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**See page 111 for information about
Downloadable Resources and Templates.**

Introduction

*Remember that stress doesn't come from what's going on in your life.
It comes from your thoughts about what's going on in your life.*

– ANDREW BERNSTEIN

Let me ask you a question. How often do you find yourself saying, “I’m so stressed?” Every day? Every week? Has this increased over the past few years? I know that for the individuals in my world—family, friends, coworkers—the stress levels have continued to grow over the past few years with no signs of relief. Is that how you feel? Do you also feel like you have tried all the self-care you can manage? But let us be honest: sometimes trying to find time for self-care causes more stress.

I am here to tell you that *I understand*. I, too, feel this way. As caregivers and educators, we become exhausted until we have nothing left to give. We see the same in our coworkers and students, but we do not know how to help. That is why I have authored this book. This book is for you. This book is for all educators and caregivers who need stress-relief techniques that can be used personally and shared with students and coworkers. These techniques can be implemented in individual settings, small groups, classrooms, and workshops.

I hope that by having this resource, not only will you find stress relief for yourself, but you will also be able to share these techniques with others.



CHAPTER

1

Who's Stressed?

Every day brings a choice: to practice stress or to practice peace.

– JOAN BORYSENKO

What brought you here today? Is stress taking over? Are you completely exhausted mentally, physically, and spiritually? Is it due to work, family, or just life in general? Don't worry...you are not alone. According to the Mental Health Foundation, in 2021, 74 percent of people felt so stressed that they became utterly overwhelmed or unable to cope.¹ Excessive levels of stress—and the inability to deal with it—have been leading to significant personal and professional outbursts, impacting the global economy.² Stress is defined as a physical, chemical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension that may be a factor in disease causation.³

We all experience stress in our lives. Because many health problems are caused or influenced by stress, it is essential to understand how stress affects your body and learn effective stress-management techniques to make stress work for you rather than against you.

Stress can come from many sources, which are known as stressors. Because our experience of what is considered “stressful” is created by our unique perceptions of what we encounter in life (based on our mix of personality traits, available resources, and habitual thought patterns), a situation may be perceived as “stressful” by one person and merely “challenging” by someone else. Simply put, one person's stress trigger may not be stressful to someone else. That said, certain situations tend to cause more stress in most people and can increase the risk of burnout.

Many people are stressed by their jobs, relationships, financial issues, health problems, and more mundane things like clutter or busy schedules. Learning skills to cope with these stressors can help reduce your experience of stress. While we all react to stress in our own ways, there is an extensive list of commonly experienced effects of stress that range from mild to life-threatening. Stress can affect immunity, which can impact virtually all areas of health. Stress can affect mood in many ways as well. Creating a stress-management plan is often one part of a plan for overall wellness.

Stress can be effectively managed in many ways. The best stress-management plans usually include a mix of stress relievers that address physical and psychological stress and help develop resilience and coping skills.

Practice the 4 A's of Stress Management

Before we can get started with our stress-reducing techniques, we need to understand more about stress and how you can respond. While stress is an automatic response from your nervous system, some stressors arise at predictable times: your commute to work, a meeting with your boss, or family gatherings, for example. When handling such predictable stressors, you can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose in any given scenario, it is helpful to think of the four A's: *avoid, alter, adapt, or accept*.

AVOID UNNECESSARY STRESS

It is not healthy to avoid a stressful situation that needs to be addressed, but you may be surprised by the number of stressors you can eliminate in your life.

- Say “no.” Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress. Distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts” and, when possible, say “no” to taking on too much.
- Avoid people who stress you out. If someone consistently causes stress in your life, limit the time you spend with that person or end the relationship.
- Take control of your environment. If the evening news makes you anxious, turn off the TV. If traffic makes you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online.
- Pare down your to-do list. Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you have too much on your plate, drop unnecessary tasks to the bottom of the list or eliminate them.

ALTER THE SITUATION

If you cannot avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. This often involves changing how you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- Express your feelings instead of bottling them up. If something or someone is bothering you, be more assertive and communicate your concerns openly and respectfully. If you have an exam to study for and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you only have five minutes to talk. If you do not voice your feelings, resentment will build, and the stress will increase.
- Be willing to compromise. When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you will have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.
- Create a balanced schedule. All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Try to find a balance between work and family life, social activities and solitary pursuits, daily responsibilities, and downtime.

ADAPT TO THE STRESSOR

If you cannot change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.

- Reframe problems. Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite radio station, or enjoy some time alone.
- Look at the big picture. Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be eventually. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
- Adjust your standards. Perfectionism is a primary source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others and learn to be okay with “good enough.”
- Practice gratitude. When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

ACCEPT THE THINGS YOU CANNOT CHANGE

Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You cannot prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but overall, it is easier than railing against a situation you cannot change.

- Don't try to control the uncontrollable. Many things in life are beyond our control, particularly other people's behavior. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on what you can control, such as how you choose to react to problems.
- Look for the upside. When facing significant challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your poor choices contribute to a stressful situation, reflect on them, and learn from your mistakes.
- Learn to forgive. Accept that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentment. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.
- Share your feelings. Expressing what you are going through can be very cathartic, even if there is nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist.

This book is designed to provide the specific techniques and strategies you may need to address the stress in your life. Each stress chapter (Chapters 1-13) is focused on a different tool that you can use personally, or that can be used with a student or coworker to address stress. Just as stress is personal, so are the techniques; some may work better for you than others. Try each and find multiple ways to address the stressors in your world.

My Stress Profile

My Definition of Stress:

Stress means...

Common Sources of Stress in My Life:

Signs That I Am Stressed:

Thoughts:

Bodily reactions:

Behavior:

Step 5: Dealing With Things That Are Beyond Personal Control

In Step 3, your participant identified several things on their pathway to change that are outside their control (Circle 2). Here, the individual's ability to surrender is examined. Before proceeding with the questions, it is advisable to explain what surrender means to the client:

"Surrendering means letting go of unproductive efforts to control the uncontrollable. It involves accepting that there is nothing one can do to change the situation. Surrendering is different from becoming a victim and passively being overtaken without choice. Surrendering means you decide to let go of things that you cannot control and focus on the things you can control."

Together with your participant, look at their uncontrollable things in Circle 2. Ask your participant to think of times when they tried to control one or more of these things, although they did not have control over them. Ask for some examples of situations.

Look at the uncontrollable things in Circle 2. Can your participant think of times when they could relinquish control and surrender? Ask for some examples of situations.

How did your participant surrender? How did they let go of the uncontrollable?

How would your participant rate the extent to which they can surrender to things beyond their control? (0 = not able all, 10 = very able)?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
NOT ABLE AT ALL											VERY ABLE

If your participant is not able to surrender or wishes to surrender more often, what is preventing them from doing so?

What would it be like for your participant to fully surrender to the uncontrollable?

What step(s) can your participant take to surrender more to the uncontrollable?

