



Conquer Stress: 5 Point Plan

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Although we are only two months into the year, I am taken aback by how stressed people already are. And if you are stressed now, unless you have some wonderful holiday planned, the chances are it is only going to get worse as the year progresses. Although many of us seem to think that chronic stress is just a part of life, and that we don't have much choice but to suck it up, there are actions that can be taken to manage stress. And you want to manage stress because chronic stress has negative impacts on all aspects of our lives. Chronic stress impacts health negatively in many ways such as impairing cardiovascular health, the immune system, and the digestive system amongst others. Chronic stress reduces one's capacity for problem solving, decision making, and flexible thinking. Chronic stress increases levels of irritability, anger, anxiety, and triggers a variety of illnesses, including mental illnesses. In the long term chronic stress can lead to depression and burnout.

Definition: Stress is the response, when you and I perceive, the demands of a situation exceed the resources available.

5 Point Plan

1. Understand your stressors. What is it that stresses you out? Learn to try and not be in stressful situations, or if you cannot leave the situation apply some strategies to increase your resources or reduce the demands of the situation so stress becomes less of a problem.
 - a. In which areas of your life are you most stressed? Family, children, finances, career, relationships, etc.? What can you do to get these areas under control?
 - b. Are there certain people that stress you out more than others and why? What could you do about this?
 - c. Are you a perfectionist or do you like to control everything? We live in a world where nothing is perfect and you cannot control everything. This you need to accept. That doesn't mean you cannot strive for excellence. You just have to accept mistakes when they happen because they will. Things cannot always go exactly the way you want them to.
 - d. Is the way you are living your life at odds with what is important to you. If you live a life that fulfils your passions and interests you can handle stress better.

2. Learn to recognise how your body and mind responds to stress. It is not the same for everyone. Once you know how stress manifests for you, you can learn to become aware of your stress levels sooner and implement strategies to manage it sooner.
 - a. Where in your body does stress manifest? For example which muscles tense up quickest?

- b. What illnesses are you prone to (for example colds and flu, stomach problems, muscle pain, skin irritations or allergies) when you are stressed?
- c. How do your emotions change when you are stressed? Are you angry, withdrawn, sulky, irritable, etc.? You can ask colleagues and loved ones for their responses as often the people around you have a very good idea of how your emotions change when you are stressed.
- d. How does your behaviour change? What happens to your relationships when you are stressed? What happens to your work performance when you are under stress?

It is possible to become very good at detecting signs of stress early, whether they be in your body, your emotions, or your behaviour. When you do detect the signs early you can implement stress management practices early on to keep your levels low so stress almost never gets out of control.

3. Physiological ways to reduce stress: Essentially all the activities in this section are about relaxation and maintaining good health. You can pick and choose from these which work for you. Depending upon how much stress you are experiencing (and we all experience differing amounts of stress at different times in our lives) you may need to do more or less of the activities. If you are very stressed and anxious it is recommended you devote 20-30 minutes at least 3 times a week to relaxation.
 - Lie down and do nothing other than breathe deeply. Being in nature can help too. Meditation, guided imagery and visualisation, progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), listening to music, laughing, and massage are other techniques that induce a relaxation response.
 - Eat healthy meals. Get enough sleep. Exercise.
4. Mental skills to reduce stress. Because stress is based on our perceptions we can change our perceptions and reduce our stress. We all interpret events, however there are many interpretations for why things are happening. So if you find yourself becoming stressed, ask yourself, "Is there another way to look at this?" The chances are that there are several other ways to interpret the situation that will make you feel less stressed. In general looking at situations in a more positive light, and focusing on learning from situations rather than indulging in self-pity helps. Learning to see opportunities in a situation rather than setbacks is also effective.
5. Behavioural actions / skills to reduce stress: Rebalance your life and your time; clear out the clutter; have fun; make time for hobbies and interests; build your social support networks; delegate or learn to delegate if you are not good at it; be assertive, say no when you need to, set your boundaries and enforce them; communicate effectively; manage time better; and deal with any harassment, bullying or abuse.

And finally if you are really in a bad way and no self-help technique seems to be working for you, then get professional help.