Top Ten Tips for Managing and Coping with Stress

With the busy lives we often lead, we are forced to juggle many roles and demands.

The pressures we encounter can be productive, motivating us to get things done. But too much pressure can lead to stress, and this can cause physical and emotional problems. Vivamus Psychologists have shared their Top Ten Tips for Managing and Coping with Stress.

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1. Identify stress

The first step is to realise when you are stressed so you can start to do something about it. How do you know you are stressed? When does a little bit of healthy pressure and adrenalin become too much pressure? This differs from person to person and over time. Look out for changes in your physical sensations. Are your shoulders tense? Are you having more headaches than usual? Are you having trouble sleeping? Look out for changes in your mood. Are you more irritable than normal? Are you more self-critical? Do you feel sad or low?

2. Identify the trigger

Can your current stress levels be prevented? Sometimes stress results from having too many demands, and sometimes one particular thing causes us to feel stressed. If we can identify the trigger, we may be able to make some changes. For example, when you notice yourself feeling stressed, make a note of what caused it. Sometimes this might be obvious, like a house move falling through. Sometimes it might be less clear, for example in response to a friend asking you for dinner.

3. Relaxation

This sounds obvious and easy but in fact learning to relax is often not a priority for people. Yet effective relaxation can both help prevent stress and help reduce it once it occurs. If we think about our stress levels being like the mercury in a thermometer, our aim is to keep the mercury low. The lower the mercury is to start with, the more potentially stressful events we can cope with before the mercury gets too far up the thermometer. Once the mercury rises too far, we can use relaxation techniques to bring it down. Additionally we can use relaxation techniques to help us have a low baseline level, which helps us cope with stress. The trick to effective relaxation is what works for you. Yoga, listening to your favourite music, running, deep breathing, meditation and going for a massage are all things some people find helpful. Learn to find what works for you and factor it in to your weekly or daily routine in order to prevent the mercury on the thermometer rising too far.

4. Notice what thoughts go through your mind when you're feeling stressed.

In order for a situation to be stressful we must perceive it as such. The thoughts we have about an event are what determines whether or not it causes us to feel stressed. When you notice yourself feeling stressed, notice what goes through your mind. Sometimes people experience thoughts such as "I can't cope", "If I don't get this done in time I will be fired". Make a note of these thoughts and then move on to address them. (See point 5).

5. Challenging negative thoughts

Negative thoughts lead us to feel negative emotions such as anxiety, low mood or anger. If we challenge these thoughts we can notice an improvement in the associated emotion. For example, for each negative thought you make a note of ask yourself the following questions: Am I catastrophising? How likely is it that this feared outcome will happen? What is the worst that can happen? What is the most likely outcome? What would I say to a friend who was in this situation? What would my friend say to me now

in response to this thought? Are unrealistic perfectionist standards getting in the way? You may also want to remind yourself that a thought is not necessarily a fact. A thought is influenced by how we feel and is not necessarily an actual rational reflection of the situation. Try and come up with an alternative thought such as "I will try my best", "perfection does not exist, I will aim to be good enough",.

6. Identify negative images

Sometimes when people are in a stressful situation, negative images run through their minds. For example they may see themselves giving a presentation and not coping and crumbling. Just like the negative thoughts, negative images can lead to emotions such as anxiety and low mood also. When you notice yourself feeling stressed, notice if any negative images run through your mind and make a note of them if this is the case.

7. Challenge negative images

Once you've made a note of a negative image that runs through your mind, run the image through in your mind until you get to the worst part. At this point start to imagine a different outcome to the scenario. For instance, try to imagine yourself completing the presentation, standing up straight and holding yourself in a confident manner. Or try to imagine yourself completing the work to the best of your ability, sending it to the relevant person and feel the sense of satisfaction that will follow.

8. Take one thing at a time

Often the reason people feel stressed is because they are overwhelmed by what needs to be done. When we are stressed we do not retain information as well as usual. We can get so wrapped up in the fact we feel stressed that we lose sight of what it is that needs to be done. Try and write a list of all the things that are stressing you, and under each item write what needs to be done. You can then prioritise which needs to be acted on first. Often writing things down relieves stress as the task seems more manageable once it is properly defined. Similarly, not having to rely on ourselves to remember what needs to be done can create thinking space for the activity itself.

9. Use coping statements

When people are stressed our thinking becomes skewed and we can forget to think of ourselves as the positive resourceful people we often are. Remind yourself of your qualities. What are your strengths? Statements such as "I have been in this situation before and I coped then, there is no reason why I won't be able to cope now". "I can only do my best". Sometimes people find it helpful to have a particular coping statement or positive thought written on a piece of paper which they can refer to throughout the day.

10. Getting support

Stress is a normal human experience that everyone encounters to some degree at some point in their lives. Talking about the effects of stress can be beneficial. Talking things through with a friend or colleague can be particularly valuable and helps you to realise you are not alone in feeling this way. If you feel your stress is getting in the way of life, you could consider getting professional help from a psychologist.

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