

Brilliant

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS

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how to manage stress

around at your environment and see the things that you must change. Listen to what your heart tells you about the things that you need to change.

You can get control when you make choices, so start to recognise that not only must things change, but that *you* must change them. To be in control means not waiting for events to change, or for somebody else to rescue you, which are forms of helplessness, but fundamentally to believe that *'if it is to be: it is up to me'*.

Believe that you can make choices that will control your environment. Learn to prioritise, learn to say no, learn to manage your time, learn to arrange your life in ways that suit you. Change your physical environment so that it helps you to relax, or to get things done, or to share your burden.

learn to prioritise, learn to say no, learn to manage your time

A lot of people say they get stuck. They say they have tried – and not succeeded. Well, if you have tried, then you have made a start, but there is an old saying:

'If at first you don't succeed ...'

One very simple yet powerful way to take control of your environment is to look at the space you inhabit – your office, your workstation and your home. What can you do to make it more relaxing, more efficient or more inviting? Make a great start by removing clutter and rubbish. Now think about how you could personalise it in a way that suits you and yet still meets the constraints of your organisation at work, or your family at home.

Commit

We feel under stress when we feel we have no control over what's going on around us. Believing you can take control is a start; the next step is to commit to controlling your life. The word

‘decision’ comes from the Latin, meaning ‘to cut off from’, so decisions can be scary because they reduce our options. But when you make a decision, it is also very liberating. You are cutting yourself off from a powerless state and have really started to take control.

Make a 100 per cent commitment now

Find one change that you commit to making that will exert your control over an aspect of your external environment within the next 24 hours. Make it real: find a pen or pencil and a piece of paper (the margin of this book will do) and write it down. I will wait.

Act

‘Without action, there is no change.’

If you have written down a commitment, and if you are a person of integrity (or you would like to be from now on), you might also write down: *‘What I commit to, I do.’*

Having made a commitment, the third step is to act on your decision. To feel in control, any positive action will do, so if you feel daunted by the task, feel free to start small: take one baby-step towards making the change you committed to. Another great way to spur action is to put together a simple plan, so you know what the first step is, and you can see clearly how it leads to the next and the next, and eventually to a real change. Once you take your first physical action, you will feel a huge sense of control.

Persist

So there is only one thing more you need to do: be persistent.

Remember that old saying:

‘If at first you don’t succeed ...’

Most people would complete it with the words *'try, try again'*. But that is foolish. What makes you think that, when you do what you did before, you will not get what you got before? A far more resourceful approach, and the one to remember, is:

'If at first you don't succeed, try something else.'

And if that doesn't succeed, try something else again... In response to someone who says *'I tried everything,'* my response would be: *'Really, everything?'* As soon as you believe you cannot make a change, you are back to helplessness.

If what you are doing is working, acknowledge your success, pat yourself on the back, and do more. If it is not working, do something different. Have the courage to change the things you can – and you always can. There are always changes you can make.

Social connections

One of the biggest stress factors can be not having people around us who care about us and support us. Making, protecting and using relationships with other people is a fundamental part of coping and thriving in stressful situations.

Establish healthy relationships

In the workplace, having a social network so that you can access informal support from colleagues will give you a quick outlet to minor frustrations before they become major stressors. Research in the UK Civil Service showed that staff who had social connections with colleagues felt less stressed, less anxious and suffered less absence due to psychiatric illness.

So, chats at the coffee machine, sharing a trip to the shops at lunchtime, and joining workmates for a drink after work are all good investments in your wellbeing – as well as pleasures.

Protect valuable relationships

Don't overdo the chat

If you find colleagues are wasting too much of your time in gossiping at the water fountain, it's time to politely return to work. The danger is that the gossip itself will become stressful, as your desire to be sociable conflicts with your need to meet your responsibilities at work. And if you find your work falling behind, there will be a second stressor. So a little honesty: *'I really do need to get back to my work now'* can prevent the relationship going sour, as you start to resent its intrusion on your responsibilities.

Don't take advantage

When we are under stress, we often take advantage of the generosity of the people who love us. This can mean treating them inconsiderately. But because they care for us, they will accept it as a product of our stress and be prepared to help where they can, and wait it out.

But there is only so much misuse a person can take, before their love for you starts to go sour. So it is vital, even in times of stress, to be mindful of the way you treat the people you value most in your life. It is because you sometimes can treat them badly that you must find a way to put them first.

Use relationships to help you de-stress

Releasing stress doesn't get much simpler than talking. Sadly, many of us do not find it easy, so it is essential that you find someone whom you feel you can trust, totally. Whilst some people's unwillingness to help you may be shocking, you will be surprised how many people will want to help, and will be keen to do so in a wholly supportive and non-judgemental way. So, consider each of the people around you; the 'right' person for you to choose may not be who you expect.

If you are under a lot of stress, listening is not the only thing that other people can do for you. Letting you take time to scream, rant or cry will help defuse your emotions, so that you can move into a more rational state of mind.



brilliant tip

If you really do not have someone, then finding a private space to express yourself, and writing down your feelings and frustrations are the next best thing.

Get organised

Being organised may seem like a small step that will have little effect on your stress levels, but don't underestimate it. It will be when you are at your most stressed that the inability to find that essential component or letter or tool will seem like an iceberg heading towards the bow of your ship.

Also, starting to get organised is easy, so it is an ideal way to start to seize control. The danger is that, in a time of pressure, organising yourself could become a displacement activity that does nothing more than distract you from your stress. So, follow these three simple rules for organising yourself or your work when you are feeling under stress.

Rule 1: Tidy frenzy

You don't have much time, so set yourself a strict time limit, like four minutes, to tidy your space and clear it of clutter. If you can, a good way to do this is to play a piece of fast-rhythm music that lasts three to five minutes and do as much as you can before it ends. You will be amazed at how much tidying and organising you can do under this constraint, and how good you will feel when it is done.

Rule 2: Backlog file

Organising takes time and there are lots of systems available (see, for example, Chapter 3 of *Brilliant Time Management*), but to make a lot of progress quickly you need to focus hard. Work on only what needs to be organised for you to make progress on the things that are stressing you. Put everything else into a backlog file, ready to be organised when the pressure is off, but safely stored so it is not lost.

Rule 3: Little bits

Keeping on top of your organisation can be satisfying, but don't make a big thing of it, or it will become a stressor itself. So, when the opportunity presents itself, just do one bit of organising and then go back to what you were doing. If you need to leave a workshop and will be going past the storage racks, pick up one or two things from your bench to put away. When you need to go to the filing cupboard, take a couple of papers from your desk that need to be filed. When you are putting away the pots and pans, take a moment to sort out a part of the jumble in the cupboard. Every time you do a little bit, think to yourself '*Good, that's progress*' and then move on. Now your brain will feel more in control.

Your space

It seems that the more you express yourself in your surroundings, the more relaxed you will become; so, every day do something to make your environment nicer for yourself. It does not matter how small. You might want to tidy up, pick a bunch of flowers, display a new photo or postcard, replace your old coffee or tea mug, use a nice notebook and pen, or change the desktop and colour settings on your computer.

It is easy to say that the solution is to de-clutter, and a hundred self-help books focus on just this. For most people, this is sound