you first need to understand what stress is all about. This chapter provides an understanding of stress that will serve as the foundation for your personalized stress management system. Instead of letting stress work against you, you will learn to make it work for you.

Before you begin to develop your stress management system, it is important to get a baseline assessment of your current stress levels. In Exercise 1-1, let’s find out where you are now to see how much you can improve in the coming months and years once you begin to integrate this simple system into your life.

Rate the following statements with numbers 1 through 4 as follows:

1 = Rarely  2 = Sometimes  3 = Frequently  4 = Always

1. I have low energy and feel tired.
2. I worry a lot about problems or how things are going to turn out.
3. I can spot all the things others are doing wrong.
4. I feel the need to be perfect at what I do.
5. I skip my workout/exercise sessions.
6. I feel sad.
7. My mind goes a million miles per hour.
8. I take on everyone else's problems.
9. I try to control other people.
10. I can’t do anything right.
11. I avoid risks for fear of failure.
12. I let my work pile up.
13. I feel like I’m being pulled in all directions.
14. I have a pessimistic attitude.
15. I get headaches.
16. I have too much to do and too little time to do it.
17. I overreact to situations.
18. I feel guilty if I relax and do nothing.
19. I talk very quickly.
20. I get angry easily.

Now add up your answers and see where you stand:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60–80</td>
<td>This chapter could be a life-changing experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>Your stress is out of control, and you desperately need this material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Your stress is causing problems for you, and you would gain moderate benefit from this chapter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>Stress is affecting you and this chapter will help with the stress in your life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>You are doing pretty well, but you can still improve.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHAT IS STRESS?**

What is this thing we call stress? One of the misconceptions about stress is that we need to wipe it out of our lives, and our goal should be to become “stress free.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Stress is needed for our very existence.

For example, your body temperature must be maintained within a narrow range. Most environments are colder than body temperature (98.6°F) and thus produce stress even though you may feel comfortable. Your body senses and interprets this stress in order to adapt, and it adjusts to cold temperature both to produce and retain heat to regulate the temperature within normal range. The body maintains many conditions, such as oxygen levels, blood values, and so on, all within narrow ranges by making changes based on internal and external stress or stimuli. Your body does this often without you even knowing it. In this way your body regulates your physiologic stress for you to survive.

Another example of good stress is when your muscles receive “stress” from exercise. This is needed so they adapt and rebuild themselves to become better and stronger. Using this concept, your mind can also use mental stress to better itself.

**A Working Definition**

So what is the best definition of stress? If you read books on stress, you will find many different definitions. According to the American Institute of Stress, Hans Selye, the father of stress theory, defined stress as “the non-specific response of the body to a demand made upon it.” Although this statement certainly rings true, we will define stress in more user-friendly terms. We have already established that some stress is needed to maintain optimal body functioning. However, at times we let this stress get out of control, and instead of helping us, it causes serious harm. What we are concerned with is how does the body react to stress? Here’s our working definition of the stress reaction:

**STRESS REACTION**—How our mind and body react to an environment that is largely shaped by our perceptions of an event, person, or situation.
**Mind–Body Connection.**

Let’s take a closer look at this definition. Notice how it begins with “how our mind and body react.” This shows the close relationship between the body (physiologic responses) and the mind (psychological responses). Many in the medical community now claim that stress causes a significant number of health problems in the United States. You may have read elsewhere that heart and lung disease are among the top illnesses. However, think about why many individuals develop heart or lung disease. Much of lung disease is caused by smoking, which is an unhealthy response to stress. Likewise, heart disease is often caused by poor diet, smoking, and lack of exercise. These are all indicators of someone who doesn’t properly handle stress in his or her life. Just think about the following common statements as they relate to stress and the mind–body connection:

- I couldn’t catch my breath.
- My heart was racing.
- My brain was fried.
- My stomach was twisted in knots.

**Our Perception Defines Our Stress.**

Now let’s continue on with the rest of the definition: “react to an environment that is largely shaped by our perceptions of an event, person, or situation.” Notice how the words our perceptions stand out. We can drive this point home using the noble example of giving blood. Study the pictures of the two volunteer blood donors in Figure 1-2.

---

**Figure 1-2**

Differing perceptions to the same procedure.

Donor “A”

Donor “B”
Donor “A” is calm and relaxed throughout the whole procedure and even smiles and jokes with the technician. Donor “B” is highly stressed, has an increase in vital signs, is sweaty, and in general is just a “nervous wreck” throughout the whole procedure. However, both patients had the same procedure, with the same technician, with the same-size needle. What was the difference?

Obviously, the perception of the first donor was more positive, whereas the second donor was full of dread. Their perceptions made the difference in their very different stress reactions. Keep in mind that most stress occurs as a result of how we interpret and react to a situation, person, or event. It is sometimes hard to admit that we cause most of our stress, but the good news is that if we do cause it, then we actually can control it.

Hans Selye developed many of the terms associated with stress. He referred to anything that causes stress as a “stressor” or “trigger” (American Institute of Stress, 2007). It’s important to become aware of the stressors in your life to learn to manage them. Give Exercise 1-2 a try.

List and describe the top three stressors or triggers in your life.

1. ________________________________________
   ________________________________________
   ________________________________________

2. ________________________________________

3. ________________________________________

**TYPES OF STRESS**

We’ve established that stress is a physical and emotional reaction based on our perceptions. Let’s further define stress to include two broad categories called **external stress** and **internal stress** (Posen, 1995).

**External Stressors**

External stressors include your physical environment, social interactions, major life events, and daily hassles. In other words, external stressors represent everything outside of you. Please see Table 1-1 for examples of some external stressors in our lives.

**Internal Stressors**

Internal stressors include such characteristics as lifestyle choices, personality traits, and negative thinking styles, such as being pessimistic or too self-critical. Thinking styles are the
internal “mind talk” we engage in. You will learn in Chapter 2 just how powerful this internal dialogue can be and how it can work either positively for growth or negatively for serious adverse outcomes. For example, someone who is a perfectionist might have unrealistic expectations. Imagine the self-critical “mind talk” if that person makes a mistake. Please see Table 1-2 for some examples of internal stressors.

**TABLE 1-2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Stressors</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Lifestyle choices</em></td>
<td>Lack of restful sleep, smoking, drug abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Personality traits</em></td>
<td>Workaholic, perfectionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Negative thinking styles</em></td>
<td>Pessimistic, self-critical, rigid thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Survival Stress**

Survival stress occurs when your body quickly adapts to maximize your reaction to a physically or emotionally life-threatening or challenging event. This is our “fight-or-flight” response, which rapidly turns on in times of perceived danger. This response is much greater than the normal day-to-day physiologic responses and adjustments to minor stresses such as environmental temperature changes.

**HARMFUL EFFECTS OF STRESS**

It is a fact of life that we all have temporary stressors. Currently you may be studying for that big exam, deciding on your career path, or going on a job interview. The question is, Will you handle your temporary stressors and turn them into a positive experience? Let’s first explore
what happens if you cannot—the harmful effects of stress. We will then finish this chapter by learning how to face stress in a positive way.

**Chronic Stress**

No matter what the change or challenge may be, it is important that you do not let stress adversely affect your performance and health. It is especially dangerous when you remain in a chronic (long-term) state of stress. **Chronic stress** equals poor performance, poor decisions, and poor health. It can affect you physically, mentally, emotionally, and behaviorally.

Physical symptoms of chronic stress can include sweating, muscle aches, digestive problems, loss of appetite, headache, and dizziness, to name just a few. Mentally, chronic stress manifests itself as anxiousness, forgetfulness, confusion, panic attacks, and loss of humor (American Medical Women’s Association, 2007). Do any of these sound familiar? Emotional changes include anxiety, nervousness, fear, irritability, impatience, and even depression. Behavioral changes may include increased alcohol intake, appetite changes, smoking and drug abuse, restlessness, nail-biting, and increased aggressiveness.

**Stress and Disease**

Let’s look more closely at the connection between stress and disease. Forty years ago, health professionals might have denied that stress can make you sick. Since then, extensive research has indeed shown that stress can contribute to illness. Now we have enlightened attitudes in the health professions toward stress. Chronic stress has been related to conditions such as cardiovascular disease, decreased immune function, personality disorders, depression, ulcers, and migraine headaches. Some say it is the leading cause of health problems in our hectic, high-paced society. Look at some of these facts concerning stress (American Institute of Stress, 2007; Burt, Cutler, Roccella, Sorlie, & Hughes, 2004; Gudka, 2002; Laurence, 2004; Women’s Heart Foundation, 2005).

- Chronic stress has been shown to weaken the immune system.
- It is estimated that cardiovascular disease causes over a third of all deaths in the United States. Stress can play a major role in these diseases.
- The majority of heart attacks occur on Monday mornings.
- The stress-related disorder of hypertension is estimated to affect as many as 65 million Americans.
- Research shows that stress plays a role in osteoporosis in women because of increased hormonal levels.
- Sales of antidepressant medications, often used to help cope with stress, have increased greatly.

**Stress and the Workplace**

Stress also has major effects in the workplace. According to NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 1999), job-related stress generates more health complaints than
other life stressors. Studies cited on the American Institute of Stress website (2007) indicate that 25% of employees say that work is the main stressor in their lives, and 75% of workers believe job stress is worse than it was just one generation ago.

GOOD STRESS VERSUS BAD STRESS

Hans Selye was once quoted as saying “stress is the spice of life.” His quote was meant to show that boredom itself can be stressful. Selye used the term *eustress* to describe positive stress. “Eu” means easy or normal. Conversely, Seyle used the term *distress* for negative stress (American Institute of Stress, 2007). We are going to keep it much simpler and use the not-so-technical terms of **good stress** and **bad stress**.

Stay in Your Zone

The main goal of this chapter is to help you develop a personalized system to keep you in your “good stress zone,” so you can perform at your best and seize personal and professional opportunities.

Let’s revisit the notion that not all stress is bad for you. Survival stress is an important and necessary stress. If confronted by a life-threatening event, part of your nervous system called the sympathetic nervous system—the fight-or-flight system—will kick in. The impact on the sympathetic system causes certain responses that will maximize your chance for survival. In other words, your body gets ready to either fight or flee the dangerous situation. Your physical and psychological responses may include (Posen, 1995):

- Increased adrenaline levels for more energy
- Faster heart rate to supply more oxygen to muscles
- Increased blood pressure to get more blood flow to the brain
- Pupil dilation to bring in more light to see better
- Faster and deeper breathing to bring in more oxygen
- Heightened state of awareness to focus on the job at hand

All of these responses can help enhance your performance. In other words, you can have “good stress.” Now we don’t always want to be in a fight-or-flight response and should reserve that for truly life-threatening situations. However, a little bit of stress is good for you while performing important tasks. The key is balance and moderation.

Good Stress

The fight-or-flight response shows a good stress response in life-threatening situations. But what about everyday events such as a big exam, a job interview, or giving a speech in front

Strange But True Fact

There are many stories of people performing herculean feats when their fight-or-flight response, or adrenaline rush, kicked in. Stories include people of average strength and weight lifting cars to save someone trapped underneath or carrying items such as refrigerators while running from a fire.
of the class? Studies show that you actually perform better if you have moderate stress and are not totally “cool as a cucumber.” If you are not under enough stress, your performance may suffer because you are bored or unmotivated. A little stress will get you “up” for the task. However, if you let stress get out of hand and you panic, you have entered into bad stress. In bad stress, your anxiety rises to the point where you perform poorly or even not at all.

So let's begin the first step of the two-step stress management system. Here you learn to become aware of your good and bad stress zones. Exercise 1-3 will help you recognize your good stress zone.

Write at least three adjectives or phrases that describe you when you are in “your good stress zone.” In other words, select words that describe you when you are functioning well, running on all cylinders, hitting your peak, and so on. To get you thinking, some adjectives may include happy, focused, and a sense of humor. Remember, choose words that best describe you when you are doing well in your life.

Keep these in mind because we will soon use them in developing your personalized stress management system.

**Bad Stress**

The first step in treating any illness is good assessment. This is also the first step in a good personal stress management system. First, recognizing your own stressors and the symptoms they cause can help you determine when your stress is out of balance or in other words, when you have entered your bad stress zone. These signals can be valuable to your good health and positive attitude. They represent a wake-up call that says you need to cope with what’s going on in your life before it overtakes you.

As already stated, a certain amount of stress is normal. We need it to develop and grow. However, going beyond your good stress zone and “losing it” by entering your bad stress zone can be harmful. You need to determine when you are losing balance. The best way is to look for physical and emotional signs or indicators that the stress is too much. From our previous discussion on the harmful effects of stress, it should be clear as to what high levels of bad stress can cause. It’s no wonder that individuals who can’t handle stress have more accidents, poorer attendance, and difficulty studying and learning. If bad stress persists and becomes long term or chronic, it can become destructive. The American Institute of Stress lists several effects of stress in the bad zone, including:

- High blood pressure, heart attack, or stroke
- Stomach pain
REAL-LIFE APPLICATION
Preventive Medicine and Early Intervention

Preventive medicine has gained much attention in recent years as opposed to the traditional disease model in which the medical community waited until individuals got sick and then treated them. Tension headaches indicate you have been in your bad stress zone for some time. If you can identify earlier signals that precede a headache, for instance, and intervene right there and then, you can prevent many headaches from ever happening. One thing to look for is nervous habits such as biting fingernails, pulling your hair, shaking your leg, or clicking your pen. These are usually early signs that you have just entered your bad stress zone. Again, if you intervene right away, you can prevent yourself from developing more serious problems. This self-awareness is often difficult because many of these habits are so automatic that we just ignore them. So if you catch yourself shaking your leg and intervene, you can prevent the subsequent muscle tightness, upset stomach, and headache that may follow.

- Lack of sleep or insomnia
- Decreased immune system functioning
- Depression and personality changes
- Problems with learning
- Frequent headaches

YOUR TWO-STEP STRESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Now that you have the background information, you can develop your personalized stress management system. Take your time with each step, and remember that this system will evolve over time and with continued use.

Step 1: Become Aware of Your Good and Bad Stress Zones

You defined your good stress zone in Exercise 1-3. You want to do the things necessary to maintain your good stress levels and reduce your bad stress levels. Now, in Exercise 1-4, let’s go on to develop awareness of your bad stress zone.

List several mental and physical changes that occur when you are in your bad stress zone. In other words, come up with a list of things that happen to your body and mind when you are “losing it,” not clicking on all cylinders, and not functioning well. To jog your memory, some possible examples could include stomachaches, forgetfulness, nervous habits, eye twitching, making mistakes, irritability, headaches, or muscular tension. Remember to list your own responses. Some may be the same as the examples given, but they must relate to your life.
You have now developed a contrasting picture of your good and bad stress zones from Exercises 1-3 and 1-4, but we need to take it just a little further. In Exercise 1-5, you will now develop your personal stress chart or continuum.

Using Figure 1-3, place your descriptions from Exercise 1-3 in the Good Stress Zone. Now look at your list from your bad stress zone (Exercise 1-4) and place it in chronological order starting with what occurs first when you just begin to enter your bad stress zone. You can also see Figure 1-4, which shows a completed stress chart or continuum as an example.
You have now completed step 1, “Become Aware of Your Good and Bad Stress Zones.” Your personalized system now shows you how to recognize when you are in your good stress zone. Most importantly, it will show you how to recognize when you are just beginning to enter your bad stress zone so you can quickly intervene to prevent all those bad things that can occur later.

For example, look at Figure 1-4. If this person intervenes as soon as his leg starts shaking (step 2), he can quickly go back into the good stress zone. If he doesn’t intervene, he will move further down the continuum to more serious consequences such as headaches.

People who get frequent tension headaches (four to five per week) have used this system to reduce their headaches down to one or even none per week. They recognize the early warning signals—such as shaking their leg or rolling their neck because of tension—and stop and do something about it before it builds into a headache.

Please note that your stress continuum will continue to develop over time. Here are some helpful hints:

- As stated previously, often a nervous habit such as tapping a pen, shaking a leg, or biting your nails is an early warning sign you are entering your bad stress zone.
- Make sure your list contains both mental and physical signs.
- Visit your continuum every few months to see if you discovered something new to add. (Your CD can help you here.)
SUCCESS STORY

Often you are not aware of a nervous habit. During one workshop, an attendee who had a headache 5 days per week vigorously denied any nervous habits that led up to the headaches. When pressed, she began to click her pen at a very high rate and still deny any nervous habits until it was brought to her attention. She said, “I didn’t even know I was doing that.” Then a friend said, “Yes, and you always chew on your hair” and another coworker said, “You drive me crazy when you tap your pencil and grind your jaw.” In 15 minutes she had a fully developed stress continuum with many early indicators that could signal an alarm to intervene before her headache began. Within 6 months she indicated she was down to one to two tension headaches per week! What a positive change in her quality of life!

- Pick something (like a headache) that occurs at the latter part of your continuum, and chart your progress in reducing the number of occurrences.
- Pay attention when people close to you provide personal insights about yourself, like your nervous habits or overreacting. They may see things you do not.

Congratulations! You now have become aware of and have developed your personalized stress continuum. Now we move on to step 2, which basically says once you recognize that you are in your bad stress zone, you can intervene in a healthy manner to get back to your good stress zone.

Step 2: Perform a Healthy Intervention

Notice that the word healthy is emphasized. If every time you enter your bad stress zone, you drink alcohol, take other drugs, or reach for something to eat, you can develop addictions. That is an unhealthy way to cope with stress. So what are the healthy interventions? There are many, and they depend on your particular situation. This chapter ends with some positive interventions to consider. Please note that not all of these will work for any given situation; they are presented here as a start to give you options to think about.

Exercise.

Physical exercise relieves stress. The type of exercise is up to you and can be as simple as taking a brisk walk. If you are more physically fit, you may want to include jogging, bicycling, or lifting weights. Finding a good workout partner or participating in team sports increases the likelihood of consistent follow-through because of the spin-off socialization aspects.

Aerobic exercise also releases endorphins, which are the body’s natural pain killers and mood-elevating chemicals. Exercise can be used on a regular basis to help prevent you from entering your bad stress zone. It can also be used when you find yourself crossing into the bad stress zone and just need to take a brisk walk to clear your mind.

Now you can’t always drop everything while at work or taking a test, and just begin exercising when things get stressful. This is why it is important to have a variety of interventions to choose from for any particular situation. People who have office jobs and spend a lot of time sitting at the computer can do certain office exercises, such as periodically stretching to help relieve their tension. Some workplaces even have office aerobics and exercise sessions built into the workday.
Nutrition/Sleep.

Good health practices such as sleeping the proper amount and good nutrition increase the probability that you will remain in your good stress zone, even when triggers do come your way. It is like hydrating yourself before physical exercise instead of waiting until you are dying of thirst. Adequate sleep is a must for us to function at our peak and handle stress. Research has shown that lack of sleep makes you more susceptible to illness, more irritable, and less able to focus. Health experts recommend that most adults get between 7 and 9 hours of sleep a night.

When the body is run down because of sleep deprivation or poor nutrition, every little trigger will cause you to enter and most likely stay in your bad stress zone. Remember what happens when people stay in their bad stress zone for extended periods of time, creating chronic stress—high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart attacks are just a few possible outcomes.

Good nutrition is a must for our growth and development. It also helps to fight bad stress and disease. One part of practicing good nutrition is to drink plenty of water. Water makes up the majority of our body, and it aids in digestion, absorption of nutrients, and removal of waste products. Although water is found in most foods, drink at least 6 to 8 glasses each day for good health.

Caffeine, found in coffee, tea, and many sodas, is a potent central nervous system stimulant. Large amounts can make you anxious, nervous, and can prevent you from getting a good night’s sleep. Maintaining a well-balanced diet in moderation is important to your long-term health. More is discussed on these areas in Chapter 10.

Leisure/Hobby/Music.

Taking leisure time helps you to deal with stress in a positive manner. Both the body and mind need to get away and recharge their batteries. Getting lost in a hobby or listening to your favorite music can slow down your mind. Slowing down your mind can help you take a calmer look at perceived stress.

Did you ever have a major problem come into your life and the more you focused on it, the more stressed and emotional you became with no solution in sight? It is hard to come up with ideas and use good decision-making skills in this frame of mind. Even taking only 15 minutes of leisure time can help greatly.

When a problem is causing unrelenting stress, take a break and get away from the problem by doing something else. In many cases, the solution will then just come to you as if by magic. It’s not magic, just your subconscious mind working for you, a phenomenon discussed in depth in Chapter 2. Basically, by stepping away from the problem and emotionally detaching into a hobby or music, the calmer mind may come up with the solution.

Humor Therapy.

It has been estimated that children laugh 100 times a day. Maybe there is a lot to be learned from children. How often do you think adults laugh in one day, compared to children? How much do you laugh?

Humor also has psychological effects, such as helping to resolve problems and to reduce stress and anxiety. You have probably been in a stressful situation with other people when a joke broke the ice. Humor therapy is even used in some medical institutions as an enhancement to medical treatment (Ziegler, 1995).

There are several techniques you can use to enhance humor in your life. Tell appropriate jokes and even keep a humor file. One of the most effective
tools is to simply *smile* and laugh out loud more often. Look for humor in every situation you can, and don’t be afraid to laugh at yourself. At the same time, always remember to take your study and work responsibilities seriously.

The next time you are on hold, or dealing with one of those frustrating automated telephone menus, or in a traffic jam and begin to tense up and stress out—force a big smile on your face. You will find out it is nearly impossible to feel bad when you are smiling. This will prevent something that is out of your control from ruining the rest of your day. Try it now in Exercise 1-6 to demonstrate its effectiveness.

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**Place a big smile on your face and try to be angry or think a bad thought. Write a description of how it worked for you.**

---

**Social Support.**

Social support in the form of friends, family, loved ones, or clubs and organizations can all help with stress relief. Be careful because interactions with people can also cause bad stress. However, all you need to do is remain *aware* of your early stress signals, and when they alarm *do something positive* to get you back to your good stress zone.

Although social support can be very positive, it is always good to keep in good touch with *yourself*. Do Exercise 1-7, which helps you vent safely.

---

**Is there something happening that you perceive as unfair? Do you have a friend with a personality trait that drives you crazy? Is an upcoming event stressing you out?**

Using your computer microphone, camcorder, or other recording device, talk to yourself about it. Make a recording of yourself talking about this problem as if you were venting to a trusted friend. Be honest, be brutal, or be ultrareasonable, but be yourself. Get it all out. Then let a few hours or a day go by, and listen to yourself. How does the problem sound to you now? Does it seem as important or “vent-worthy” as it did before? And how do you sound to yourself? Would you sympathize with yourself? Major leap of faith: Would you let someone you trust listen to this recording? Talking with a close friend and journal writing can be two additional and very effective ways to vent.

---

*We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.*

—Anais Nin
Relaxation Techniques.

Practicing relaxation techniques will help to clear your mind and make you sharper. Many people will find a million excuses why they can’t take the time to relax because of their demanding schedule. Do you see the problem this sets up? If they are that busy, then they need to take the time to relax and restore the body and mind or life will continue to be crazy. This time also allows you to listen to your body. Two types of effective relaxation techniques include breathing relaxation and meditation techniques, and these are demonstrated on your CD.

Slow and deep breathing serves several purposes. First, it increases oxygen to your brain and your body. It also slows your thinking to help clear your head and relax your muscles. Here is a breathing relaxation technique to try:

First, find an area with few or no distractions (insects, noise, interruptions, etc.). You can sit in a favorite chair (recliners work best) or even lie in your bed and use this technique before going to sleep if you can’t find the time during the day. Sometimes, this may even make you fall asleep, which is good because you will get a much more restful and restorative sleep. Now that you have your area, get comfortable and do the following:

1. Close your eyes and have your palms face upward (this removes distracting sensory input).
2. Take a slow and deep breath in through your nose and out your mouth. When you breathe in, your stomach should slowly rise and it should then slowly fall when you breathe out. You can put one hand over your stomach to make sure you are doing this correctly until you get used to this.
3. Continue breathing slowly and deeply concentrating on your breathing and nothing else (thoughts will enter, but just go back to concentrating on your breathing).
4. Once you are comfortable doing this, add some visual imagery. For example, as you slowly breathe out, visualize all the tension in your body leaving with the exhaled breath.

This is a basic technique, and with practice you can eventually do one or two deep cleansing breaths when tension rises and feel immediate relief within 1 minute. This becomes important when your demanding schedule is causing stress and you need to take a quick refreshing pause. In addition, you’ll see in an upcoming chapter how this 1-minute technique can help when you begin to “stress” while taking that big exam. However, try to do at least 10 breaths in the beginning until you get comfortable with the technique.

Strange But True Fact

Meditation is recommended by more and more physicians to prevent or slow the pain associated with chronic diseases such as cancer. New research with sophisticated imaging techniques is showing that meditation can train the mind and reshape the brain to prevent “traffic jams” within the brain that cause stress (Stein, 2003).

Meditation.

Meditation means basically slowing your mind down and clearing it of internal chatter. Techniques can vary greatly, but they all center around attempting to focus your mind on “one thing.” This one thing can be your breathing, as you just learned. It can also be an object, chant, or phrase, or even a positive thought (Stein, 2003).
Yoga deals with the study of meditation and has been around for centuries. Although many people think of yoga as all those twisted postures, this is really the lowest form of yoga in which the body is being conditioned, so it does not distract the mind. Think how hard it would be to concentrate on “one thing” or a positive thought with a “nagging” backache. It may be an interesting and relaxing experience to take a yoga or tai chi (meditation in movement) class.

**Know Your School**

Your school will have support services to help you in many areas. Research and find what school resources can help you with stress management. One example would be counseling services. Others include student health services, resident advisers, and clergy. List the information here, and for quick reference place the information in a prominent place such as on your refrigerator.

Now that you have developed your stress continuum and can recognize when you are entering your bad stress zone, use Exercise 1-8 to list a few interventions you can use to get you back into your good stress zone. It may be something from this chapter or it may be something unique to you. Pick interventions that work for you. It is also a good idea to pick interventions in different environments and situations. For example, you may pick a “walk in the woods.” However, when the stress is mounting during an exam, this isn’t feasible, and something like a single relaxing cleansing breath may be appropriate.
Chapter 1

HEALTHY DECISION MAKING

Mary has been out of school for several years and is a single parent. She has decided to go back to school to better her life and has been accepted for the fall semester, which is 3 months away. She has been reading about how much her program stresses critical and creative thinking skills, and she is concerned that she gets too stressed out to think clearly at times. In addition, she has attempted several study schedules but gets overwhelmed and very anxious and is unable to complete them. What would you recommend Mary do prior to the start of school to give her a more hopeful outlook and maximize her chance of succeeding in school?

SUMMATION EXERCISE 1-8

List and describe several interventions, so you can have them ready in any given situation or environment.

An exercise choice: ________________________________________________________

A step you will take toward better nutrition: ___________________________________

A way to improve your sleep habits: __________________________________________

A hobby: ___________________________________________________________________

Your favorite relaxing music: _________________________________________________

Your favorite type of humor or favorite comedian: _______________________________

Your social and family supports: _____________________________________________

A favorite relaxation technique: ______________________________________________

At least one intervention for work or school: ___________________________________

At least one intervention at home: ____________________________________________

Note: You may want to keep this list handy so you can pick out something that would help you at that “stressful” moment. Eventually, you won’t need the list because you will automatically respond when your stress alarm goes off with a healthy and effective intervention.
Now that you have read this chapter and performed the assessments and exercises, please go to your CD for this chapter to reinforce these concepts. The CD will present you with a fun and interactive journey back through stress management and visually show you such things as how to develop your stress continuum, meditation, and relaxation techniques.

References


For a listing of further suggested readings for this chapter, please visit the companion website for this textbook.