

STRESS MANAGEMENT



understanding stress and healthy coping strategies

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is any physiological or psychological arousal produced by external or internal stressors. The stressors must be perceived as challenging or exceeding one's ability or resources to cope.

IS STRESS ALWAYS A BAD THING?

No! Stress is a **normal** and **necessary** part of life. There are two types of stress a person can experience:

Eustress is experienced when moderate levels of stress increase our ability to perform or function. For example, when you have an exam coming up, the stress you might feel could motivate you to study in order to receive a good grade.

Distress on the other hand, is the result of stress becoming overwhelming and causing adverse effects

DISTRESS

can impact individuals differently depending on the cause of the stress, called the **stressor**, and how the stress is handled. Distress can present itself as: **Acute Stress, Episodic Stress, or Chronic Stress**

ACUTE STRESS



is the most commonly experienced type of distress. The stressors that cause this type of stress typically start and end quickly. A person's body typically returns to a normal state shortly after the experience is over.

Our response to acute stress is what kept us alive thousands of years ago, when our most common stressor was avoiding large predators. This response is often referred to as fight, flight, or freeze. When experiencing acute stress, a person may experience increased heart rate, fast and heavy breathing, sweating, irritability, and mood changes.

Examples of stressors: running late, a pop quiz, and riding a roller coaster.

EPISODIC STRESS



is typically caused by repetitive or frequent occurrences of stressors. It is usually overwhelming and difficult to manage, with little time for the body to return to a relaxed state. Episodic stress often feels like a person is moving from one crisis to the next with no rest in between.

Unmanaged episodic stress can cause muscle tension, headaches, memory problems, difficulty focusing, anger or irritability, increased likelihood of becoming sick, and poor judgment. An important distinction of episodic and chronic stress is that although it is frequent, there is typically an end in sight.

Examples of stressors: frequent deadlines and stressors in multiple areas of life

CHRONIC STRESS



is stress that continues for a long time, sometimes indefinitely. It is often difficult for a person to see a way to change or improve their situation.

A chronically stressed individual might experience high blood pressure, heart disease, insomnia or hypersomnia (excessive sleepiness), emotional withdrawal, significant increase or decrease in appetite, trouble focusing, emotional changes, increased likelihood of sickness, increased drug or alcohol use, and mood or anxiety disorders.

Examples of stressors: poverty, discrimination, and a deeply dissatisfying job.

Understanding the different types of stress highlights the importance of prioritizing healthy coping, especially when stressed!

Now what?

In order to minimize the impacts of distress, it is important to remember to check in with yourself and keep a balance between *Problem-Focused Coping* and *Emotion-Focused Coping*.



PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING

Problem-focused coping strategies work to eliminate or reduce the impact of the stressor, which in turn reducing feelings of distress. For example, if you are feeling distressed because of a big test coming up, you could create a study schedule, read over the study guide, and start studying! Here are some tips for problem-focused coping:

- **Consider Eisenhower Decision Matrix**
Prioritize what is urgent and important, schedule things that are important but not urgent, delegate things that are urgent but not important, and eliminate things that are not urgent or important.
- **Adjust Expectations and Make Achievable Goals**
It is easy to set ourselves up for failure by taking on too much at once. Make sure goals are reachable, and if they are not, make adjustments. You may also want to consider breaking up larger tasks into smaller reachable ones and creating to-do lists.
- **Create a schedule**
When creating your schedule make sure to prioritize and add in time for a restful night sleep, healthy meals, and emotion-focused coping to avoid causing new stressors! This will not only help you feel better, but will increase your productivity.



EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING

Emotion-focused coping is often referred to as self-care and can be a powerful tool. It is especially important to focus on emotion-focused coping when the symptoms of distress are preventing you from problem-focused coping or when there is nothing you can currently do to directly address the stressor. Here are some tips for emotion-focused coping:

- **Engage In Activities that Make You Feel Rejuvenated**
These activities could include going for a walk, doing a craft, or talking to a friend. Avoid overusing activities that are distractions, but do not result in feeling rejuvenated, like social media and TV.
- **Work emotional-focused coping into your daily routine**
Coping does not have to be time consuming to be effective. For example, you can work mindfulness into some of your daily tasks, like walking or eating. If you need help staying on track, there are many apps that can help!
- **Prioritize self-care without avoiding**
It is important to prioritize self-care, but be careful not to use this as a reason to unnecessarily avoid responsibilities, which can then lead to additional stressors. Remember, coping does not have to be time consuming to be effective!

Example:

Stressor	Problem-Focused Coping	Emotion-Focused Coping
Conflict with a friend	Plan a time to talk about conflict. Look up healthy communication skills.	Take a walk, listen to music, and take a long bath or shower.



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