

Stress Management: Ways to Cope¹

Suzanna Smith and Joe Pergola²

Stress management practices help you cope with stress. Coping is what you do to deal with the pressure of stressors and stay steady. Coping is a natural process we do throughout our lives. Some ways of coping are more helpful than others. In this series we talk about the helpful coping strategies. This publication focuses on ways you can think about problems that will help you overcome stress.

How Do You Look at Stress?

One important step in managing stress is to be aware of how you look at the stressful situation. What do you believe will happen? Do you feel that you will be able to deal with the problem?

Is stress a challenge? People who cope well with stress usually have a positive outlook on life. They see a situation as a challenge instead of a problem. They see the glass as half full instead of half empty. Their beliefs about the situation are very important. They may actually have more of an impact on stress than the stressor event. Adults who are optimistic have higher levels of mental and physical health than those who are more negative.

There seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy at work. When you see a stressor as a problem or crisis it is likely to become a crisis. This is because you feel unable to cope. When you see an event as something that can be managed, you are likely to act quickly to solve a problem before it exhausts your energy. In other words, how you perceive the situation influences how you react.

If you can change your negative thoughts into positive ones you will find it easier to manage stress. One easy way to do this is to reframe the situation. When you do this, you look at things in a different, more positive light. This technique, called reframing often helps a person feel better.

Monica's Story: *Monica is a single working mother with two elementary aged children at home. She recently lost her job as a receptionist with a large factory. She was initially shocked by the lay off. Instead of dwelling on the loss, she looked at it as an opportunity for change. She felt that she had been stuck in rut. Her job was going nowhere. There was little opportunity for her to move up in the company. Monica stayed because the work was stable. After the plant closed, Monica went back to school and updated her computer and business skills. Her children encouraged her, and they all did homework together. They took odd jobs...caring for pets, mowing lawns, babysitting. Monica's mother helped with child care after school. When Monica finished her studies, she found a higher level, stable job with a small company in a nearby town so the children could be near their father. Although the change was a "challenge," Monica said she was happier than she had been in her old job.*

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2. Suzanna Smith, associate professor, Human Development, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, and Joe Pergola, extension agent IV, Hillsborough County, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.

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Reframing Exercise

See the Table below for some examples of how you can reframe certain situations. When you start to feel pressured or tense in a situation, try to use reframing to look at the situation differently.

Table. Examples of Positive Reframing.

| Negative Outlook | Positive Reframe |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>stubborn</i> | determined |
| <i>stingy</i> | thrifty |
| <i>bossy</i> | a leader |
| <i>loud</i> | uninhibited |
| <i>shy</i> | quiet |
| <i>picky</i> | attends to details |
| <i>won't follow rules</i> | creative/innovative |
| <i>talks too much</i> | outgoing |

There are also times when it seems almost impossible to feel positive. For example, someone in your family passes away. A coworker becomes seriously ill. You and your spouse decide to divorce.

Feeling sad, lonely, or afraid is not bad. These feelings are normal. At these times it may be helpful to take walks outdoors and to try to appreciate the positive aspects of your life. In time and with reflection and acceptance, you may come to see a problem as an opportunity to learn and grow.

Are you in control of your stress? Do you feel you can handle stress? People who are able to overcome stress have a sense of personal control. They feel independent and in charge of their lives.

People who feel in control believe they can handle tough situations. They think of themselves as problem solvers and take steps to handle difficulties. This prevents problems from becoming worse. In the following example, Shawn and his family do whatever is needed to solve their problems, even though there are many stressors in their lives.

Shawn's Story: *Shawn is a car mechanic. His wife was seriously ill last year and has not been able to return to work. The family does not have health insurance. The couple is seriously in debt for thousands of dollars of medical expenses. Shawn takes a second job. The couple cuts back on giving money to charity and going out to dinner. Shawn seeks help from a consumer credit counseling agency to help arrange a payment schedule for the medical bills and a budget to keep up with living expenses. The couple's church takes a collection and gathers \$500.*

Talk to yourself! Most of us talk to ourselves mentally about what is happening to us during the day. This self-talk can be negative or self-critical. For example, you might say,

That was really a dumb thing for me to say."

"I can't stand my supervisor. We'll never get along."

On the other hand, self-talk can be positive. You might say,

"That was a funny thing to say"

"Maybe I need to say that again and this time say what I really mean."

"I don't feel comfortable with him but I'll give it a try."

Positive self-talk helps people change the way they look at stressful situations. This lessens the harmful effects of stress. Positive self-talk is also especially helpful in situations where we are at least temporarily out of control.

If you think in ways that give you more control you will have more control.

Say to yourself:

- "I can do it."
- "I've done this before, I know I can do it again."
- "I'll just stay focused on what I need to do."
- "It only lasts a little while. This will be over soon."
- "We can work this out."
- "I'll feel great when this is over!"
- "This problem is not going to get me down."
- "I'll do the best I can."
- "I can get help if I need it."
- "I'll jump right in and it will be alright."
- "If I start to get tense, I can relax."

It is also important to know when you can't control a situation. This helps you avoid getting more frustrated and tense. What to do when a solution is out of reach?

Change your outlook by "letting go" rather than forcing a solution.

Accept that this may not be something you can change.

Conclusion

In this publication, we have covered the critical role that your beliefs about stress play in how you react to and manage stress. You can reduce stress when you view it as a challenge, something you can learn from. One way to do this is to reframe the situation. You can also lower stress if you feel in control. You can help yourself feel in charge through problem-solving and positive self-talk. For more information on other ways to cope with stress, see the references below and other publications in this series.

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