

STRESS LESS!

The Guide to Stress Management

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Introduction

Stress management is not a series of quick-fix techniques. It is an ongoing learning process that requires commitment, creativity, and dialogue directed at gaining clearer insight. This book will make it easy for you to identify and implement the changes you need to remove negative stress from your life.

Stress management involves making changes in perceptions, attitudes and behavior. You will learn a process called self-reflective learning that is the cornerstone of stress management. To successfully manage stress you must learn to think about your actions in terms of your own internal thought patterns (often called self-talk) and learn to change the messages you give yourself.

Stress is certainly a fact of life. For many, however, life's stressors have become unmanageable, bringing on a host of problems that may include hypertension, anxiety, sleep disturbances and more. Stress management is especially important when you have to handle change or an uncertain future. Stress management skills help you cope with the emotional upheavals that accompany these events.

Basic considerations about stress

Is stress really bad for you? No! Stress can energize you and keep you excited about life. Life would be meaningless and unexciting without stress. Whether you like it or not, stress is an integral part of everyone's life. Distress, or negative stress, can be managed and avoided. Eustress, or positive stress, should be celebrated! You need stress as a positive ingredient in your life.

You have no control over certain events that may cause stress, but you can learn how to deflect stressors. You can learn how to handle stress-provoking events so that they will not be harmful to your physical or psychological health. There are stressful situations you may never be able to change, but you can learn to change how you respond to them. The real dilemma is how to use stress in a positive way how to make stress work for you. Remember - you cannot stop the waves, but you can learn how to surf.

What is stress? Stress is the way you react to an unusual and/or difficult situation. Stress is any change you must adapt to. Life is a continuous learning process. Life is full of unexpected transitions and unstable situations you have no control over. Our lives are not predictable. Regardless of how much power or money you may have, all situations and things in life are temporary.

The way you handle life experiences is related to your childhood and the behaviors you learned then to cope with life challenges. As adults, you need to determine whether these behaviors still work and whether you are coping in a healthy manner. In some cases the behaviors and attitudes that you have acquired early in life could lead to emo-

tional imbalance in your adult life. This is why what really matters is not the situation causing stress but your ability to cope with it. Happiness is not the absence of problems but the ability to deal with them.

The Body-Mind Connection

There is a newly developed specialty within the field of medicine called psychoneuroimmunology. This field examines how the body, the mind and the immune system are all connected. Many scientific studies in this area point out that chronic stress is associated with a psychological process that leads to illness. Emotional stress leads to hormonal imbalances that further interfere with the immune function. Researchers have also found out that stress management techniques promote healing and improve physical and emotional wellbeing. Individuals who are optimistic and hopeful have a better immune system.

There are many examples of the relationship between negative stress and poor health. The New York Times has described studies including one that showed how a group of law students who were optimistic about doing well in school had more T-cells and natural killer cell activity than they had before the beginning of the semester. Other studies have also found that the more stress you experience, the more likely you are to get colds. Finally, a study on colds and stress found that stress played an important role in the development of a cold even when other factors such as poor diet, smoking, sleep problems, lack of exercise, and alcohol use were not taken into consideration.

Medical evidence links stress to problems including hypertension and cardiovascular complications. Any threat perceived by the brain, regardless of whether it is real physical danger or a minor threat, triggers the fight-or-flight reaction. This is a genetically programmed response pattern based on the fact that when human and animals are threatened, they will either fight or run as fast as possible.

The sympathetic nervous system is our warrior. Cardiologists tell us that stress can precipitate heart disease because some of the consequences of the fight-or-flight reaction are elevated heart rate, increased respiratory rate and high blood pressure. Serum cholesterol and triglyceride levels rise and the tendency of blood to clot increases. This blood can adhere to fatty deposits in the vessels and may block a crucial vessel, like a coronary artery. Following the fight-or-flight response, the body relaxes and returns to normal, but if the stress continues, the body stays on alert. This is why prolonged bouts of stress can lead to health problems.

Other physical problems related to stress include: allergies, asthma, gastrointestinal disorders, cancer, diabetes, emphysema, hypoglycemia, and speech problems. Four common symptoms caused by stress are headache, neck ache, backache and upset stomach. Muscles that contract and blood vessels that expand in the head in response to pain - provoking substances triggered by stress - generally cause stress-induced headaches. Neck ache and backache are caused by the release of "stress hormones" that make some muscles tense. Physicians think that the reason why some people suffer from diarrhea and vomiting when they are under stress may be a response to the contraction of the muscles that line the stomach and the intestines.

As you move through this book, you will learn how to identify sources of stress in you work life and personal life. You will learn how to differentiate between positive and negative stress. You will be able to isolate your personal coping techniques, trace each to its childhood roots, decide which may no longer work for you and develop new techniques. Finally, you will learn what lifestyle changes will increase your sense of wellbeing and help you cope with negative stress.

Chapter 1—Learning How to Cope with Stress

Your main goal in trying to cope with stress should be to promote wellness; to add pleasure and satisfaction to your life. Stress gives you the opportunity to become aware of what is going on in your body and mind and to take individual responsibility to improve your physical, emotional and spiritual life. These can be parts of your life that you hardly notice and almost take for granted. For example, stress at the office may accumulate with every ring of the phone and every meeting you have to squeeze into your already busy day.

Even when you are unable to change these situations, it helps to be aware of the stress they cause and prepare for it. Even when you are not aware of stress or do not recognize it, the body feels it and suffers the consequences. A person can lie with words, but the body does not lie. Becoming aware of stress signs is also important if you want to determine your comfort zone; in other words, how much stress can you take? Some of us are better equipped to cope with stress and can tolerate higher level of stress without becoming upset or anxious.

Learning to handle stress not only means being open to new information; it involves a critical review of your assumptions and perceptions in life and your willingness to develop new ways of thinking. After all, more important than the stressful event, is your perception of it. Remember! Your environment provides challenges and learning opportunities. It is your responsibility to accept challenges, identify the resources to meet those challenges and try out new behaviors.

Exercise 1 - Sources of stress

Look at a typical week in your own life. Think about all the things that happen every day - your daily routines, your commute, your contact with friends and family, the errands - everything. Pay careful attention to what makes you tense up even in just thinking about it. It could be something big, like a chronically ill child. It could be something tiny, like that leaky faucet you can't get fixed. If it bothers you, it's major, no matter how small it might seem to others. Now, list all the major sources of stress in your life.

Self-generated stress: behaviors and attitudes that lead to stress

Stress can be acute like a sudden change or illness or chronic; this refers to little stressors outside of yourself that accumulate before you even notice them. But you have to be most careful with self-generated stress. It could be the most dangerous type of stress because it is generally difficult to identify. Why? Self-generated stress is difficult to identify because it originates in our own perceptions.

Stress is often self-generated through our thoughts, attitudes and behavior. This type of stress is often caused not by what happens but by what you think is happening or how you react to what happens to you. Humans tend to make situations more stressful than they really are because of learned behaviors that are not always healthy.

Self-generated stress is also caused by your own interpretation about what should or should not happen or what you should or should not have; with the many "want to's" and "have to's" imposed by society and culture, perhaps inconsistent with what you really

want, a great deal of self-generated stress is created. The danger of this type of stress is that you are generally not aware of it.

During the years we have been doing stress management, we have seen two types of perceptive distortions that may lead to self-generated stress: interpreting the situation as stressful or problematic when nothing is really creating stress and having unrealistic goals that put excessive burden on us. The following thoughts are simple examples of self-generated stress:

I have to be perfect

I have to excel in everything I do

I have to please everybody; I have to make everybody happy

I have to prove myself to everyone

I cannot take a break and relax until I complete everything I have to do

I can only be happy if I have everything I want

Self-generated stress often has its roots in assumptions about what will make us happy or successful. These assumptions have been transmitted to us by society and can be summed up in the following statement: We want what we cannot have, we often have what we do not need and we really do not know what we need. By wanting what we cannot have we create often our own suffering and let desire run our life.

There is no end to our desires! We are in a constant competition with our friends and colleagues. There is a story about two acrobats in a circus. One told the other "look at me so you will not fall down," and the other said "If I look at you then I will really fall down." You do not need to imitate others. You need to use your energy to discover your potential and skills and what is most important to develop your definition of success instead of letting society prescribe its formula for success.

By constantly comparing yourself to others, you forget how to appreciate who you are, what you are and to enjoy life. Although society has defined it so, success does not mean having money or possessing material things. There is no question that money is necessary to meet your basic needs and to enjoy life, but how much is enough and what price are you willing to pay to have more than you really need?

We often have what we do not need because accumulating or possessing material things and holding on to them makes us feel powerful. However, nothing in this life is permanent; that is why attaching yourself to material things is a source of suffering. Attachment to things or people can be toxic and addictive. How many times do you look around in your home or office and see things you have not used in months or years?

Shopping for things we do not need is an addiction in our society. We really do not know what we need because we probably never took the time to find out that we need to have inner peace, which is the real source of living a joyful life. What you need and how you are going to achieve it has to originate within yourself, not outside for it to be genuine.

Your inner state of life is what determines your own success in life. If only money, power, status were the key to success, so many people who possess them would not be addicted to dangerous substances or show behaviors harmful to themselves or others. It is important to satisfy our basic needs and obtain material things that will make our life

comfortable, but there has to be a balance. You must be able to judge how much of our physical energy and mental peace of mind is worthy to sacrifice to obtain that comfort. Our commercialized society often makes us choose external strategies to cope with emotional issues that call for "internal adjustment transformations." When you buy things that you do not need to soothe yourself you do it because you do not want to face your sadness, anger, frustration, loneliness or whatever you are trying to run away from.

You do not have to suppress all your desires, but you have to learn how much of yourself you should sacrifice to act on your thoughts of desire. You do not have to give up your preferences, you just have to become more objective and develop a neutral mind. Later on we will show you how meditation can help you become neutral and get rid of frustrations and negative thoughts related to pessimism, inability to accept change and failure.

What are the signs of too much stress? Here are some warning signs to watch out for:

- Having trouble sleeping and/or wake up tired.

- Suffering from many small aches and pains. When we are under a great deal of stress, our muscles tense up and become painful.

- Becoming impatient and losing our temper easily.

- Getting upset about small things, when small irritations get the better of us.

- Eating, drinking or smoking too much. In some cases, people under stress may not eat properly and their bodies can become depleted of many nutrients.

- Being unable to concentrate.

- Feeling it takes a great deal of effort to accomplish things.

- Being unable to spend enough time with people who are dear to us.

Self-generated Stress: learning how stress is related to thinking

If you keep a self-generated stress diary, you may become more alert about what is going on in your mind and more aware of the negative messages you send yourself. Try to capture what you are thinking when feeling stressed out or responding to what you perceive as a stressful situation. You may be shocked when you become aware that something is wrong with your thinking and behavior and that you have become your worst enemy.

Let's look at Sara. One day, after Sara gets to her office, her boss unexpectedly tells her there is an emergency staff meeting to discuss the progress each unit is making in a specific project. She is asked to give a brief summary on behalf of her unit. She starts shaking; she starts sweating, and after speaking feels ashamed and embarrassed.

Sara had decided to start her self-generated stress diary that day. As soon as she goes back to her office, she writes: "I feel like a jerk, I feel so stupid and inadequate for this job." "I am sure everybody is laughing at me now." As it happens in many cases, the day goes by and nobody says anything negative about her presentation. Suddenly, Sara realizes she drove herself crazy for nothing. When she goes home, she reads her diary and realizes she has become her own "stress generator." Reading her diary she starts examining her inappropriate behavior and tries to find the causes for it. In other words, keep-

ing this diary is helping her to look at her negative core beliefs and at the thoughts behind her stress.

The messages you give yourself can limit what you are able to do. These self-limiting thoughts may prevent you from achieving your goals. Negative self-talk is a good example of how the way you think can be detrimental to a sense of well-being. Here are some examples:

I am not a good person. I deserve the bad things that happen to me.

If I ask questions, I will look like a fool.

I will not be able to make changes in my life.

There is nothing I can do to improve my current situation.

I should have accomplished more in my life; it is too late for me now.

The good news is that you can learn to reframe your negative thoughts. However, first you have to identify them. Once you know what they are and become aware of the negative effect they have on your behavior, you can create new thoughts to replace them. These new, positive statements are called "counters." They fight our self-limiting thoughts. If you make them part of your daily life, they will help you improve your behavior and attain your goals. As you include more positive thoughts and behaviors in your life, you will develop and project increased self-confidence.

Sonia is a woman in her 30's, very bright with a very satisfying personal and professional life. She came to me because she was suffering from "anxiety attacks." After keeping a diary about how she felt about herself during these attacks we were able to counteract her feelings of inadequacy. First she read aloud from her diary. We noted she usually said to herself: "I cannot do it." we examined the beliefs triggering her anxiety. We found out her feelings were a product of her negative self-concept. Her problems started during her childhood when she was generally compared to her sister who was considered more attractive and intelligent.

Once she realized what the problem was, we chose the following counter: "I can do it. I will be able to find solutions to my problems; if I cannot it is not the end of the world." She also learned meditation and relaxation. In a few months she was able to live a normal life again; she was even able to face a personal tragedy without experiencing any anxiety. The effect of this technique has been long lasting.

This technique, called cognitive reappraisal or cognitive restructuring, helps you see your problems in a new light by reevaluating assumptions or points of view acquired through the years from family and society. These thoughts are often unconscious and could be distorted. They influence the way you see yourself and the way you see others.

Exercise 2:

When you are beginning to feel stress, take a few minutes to remove yourself from the situation. Try to capture what you are thinking when feeling stressed out or responding to what you perceive as a stressful situation. Jot this down on a scrap of paper or an index card or in your stress journal.

As soon as you can, reread what you have written. Identify the beliefs behind your thoughts. Ask yourself if these beliefs are facts or assumptions. Did your worst fears come true?

Exercise 3: Counters

One way to stop negative stress is to counter the thoughts that trigger that stress. Review your list of the thoughts you have when you begin to feel stress. For each of these thoughts, you are going to develop a thought that is the opposite of the stress-inducing thought. These thoughts, which you will turn into phrases, are called counters. Whenever the negative thought comes to mind, you will turn that thought off - just like a faucet - by stating the counter. Some people post their counters on their desk or someplace where they will always see them. Others prefer to be more private and keep their counters in a notebook or a sheet of paper inside their desks. Whatever your style is, keep your counters handy so that you can refer to them when you need them. Here are some examples of negative thoughts and counters:

I can't do this job!

I was selected because I am capable of doing this.

Nobody cares about me.

I have loving friends. Two of them are Carole and Alice.

Chapter 2—Stress In The Workplace

The key to dealing with stress in the workplace is to identify what you can change and what you cannot change. For example, we always tell workers in governmental or funded organizations that they have to understand that the paperwork cannot be changed. Funding sources have certain requirements that are not open to negotiation. However, perhaps they can change how they manage their time and plan their daily activities or they can learn stress management strategies that will alleviate the stress caused by the excessive paperwork. Once you have identified what you can and cannot change, then you need to be able to differentiate internal from external stressors.

Coping with external stressors may require talking with our supervisor, reorganizing our time, taking breaks, etc. Coping with internal stressors may require changing your thoughts about being perfect, being able to delegate some responsibilities, setting home/office boundaries, etc. You may also have to make changes in your personal life (relaxing, developing better eating and sleeping habits, etc.). First, let's talk about what I mean by external and internal stress in the workplace. Individual (internal) and organizational or environmental (external) factors are both to blame for work-related stress. People usually focus on one or the other, often neglecting to acknowledge that both should be looked at in order to identify the appropriate strategies for effective coping. Top leaders and middle managers must make changes in the structure of the organizations and often modify policies and procedures to help alleviate workers' stress.

On the other hand, workers must learn to manage their stress as it relates to their role in the organization. It is like everything in life; in a marriage or any romantic relationship, people have to work hard to avoid conflicts and keep the relationship alive. Whether you like it or not those of us who are proud members of the workforce are like Catholic priests; they are married to the church and we are married to our agencies or corporations.

This relationship is even more complex because there are too many people involved. You generally say: "I have a life after this job," but you often spend more time in our workplace than with your relatives or loved ones. It is for this reason you cannot deny that your job may have a detrimental effect on your physical and emotional health. This is especially true if you are burned out or under a lot of stress. "It's only a job", we often say when we want to be in denial, but it is an important part of our lives, especially in the American society where, for many people, you are not only what you eat but also what you do.

Here are some of the major sources of stress that were identified by front-line as well as managers and supervisors in organizations where I have conducted organizational assessments:

Major organizational changes	Lack of or poor communication
Problems hiring and/or retaining staff	Lack of/or unclear policies and procedures
Lack of feedback on work done	Lack of intrinsic rewards

Inadequate staff development/training activities	Lack of emotional support, especially in the helping professions
Ineffective supervision	Unclear lines of responsibility
Interpersonal conflicts/lack of peer support/isolation	Organizational climate of distrust, competition or disrespect
Responsibility for the work of others	Inability to delegate
Role ambiguity (wearing too many hats)	Work overload/too much time spent on paperwork
Lack of mobility	Non-competitive salaries
Lack of participation in decision-making	Lack of job security
Lack of boundaries between home and office	Inadequate physical environment

Based on my experiences conducting organizational assessment and making recommendations to alleviate stress in the workplace, I will identify some general suggestions and suggestions that focus specifically on managers and supervisors. In addition, as a member of the helping professions, I cannot avoid offering suggestions for "professional caregivers."

General Suggestions

1. Try to establish your comfort zone in the workplace.

How much stress are you able to take at work? Remember stress could provide motivation but too much may have not only a negative effect on your job performance and job satisfaction but also in your personal life. The important thing is to be able to establish a middle point where you are using your skills to a maximum, enjoying what you are doing without being overloaded. Does it sound difficult? Yes, I know, but are you willing to pay with your own life? Read the statistics about how many young managers are dying of heart attacks. Examine how you are responding to work-related stress. Are you making things worse with your response?

2. Ask for help.

Do not be uncomfortable saying "I do not know how to do this." Regardless of the position you have in the organization, you are not supposed to know everything all the time. It is fine to be honest when you do not know or are having difficulty performing or understanding a task. The same way you do not have to be perfect in our personal life, you do not have to be perfect in your professional life.

3. Network and learn.

Learn something new by attending conferences and workshops; take a course, talk to others in your field. Become a member of a professional organization or of an informal group where you can discuss mutual concerns with individuals performing similar work.

4. Become a relationship manager.

It does not matter what your role is in your organization, you have to become a "relationship manager" to get along with your boss, co-workers or subordinates. Remember, we all have unique personalities and different ways to approach the same situation. Learn how to communicate and negotiate. Do not avoid conflict; deal with the problem.

5. Identify your sources of stress.

Remember before you find the solutions you need to identify the source of the problem. It sounds simple and that anybody with common sense would do it, but in reality most people want solutions but seem afraid to investigate why they need solutions for something.

6. Take care of your physical health.

Have annual physical examinations. Examine your eating and sleeping habits and exercise regularly. Anything related to your body will affect your level of stress while working. Learn about stress management interventions (e.g. meditation, yoga, and relaxation); obtain information on several practices and choose the ones that seem suitable for you.

7. Learn to structure and use your time effectively.

Time management forces you to set realistic goals and not to overextend yourself on the job. Learn when it is the best time to talk to your boss. Spend some time understanding his/her habits and schedule. Decide when you should put things in writing in addition to discussing them.

Suggestions That Focus On Managers And Supervisors

1. Delegate some tasks and responsibilities.

This alleviates your workload. It serves as a staff development tool and helps develop trust in workers. Avoid the one-person syndrome that leads to self-generated stress. When you delegate you are encouraging workers to be creative and take initiative, preventing them from getting bored, a major source of stress. Delegate routine details. Identify workers who have the experience and skills to perform the tasks. Delegate tasks that will enhance workers' skills and will stimulate them. Only delegate jobs you are confident workers will do well.

2. Reward your staff for work well done.

This could mean sending a memo or a letter or just saying thank you.

3. Review your daily and weekly plans and priorities with your employees.

This will make matters clearer and everyone more relaxed. When workers are under a lot of pressure, acknowledge the extra pressure. Share information with them so they know why there are so many demands placed on them. Tell them about your deadlines, grants you have to respond to, meetings, etc. Go over the tasks to be completed and set priorities.

When you have a complex and time-consuming project, special work arrangements may be called for. If possible try to work at home, away from interruptions while completing the project. If not, create a quiet environment in the office. Tell the staff you will not be available except for emergencies.

4. Make use of your authority.

If you identify problem employees, warn them in writing and let them know you will not tolerate unproductive or inappropriate behavior. Always document any problems.

Chapter 3—Stress Management for Caregivers and Mental Health Professionals

One of the major sources of stress for those in the helping professions, especially in the health field, is the lack of boundaries between an individual's work and their personal or social life. For example, some of us in mental health, often seem to play therapist with people other than our clients. Whether I am in a party or in a funeral, people sometimes want to have "on-the-spot sessions." Pay attention to the fact that I did not say you have to play therapist; you have the option to explain to friends, relatives, co-workers and other acquaintances you just met on the bus or train that you cannot be their therapist outside of your office. I still make this mistake once in a while, but being aware of it I now find myself doing it less often. I try to explain to people I cannot be their therapist and that it is unhealthy for both of us. It depletes me of the energy I need to care for my clients.

At the same time, no one can be objective giving advice to people with whom they have a close relationship or to people they do not know anything about, except for their problems. I am talking about those strangers who just found out you are professional caregivers. I guess it is human nature. I sometimes do it with friends who are in the medical field, asking them in social situations about the side effects of certain medications or sharing some "over 50 physical symptoms." So I advise them to tell me I should make an appointment and discuss the matter in their office.

Another source of stress for caregivers is the inability to accept help when you need it. You sometimes have the toughest time admitting you need to be cared for and letting others do for you what you do with people all the time. I see this happening to individuals in the medical professions as well as in the mental health field.

Stress Management Techniques

It is important to note that to be able to identify what will help you, you need to learn first what it is that you need help with. In other words, problem posing should precede problem solving. You may try to look for remedies for your problems without becoming aware first of what behaviors and attitudes you need to change. Perhaps because it is sometimes painful to take a close look at who you are; however, for changes to be everlasting, self-assessment is crucial. Before getting into specific stress management techniques, let's talk about general strategies:

1. Set realistic goals and do not expect to be perfect

In order to set realistic goals, you first have to create our own vision about life.

2. Become aware of your priorities in life

Take time to think about what makes you happy, what gives you joy and satisfaction in life. As the famous psychologist Abraham Maslow would say: are you self-actualized? Think about things in your life that need more of your attention and time. Remember what we said earlier about goal setting. Before setting realistic goals, you need to listen to these messages and take time to start a dialogue with yourself to find out what you

want. This does not have to be based on what someone else thinks you should want or should be doing at a certain point in our lives.

Throw away that biological clock or those theories of development with exact ages and time when important life events must take place in our lives! One of the teachings of The Buddha that I really like is that you should not believe anything just because it was said by a great teacher - including himself. The important thing is who you really are, what you want, what you need, what you are able to do and what you think is right to do at certain points in your life.

Do not be afraid of change. It's OK to change goals or review your needs once in a while or more than once in a while. As long as you do not engage in self-destructive behavior, there is not anything wrong with it. For example, both authors changed careers several times in our lives. In the past for many people this meant lack of stability or insecurity. Now, experts in vocational counseling are saying the opposite; they think diversifying yourself professionally is the best way to widen your options. But it could do even more than that for you.

I realized at some point in my life that I get bored very easily with everything, so having a diversity of tasks to perform in my professional career provides the constant challenge I need and prevents boredom to enter my life and make me a non-actualized person. Winston Churchill said, "to be perfect is to change often."

In Buddhism, we find change is one of the kinds of suffering. We would like things to be permanent but everything in life is transitory. As painful as it may sound, people, things and experiences are not here to stay. In reality change is the only thing in life that is with us on a permanent basis. So, when setting goals, remember, change could help you improve your life. It is really important that you pay attention to your intuition, your needs, your desires, and your passion in life. I often ask people "What would happen if you do not achieve your goals, would you go to jail?" If the answer is no, why worry?

Become the creator of your life recipe; make your own prescription for success! If you make mistakes, it only means you are human. Get over it and realize that you have not been and will not be perfect ... by the way neither can your friends, co-workers, parents, children, spouses or romantic partners, significant others or the rest of the inhabitants of the fifth largest planet of the solar system: Earth. Discard all notions of perfection; it is not realistic!

3. Reevaluate your expectations

Stress is sometimes the difference between your expectations and reality. You will experience less stress when you realize and accept that everything in this world is always changing, that nothing holds still and that you face new challenges every day. And guess what? You have no control over this, so learn to accept that there are things you cannot change and if you fight them you will experience a lot of stress. The answer is to identify those things you can change and those you cannot. In the latter case, learn to prepare for the experience because you can always decide how you respond to life situations.

4. Schedule time for yourself and keep the appointment

Let's start with your daily schedule. You should be able to find at least 10 or 15 minutes every day to be alone with your thoughts. Insulate yourself from telephone calls, beepers, computers or other stress producing equipment and replenish yourself. Do meditation, visualization, self-massage, relaxation. We will discuss these techniques later on.

In addition, you should schedule different activities each weekend for personal enjoyment. You do not have to wait until you are on vacation. This does not mean you have to go out every weekend. For some people having fun is being out, but sometimes you may feel like just reading an interesting book, listening to music or watching a nice television program.

There has to be a balance, it is not good to stay home all the time. It is exciting to use this "personal time" to open ourselves up to new experiences. For example to visit places you have never visited in the past. Look at the paper or get on line. Do you see any activities that may seem interesting? Pay attention to the opportunity to have self-renewing experiences.

You cannot always expect excitement to come to you; sometimes you have to run after it. Scheduling time to add some excitement and fun to your life is important. It helps you look forward to the workweek ahead of you.

Remember making the appointment is not enough; you have to keep it, the same way you keep appointments to visit your doctor or to attend a meeting in the office. Ah! I almost forgot to tell you, try not to over program yourself. Leave some room for spontaneity. Learn to be flexible. Believe me, it is more fun. Some friends accuse me of being too spontaneous at times, but I always respond: "Nobody is going to tell me when I am going to die, so I can leave everything ready."

5. Discover ways to share your stress and constructively express your emotions

Do you know that according to health researchers, counseling can reduce the risk of a heart attack? It helps to talk to someone about your concerns and worries. Another person can help you see your problems in a different light. There are times, if you feel your problem is serious, when you need professional help; there are others when all you need is to talk to a friend, but the main idea here is that you need to let it out. How you do it depends on the severity of our troubles and our ability to handle the situation, but the important thing is that you need to talk about it. It is important to note that knowing when to ask for professional help may avoid more serious problems later.

Expressing your emotions is not enough. Expressing your emotions to the right people in the right manner is not always easy. Unfortunately a lot of times you are unable to share your emotions with those people who may be at least partly the cause of your stress. How many times do you have perfect strangers telling you their conflicts with their spouses, children, co-workers or friends? The solution in moments like those is to give them a quarter and say: "Please call them and tell them exactly how you feel. Tell them exactly what you are telling me."

6. Free yourself from anger

Whether you want to admit it or not, you have felt or still feel angry at someone or something. Anger is one of main sources of stress. It is a very anxiety-provoking feeling and difficult to get rid of. You think that if you forget, whatever or whoever made you angry is going to make you angry again. I still do not know whether the answer is to forget or not, but I am convinced that you need to forgive and at the same time you could still learn from the experience.

It takes a lot of strength and courage to forgive, but you have to do it for yourself. It is for your own benefit that you need to forget. It is OK to acknowledge your angry feelings; there is nothing wrong with feeling angry. Once you repeat to yourself you are angry, you have to then realize you cannot let anger take control of your life and ruin your physical and emotional health. Therefore, once you say, "Here you are" "I know it is you," then you need to say "I know you are not good for me." Instead you should then welcome forgiveness into your life, letting go whatever was done to you. You could use the energy you were using being angry for this transformation. Once you are able to this, you can move forward and can concentrate on living a better life.

Let's learn with great leaders such as the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Even though the Chinese government sent him into exile, he prays for them. If you pay attention to history, those leaders who began by killing those they called their enemies, without making exceptions, when they came into power, generally ended up being the worst and most dangerous dictators. As Margaret Atwood says, "An eye for an eye leads only to more blindness."

7. Develop and maintain a network of caring people

Solitude is important, but paradoxically at the same time, you need to feel connected with other people in life. I do not mean just having a lot of friends with whom you go out and have fun. I am talking of people, men or women, with whom you develop the kind of understanding that only comes from a deep sharing of experiences. This means people with whom you can break your silence about certain emotional issues in your life, people who helps you uncover your hidden fears. These relationships help you define who you really are and more important, they give true meaning to your life.

How much time do you spend nurturing your friendships? According to a New York Times article published in May 1998, researchers have found that having social relationships helps to protect us against disease. An article published by Natural Health in 1993 discussed the findings of a scientific study that showed that monkeys who were friendly had stronger immune systems than those who exhibited more dominant behavior. The study implies that having a network of supportive people not only helps our immune system, but the way you respond to stress is also associated with the immune system.

Responding to difficult situations or challenges with calm and understanding rather than in an aggressive and hostile manner also strengthens your body-mind connection. We always complain about how we do not see our friends enough, but we do not make an effort to call and stay in touch. No matter how difficult it is, developing nurturing meaningful relationships should be one of the most important aspects of our life. And I said meaningful because I do not mean just making friends to avoid loneliness or having something

to do. This is more detrimental than being alone. You have to be selective and spend time with people with whom you really feel you have a special connection. Books or other people cannot help you with this selection. You have to listen to your heart and follow it.

Quantity is not what matters when it comes to friendships, it is the quality of the time you spend with them and the great feeling that stays with you after being with your friends or the excitement in knowing you are going to be with them. Notice I said "being with" not doing things with. In true friendship, you enjoy doing things with the person but it is not the main reason for being with the person; you enjoy having a cup of coffee or listening to music. A true friend is not the person who tells you what he or she wants for his or her birthday or for the holidays. I have a dear friend who always says that a true friend is a "4:00 o'clock in the morning friend," meaning the person you can call at 4 in the morning if you are feeling sick without even thinking about it, knowing the person is there for you.

It is my opinion that material things such as presents have nothing to do with good, solid long-lasting friendships. It is giving of oneself what is difficult to people at times, it is not asking for or giving expensive presents. Be spontaneous and if you see something your friend would like, buy it. The price or the occasion should not be important, it is the thought associated with the present. These are things that need to be considered in the development and preservation of friendships. I have seen many relationships ruined because material things got on the way.

Let's give of ourselves, let's take time to be with our friends, let's try to understand our friends, let's find their positive traits and forgive what you may not like that much, let's show how much you love them with actions not with gifts. After all, this is what nurturing friendships really mean.

8. Use your emotions.

Have a good cry if you feel like it. Crying helps us cope with powerful emotions, negative or positive, and according to scientists it also helps us get rid of chemicals in our bodies created by moments of stress. Hold on to your sense of humor. A good laugh can get you through the worst of times.

9. Approach problems as challenges

The following steps may help you:

- a) Ask yourself in a very objective manner: What is it that I have to face? Define your challenge.
- b) Make a list of the individuals or situations associated with the situation.
- c) Make a list of the decisions you could make to face the challenge.
- d) Think of the resources or people that may help you face the challenge.
- e) Develop a strategy and put it into action. Remember; do not give up until a solution is reached!

10. Listen to your mind

Remember the idea of self-reflection mentioned at the beginning of this chapter? Please, give yourself time to expose yourself to yourself. Does it sound too complicated? Let me

explain what I mean. If you learn to focus on what you are doing and not only on its content, you may find that unexpected personal feelings will come to the surface. It is OK. This will help you increase your awareness of what is going on in your life. When you decide to do this, it could be your best day or the worst. It could lead to confusion, guilt or shame. However, it could be the beginning of an emotionally healthier life.

11. Listen to your body (small aches and pains), especially when you are pushing too hard

You may try to lie to yourself but your body is more honest. When you feel too tired, have a headache, feel pain in our neck or back, your body is trying to send you a message. In some cases, it may be telling you that you are under more emotional stress than you can take. In other words, you have gone beyond your comfort zone.

Jennifer came to a stress management group I was facilitating and said: "I don't know what I am doing here, I don't have any stress." She had a very stressful job and looked stressed out to me, so I asked her: "What do you generally do when you get home?" She responded: "I watch a lot of TV, I smoke and since I sometimes go home with a headache I drink a lot of coffee." Ah.... But remember she did not have any stress!

12. Interrupt the stress through time-outs

Mini-breaks can make all the difference. Marsha goes to the beach when her job begins to get to her. She never leaves her desk - she just focuses her thoughts on a favorite vacation spot for a minute or two and comes back refreshed. Karen takes a walk. Even a trip to the ladies' room is enough to break the stress cycle.

13. Write empowerment statements

Eliminate "cannot," instead choose "I will." Choose an affirmative statement and make it a part of your life. Post this affirmative statement in your home and/or office. Post it in a place where you will see it every day.

14. Be a good friend to yourself.

Examine the way you treat yourself. If you don't treat yourself well, how can you expect others to treat you well? Remind yourself that you are a worthwhile person. Learn to be patient with yourself.

15. Develop your own definition of success

In order to do this, you have to get rid of preconceived notions to get to your underlying truth. In other words, to find out what type of person you really are, what it is that you really want out of life. Remember we all have our own truth and are unique way to see the world, this is what you must reach for, not somebody else's version. I have been unable to find a true version of the truth about anything in life. Have you?

16. Organize yourself and learn to manage your time

Make a regular schedule of activities you enjoy. It is good to organize yourself, but make plans for fun along the way. Decide what makes you happy and make time to do it. Do not answer the telephone during meals. Learn to say no.

17. Get rid of people or things you do not love or like

Clutter causes chaos; chaos leads to stress. When you cannot find things, your stress level can begin to rise. Think of all the time you lose trying to remember where you put something. Similarly, too many people in your life demanding attention creates a kind of chaos and limits the amount of quality time you can spend with those you love. Hannah once described the experience of too many people pulling on her as feeling like all these strangers she didn't even like attaching hoses to her and trying to suck her dry. As soon as she suffered the pain of pulling one loose, it seemed that another came to take its place.

Simplify your life. Get rid of anything in your space that you do not love or do not use. If you are surrounded by a few things that you love, you have time to enjoy them. If you can easily find the things that you need to use, you will operate more efficiently. Be equally ruthless with your relationships. Spend your time with people who nourish and replenish you. Help and support them and let them help and support you.

18. Do not neglect your spiritual life. Seek meaning and purpose in life.

Create some quiet time for meditation or prayer. Experiment with soothing music. Nurture hobbies that help you express yourself and renew your spirit.

Chapter 4—Cognitive reappraisal

"Empowerment means learning to see things in a different light" As mentioned before, the key to this technique is awareness; Becoming aware that something is wrong with your thinking and behavior. Since you have already identified the beliefs behind your thoughts when you feel under stress, now it is time to examine those beliefs and develop a plan of action to challenge them. You now need to change the way you interpret your emotions. This is the real meaning of cognitive reappraisal. There is a behavioral aspect to this approach, which is changing the way you respond to your emotions.

Once you have become more alert about what is going on in your mind and identify the beliefs behind your thoughts, you must challenge those thoughts that, for the purpose of this discussion, I will call "stress triggers." Before you embark on this important mission, you must become aware of the following:

There are other ways to think and act

Your current way of thinking may not be the best for you

You have other choices

You need to change the way you think

You have the power to change

We are not asking you to change beliefs that were "deposited" in your head many years ago in a couple of days, but we are asking you to challenge them. Learn to see life in a new light, to understand that your thought process may be often the source of your self-generated stress.

One of the main reasons why this happens is because we see things as black or white and do not see the options we have available to cope with life problems. I never saw this clearer than with the case of Isabella, a dear friend of mine who has been a devoted Catholic all her life. She was taught that when you get married it is forever and that if you attend mass and take Communion you are supposed to be a good person.

I found out a few years ago that Isabella's husband was being unfaithful and was having a hot and serious affair with a younger woman. I knew I could not tell my friend exactly what was going on. I called her and said I thought her husband was behaving in a strange manner, based on my own observation and stories she had told me. For example he would leave the apartment in the middle of the night, but she said he was just feeling depressed and wanted to take a walk. She got mad at me, saying he was very religious and would not be unfaithful to her.

In addition, even though they were having marital problems, Isabella said that in her religion, when you get married before the eyes of God, even if you are suffering, you couldn't get a divorce. After hiring a detective, she found out the shocking truth - that you could hear mass and then see your mistress. Now they are divorced and she regrets she did not do it sooner.

Sometimes our beliefs lead to generalizations about people based on their religion, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, cars they drive or clothes they wear. There is not a right formula to challenge our beliefs and change the way you think; each one of us has to develop our own strategies. The important point is to change the way you respond to

unhealthy situations. Instead of blaming them, you need to recognize that you are often responsible for our own stress. The steps involved in this process are:

- a) look at the situation that led to your response,
- b) examine the belief behind your response and
- c) challenge the thought process you used to try to make sense of the situation.

For example, let's imagine this situation: Mary runs into Frank in the street and he is somewhat abrupt and tells her "I am running late to a meeting, I will call you later." Mary responds by feeling anxious and uncomfortable, thinking she had done something wrong to Frank and perhaps did not realize it, blaming herself for Frank's behavior. She may believe she always ruins relationships. Perhaps as a child her family always blamed Mary for not being the perfect child. Once Mary becomes aware of the fact that every time a friend's behavior is unusual she blames herself for it, the challenge is to realize that in reality sometimes people are under a lot of personal or work-related pressure and she should not think they are upset with her.

In order to use this method you have to be willing to:

Experiment

Enter in a dialogue with yourself

Acknowledge value in conflict

Be willing to change your mental models

You have to be able to modify deeply engrained assumptions about yourself and about others. Cognitive reappraisal requires what adult educators call self-knowledge. This process calls for an examination of how your life history has expressed itself in the way you see yourself, your roles, and your social expectations.

Self-reflective learning helps you obtain a clearer understanding of yourself by identifying assumptions acquired in earlier life, which have become "unhealthy" in adulthood. In other words, these are the assumptions associated with the beliefs that lead to stressful thoughts. It is helpful to ask yourself what you are afraid of. What would happen if you break with old ways of thinking and behaving? How is it that the "status quo" is easier even when it is killing you? You are afraid of the unknown even when the unknown may be better for us than that which is familiar.

We have the extreme cases of individuals in abusive or conflictive relationships who are afraid to leave because leaving implies changing their lives and prefer to suffer with a familiar situation. They are really afraid of what the future will bring. Instead you should focus on making the present better because tomorrow could soon be today, so there is no need to be afraid of the future. Let's use our energy not to be afraid of tomorrow but to make the present more enjoyable from a physical, emotional and spiritual point of view.

Exercise 4:

Now that you have identified your main stressors and have learned about these stress management techniques, what techniques would you choose to handle stress in a healthy fashion? Pick one or two and develop an action plan, complete with deadlines, for how you will implement the techniques.

Chapter 5—Stress and Your Lifestyle

Stress and Nutrition

Nutrition is an important part of the whole health picture. Symptoms of stress such as anxiety, depression, and hyperactivity can be explained by a careful examination of our diet as well as vitamin, mineral and other nutrient levels. Experts suggest that those suffering from stress stick to a fresh, whole food diet that is high in complex carbohydrates, moderate in protein and low in fat. Less than 2 percent of our diet should consist of simple sugars. Much of the sugar you consume should come from fruit.

Stress is associated with the poor absorption or digestion of certain nutrients; this may lead to deficiencies. For example, vitamin B6 is rapidly depleted during time of stress and needs to be replenished on a regular basis. An appropriate diet should include supplements of vitamins and minerals, particularly B complex vitamins and vitamins A, C and E as well as selenium, calcium, magnesium among others.

Be concerned with what you eat. Research shows that stress depletes our body of protein, B-vitamins, vitamin C and vitamin A. They can only be replaced and maintained by consuming balanced meals. You need to eat a variety of foods to ensure an adequate diet that will replace nutrients lost while you are under stress. Fruits and vegetables are excellent sources of vitamins, especially vitamin A (dark green vegetables and yellow vegetables such as carrots, squash, and sweet potatoes) and vitamin C (citrus fruits, peppers, baked potatoes, and strawberries). Whole grains provide B-vitamins and iron. Fish, poultry, lean meats, dry beans, and peas supply proteins. Dairy products are major sources of calcium and other nutrients.

Where and when you eat is very important. You should avoid eating when you are in a hurry or unable to eat in a relaxing atmosphere. This affects your digestion as well as eating while driving, standing, talking on the telephone, working or doing something else at the same time you are eating. You should avoid eating late at night.

Eating is one of the many ways you try to cope with stressful situations. It is also important to avoid emotional hunger. You should be aware of why you eat. Is it because you are hungry or because you are bored, depressed, anxious or need some kind of gratification? Do not use food as a Band-Aid. Remember a Band-Aid only solves the problem temporarily. When you are under stress, you generally binge on sweets such as chocolate bars, cookies and ice cream. They often make you feel better initially but you then gain weight that adds to our stress. We are not recommending any diets because we all know that dieting is dead and buried, but here are some simple eating suggestions for a healthier life:

- Choose light, natural foods over processed or sugary foods
- Read can and bottle labels. Ingredients are listed in descending order. Sugar can appear as several different components: sucrose, fructose and corn syrup.
- Snack on healthful foods

Eat plenty of complex carbohydrate foods such as rice (especially brown rice), whole-grain breakfast cereals (without or low in fat and sugar), pasta (made without egg yolks), beans, lentils, yams and corn.

- Use Tamari sauce instead of soy sauce
- Limit your intake of sugar, sodium, fat and alcohol. Avoid food dyes, preservatives and hydrogenated oils
- Use instant carob instead of hot chocolate mix. It has a similar taste but does not contain any sugar
- Use plenty of olive oil. It is rich in monounsaturated fatty acids, the healthiest choice among dietary fats which lowers total cholesterol and artery-clogging LDL. It is also rich in polyphenols, a group of antioxidants which protect us from heart disease and cancer.

Stress and Exercise

Physical exercise is one of the most effective means of managing stress. You should design an exercise routine appropriate to your needs, resources and time available. When you are in good physical condition you are better equipped to deal with stress. You react less drastically to environmental, physical and emotional stress. The way exercise increases your endurance is by lowering your blood pressure and blood fats, improving muscular strength and lung capacity, increasing the inner size of arteries and the number of capillaries and reducing total peripheral resistance in blood circulation.

Physical exercise is vital to your hearts. Exercise makes the heart stronger and increases its pumping capacity, making it beat more slowly at rest and during work. The important thing to remember when designing an exercise program is that it is not about having thin thighs, a super stomach or a perfect waistline (unless you are planning to become a size 2 model). It is about feeling good about yourself. It is about taking care of your health to be able to enjoy life.

When you start to exercise, you should begin slowly. Once you get used to a particular level, you may increase to a more demanding level. An appropriate exercise program should always begin with a warm up period of 3-5 minutes of stretching and light exercise to reduce the risk of injuries when you begin the more strenuous period of exercise. You should never stop exercising abruptly. You should always end with a cool down period so our bodies can return to their usual breathing and heart rates.

Experts say you should exercise a minimum of three times a week. These three days should not be continuous but scheduled with a day of rest between the days of exercise. The recommended duration each time is 20-30 minutes. Now let's face it, there are days when you would really just stay in bed and watch a fitness videotape. If a routine is not longer fun, try something different; perhaps you want to walk instead, go cycling or plant a garden.

Starting an exercise program is not the main problem you face, it is sticking to it. I know most of my friends start with a lot of enthusiasm, doing too much too soon. They go out and buy expensive exercise equipment that they often end up using only on holidays or a couple of times a year. Who does not have a treadmill that serves as a nice ornament in the living room or the bedroom? Or signed up for an aerobics class at a health club and only went a few times or cancelled your membership after a while. Of course, you said you would seriously start next year.

Choose a program that you can truly live with, one that takes into consideration your lifestyle. But remember, this is too important to your physical and psychological help to just forget about it. Choose something that is going to be easier to do regularly and think about the reasons why you stopped last time and learn from your past. In addition, do not think only about your fitness level, dress size or body parts you want to improve, but take into consideration what you enjoy. In my case, I know even though I like health clubs, it is difficult to me to get to a gym because I am not crazy about crowds. I love walking so generally instead of using public transportation I walk (it is cheaper and safer anyway).

Listen to your ego. For example, I love lifting weights because it makes me feel powerful. Even when I am only lifting ten pounds I imagine I am lifting 300 and this thought keeps me going. So do not go crazy now analyzing your childhood, but think about what would make you feel strong, powerful or just plain happy. Is it swimming, jogging or just getting off the bus or the train farther from your stop and walking? No matter what you do, make your workout a must.

Make working out part of your daily routine. Just think that exercising is like brushing your teeth, taking a shower, eating or going to work. This way you are making physical exercise an important part of your life.

Time Management

Do not tell me you are too busy to enjoy life. Here are some ideas to identify what is preventing you to accomplish your tasks in a 24-hour day:

- Identify your main time wasters
- Make a realistic plan
- Make a "must do" and "should do" list
- Estimate the amount of time each task will take
- Establish deadlines for each task
- Make a daily or weekly "To Do List"
- Plan time to work and plan time to play
- Do not spend too much time doing the same thing
- Reward yourself each time you complete a task
- Avoid distractions
- Identify times when you are more alert and perform better. Adjust your schedule accordingly.
- Try to build time into your schedule for interruptions, emergencies, telephone calls, unscheduled events and unforeseen problems
- Cut off non-productive activities as soon as possible
- Learn to say no

Exercise 5: Formulate a time management contract.

Examine your current problems concerning time management. Make a list of things you can do to make better use of your time from now on. Don't try to do them all at once. Make an action plan that gradually phases in the new activities.

Developing a Wellness Plan

Stress management is a plan of action that helps you cope with life challenges and to replenish your energy. Following a wellness plan helps you cope with stress, build optimal health and live a better life. The philosophy of an effective wellness plan program is that mind, body and spirit are a unified system and that when one is affected, the whole system suffers. The objective of this session is to help you design an individualized wellness plan.

Exercise 6: What are my priorities?

Think about things you want to change. After you complete this exercise, you may use the following format to develop your wellness plan:

List the first three things that you need to change in your life. Write down your goals. Make them specific and manageable. Separate them into short-term goals (goals you want to achieve within the next six months) and long term goals (those you want to achieve within the next 12 months).

Identify your strengths - anything that will help you achieve your goal (e.g. skills, a supportive network of family and friends, the community, etc.)

Identify your challenges - areas of improvement needed to attain your goal or barriers to success. Identify the next step or actions needed to carry out your plan (e.g. take courses, get professional advice, learn meditation, spend more time in solitude, develop a better support system, etc.).

Establish deadlines to take action. Try to be realistic based on time and resources you have available. Establish your own pace; try not to set yourself for failure. Evaluate your progress and examine your decisions according to whether you have been able to achieve your goals. Review your deadlines if needed. Add areas you want to change once you have attained your goals based on the priority list you established when you completed the exercise for this session.

Stress gives you the opportunity to take charge of your life. A wellness program, tailored to your needs, can help you develop the self-awareness you need to take individual responsibility and learn to count on yourself to get physically, emotionally and spiritually fit.