



Chaplains Caring for Companies

Caring for Your Greatest Asset – Employees!

Stress in the Workplace

How to Recognize, Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress in Your Workplace

It may seem that there's nothing you can do about your stress level. The bills aren't going to stop coming, there will always be challenges and changes at work, at home, or in the day to day life experiences. There will never be enough hours in the day for you to do all that needs to be done – at work and at home. Your job and family responsibilities will always be demanding. But you have a lot more control than you might think. In fact, the simple realization that you're in control of your life is the foundation of stress management.

Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment at home and work, and the way you communicate or deal with problems. The ultimate goal is a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun – plus the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on.

Identify the sources of stress in your life

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Your true sources of stress aren't always obvious, and it's all too easy to overlook your own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Sure, you may know that you're constantly worried about work – perhaps legitimately, but the stress you may be experiencing due to your job may not be the only reason you feel stressed, depressed or anxious.

With the economic challenges we are facing, many companies have laid off employees, reduced hours or salaries. Other companies experiencing a slowdown changes the way they do business just to survive this season. These situations maybe stressful for you, but the stress reactions are felt by the entire family. On the flip side, the times when a company is experiencing growth, there is the added pressure to increase production and meet deadlines. This often creates additional stress in the workforce due to mandatory overtime. If a company is experiencing either of these situations, it causes stress for everyone - the management, the employees, and their families.

To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:

- Do you explain away stress as temporary (“I just have a million things going on right now”) even though you can't remember the last time you took a breather?
- Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life (“Things are always crazy around here”) or as a part of your personality (“I have a lot of nervous energy, that's all”).
- Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

**Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it,
your stress level will remain outside your control!**

Look at how you currently cope with stress

Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life. It would be beneficial for you to write these down. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.

These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but in the long run cause more damage:

- Smoking or drinking too much
- Overeating or under-eating
- Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)
- Using pills, alcohol, or drugs to relax
- Sleeping too much
- Procrastinating
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems

Learning healthier ways to manage stress

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no “one size fits all” solution to managing it. Different people experience stress in different ways. Some people experience stress physically (muscle tension, headache, backache), while others react to stress mentally or emotionally (insomnia, worry, irritability, and difficulty relating to friends and family). No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

If your methods of coping with stress aren't contributing to your greater emotional and physical health, it's time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they require change. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it's helpful to think of the four “A's”: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept. You can change the situation by avoiding the stressor or by altering the stressor. You can change your reaction to the situation by adapting to the stressor or by accepting the stressor.

Stress management strategy #1: Avoid unnecessary stress

Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate. Just remember: A certain amount of avoidance is healthy, but some problems can't be overlooked. For those situations, try another technique.

- **Learn how to say “no”** – Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities when you're close to reaching the limit.
- **Avoid contact with someone who bothers you.** If you have a co-worker who causes your jaw to tense, if it is possible, put physical distance between the two of you if it doesn't adversely affect productivity. Sit far away at meetings or walk around his or her cubicle, even if it requires some weaving.
- **Take control of your environment** – If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off.
- **Avoid hot-button topics** – If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.
- **Pare down your to-do list** – Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts.” Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

Stress management strategy #2: Alter the situation

If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. One of the most helpful things you can do during times of stress is to take inventory, then attempt to change your situation for the better. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- **Communicate your feelings openly.** Express your feelings instead of bottling them up. If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. Remember to use “I” statements, as in “I feel frustrated by shorter deadlines and a heavier workload. Is there something we can do to balance things out?” If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- **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'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground. Small problems often create larger ones if they aren't resolved. If you're tired of being the butt of your wife's jokes at parties, ask her to leave you out of the comedy routine. In return, be willing to enjoy her other jokes and thank her for humoring you.
- **Be more assertive.** Don't take a backseat in your own life. Be proactive. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. If you've got a project to complete and your chatty co-worker is distracting you, politely say up front that you can't talk now. (Note: assertive communication is not being aggressive or offensive. It is simply learning to ask for what you need or want.)
- **Manage your time better.** Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. But if you plan ahead and make sure you don't overextend yourself, you can alter the amount of stress you're under.

Stress management strategy #3: Adapt to the stressor

If you can't 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 the mandatory overtime, look at it as an opportunity which allows you to get ahead on some bills, or add to your savings account, or take that vacation you have dreamed about. The overtime hours can put additional stress on your family. It is crucial that everyone works together and makes the necessary adjustments to everyone's schedules, household duties and activities.

If your company is experiencing a slowdown or layoffs, it is helpful to look at the crisis as an opportunity - to spend more time with family, or do things that you have been putting off. This may be the perfect opportunity to establish a budget, go back to school to increase your skills, or start the business you have dreamed of. Everyone in the family adjusts and becomes a part of the solution. Who knows, this exercise may cause your relationship with your spouse and children to grow stronger and closer.

- **Look at the big picture.** Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere. It is helpful to remember that no crisis lasts forever. This too will pass.
- **Adjust your standards.** Perfectionism is a major 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."
- **Focus on the positive.** When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective. You might find it helpful to create an assets column. Imagine and write down all of the things that bring you joy in life, and the things for which you are grateful — vacations, children, pets, your job, or ? In other words, **count your blessings!** Then look at that list when you're stressed. It will put things into the proper perspective and serve as a reminder of life's joys.
- **Practice thought-stopping.** Stop gloomy thoughts immediately. Refuse to replay a stressful situation as negative. Instead, implement a positive mental statement. It's easy to lose objectivity when you're stressed. How you think and the words you speak have a profound effect on your spiritual, emotional and physical well-being. Each time you speak or think a negative thought about yourself, your body reacts as if it were in the throes of a tension-filled situation. One negative thought can lead to another, and soon you've created a mental avalanche. Eliminate words such as "always," "never," "should," and "must." These are telltale marks of self-defeating thoughts.

If you see good things about yourself, and practice positive self-talk, you are more likely to feel good. Create a positive affirming statement and say it to yourself in tough situations. To double the effect, say it out loud. Be positive. Instead of thinking, "I am horrible with money and will never be able to control my finances," try this: "I made a mistake with my money, but I am resilient. I'll get through it. I can handle this." If you say it often enough, replacing the temptation to think or speak negatively with this positive statements, it becomes a reality.

- **Adjust your attitude!** You and only you are in charge of your attitude! Recognized author and pastor, Chuck Swindoll said it best, *"The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, the education, the money, than circumstances, than failure, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company... a church... a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice everyday regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% of how I react to it. And so it is with you... we are in charge of our Attitudes."* You might consider printing this quote and posting it where you can see it. It will serve as a reminder when you find it necessary to make an attitude adjustment!
- **Adjust your standards.** Perfectionism is a major 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."

Stress management strategy #4: Accept the things you can't change

Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can't 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 in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change.

- **Talk with someone.** You may not be able to change a frustrating situation, but that doesn't mean your feelings aren't legitimate. Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with your doctor, a counselor, a chaplain, or pastor. Expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic, even if there's nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. You will feel better after talking it out.
- **Forgive.** It takes energy to be angry. Forgiving may take practice, but by doing so, you will free yourself from burning more negative energy. Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.
- **Smile.** It may improve your mood. Even if you have to fake it, smiles are contagious. Before long, you're likely to see your smile sincerely reflected back at you.
- **Learn from your mistakes.** There is value in recognizing a "teachable moment." You can't change the fact that procrastination hurt your performance, but you can register the regret to make sure you allot more time in the future.
- **See stress as an opportunity.** Try to look for the upside of the situation. As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
- **Don't try to control the uncontrollable.** Many things in life are beyond our control— particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.

Stress management strategy #5: Make time for fun and relaxation

Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors when they inevitably come. Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Taking care of yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

- **Set aside relaxation time.** Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don't allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from your responsibilities and recharge your batteries.
- **Connect with others.** Spend time with positive people who enhance your life. A strong support system will buffer you from the negative effects of stress.
- **Do something you enjoy every day.** Make time for leisure activities that you enjoy. It does not have to take hours – even a few minutes "just for you" will make a difference.
- **Keep your sense of humor.** This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Stress management strategy #6: Adopt a healthy lifestyle

You can increase your resistance to stress by strengthening your physical health.

- **Exercise regularly.** Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week. Nothing beats aerobic exercise for releasing pent-up stress and tension.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress, so be mindful of what you eat. Start your day right with breakfast, and keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day. Eat protein, raw fruits and vegetables when under stress. Drink lots of water.
- **Reduce caffeine and sugar.** The temporary "highs" caffeine and sugar provide often end in with a crash in mood and energy. By reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugar snacks in your diet, you'll feel more relaxed and you'll sleep better.
- **Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs.** Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief is only temporary. Don't avoid or mask the issue at hand; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind.
- **Get enough sleep.** Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally.
- **Practice meditation or prayer.** Quieting the mind and soul through prayer or meditation is a great tool to fight stress.

Problem-solving techniques can be hard to learn and even harder to use on a practical level. But the truth is you can't fix a flat tire by willing it repaired, and neither can you diminish stress by ignoring it. Practicing problem-solving skills on stressors ranging from minuscule nuisances to monstrous crises can help you to better cope with stress as it comes at you. Nobody wants stress to get the best of them. So do something about it!

Take the Stress Test: Are You Stressed?

1. Do you feel tired all the time or have trouble sleeping?
2. Do you have a hard time relaxing or feel unable to relax?
3. Do you forget things all the time?
4. Are you frequently angry and tired at the end of the day?
5. Do you always feel under pressure?
6. Do you argue all the time, even about minor things?
7. Can you never find time for yourself?
8. Do you no longer want to socialize with others?
9. Do you lack patience and feel others are always wrong?
10. Do people often tell you that you seem tense or upset?

Everyone has bad days and feels some of the above, but if you have answered 'yes' to two or more of these questions and/or feel this way regularly, chances are that you are stressed! Some people experience stress physically (muscle tension, headache, backache), while others react to stress mentally or emotionally (insomnia, worry, irritability, and difficulty relating to friends and family). You might not realize that stress symptoms may be affecting your health. You may think illness is to blame for that nagging headache, your frequent forgetfulness or your decreased productivity at work. Sometimes stress is to blame. Stress symptoms can affect your body, your thoughts and feelings, and your behavior.

Please be aware that other potentially serious health problems also can cause some of these symptoms. If you're not sure if stress is the cause or if you've taken steps to control your stress but symptoms continue, see your doctor. If you have chest pain, especially if it occurs during physical activity or is accompanied by shortness of breath, sweating, dizziness, nausea or pain radiating into your shoulder and arm, get emergency help immediately. These signs and symptoms may indicate a heart attack and not simply stress symptoms.

Stress Test: Mountain State Centers for Independent Living - 821 Fourth Avenue Huntington, WV 25701 <http://www.mtstcil.org/skills/stress-test-2.html>

Stress Symptoms Checklist

Check any symptoms you have noticed in yourself on the Stress Symptoms list. The presence of any symptom indicates that you are dealing with some stress. If half or more of the symptoms are checked in any of the categories, your stress level is much too high. Recognizing these common stress symptoms is the first step to dealing with stress. You can then take other steps to manage stress.

<u>Emotions</u>	<u>Spiritual</u>	<u>Relational</u>	<u>Mental</u>	<u>Physical</u>	
Anxiety/ Worry	Anger/disappointment	Isolation	Forgetfulness	Appetite changes	Teeth grinding
Fearfulness	toward God or church	Impatience	Dull senses	Headaches	Rashes
Frustration	Critical attitude	Lowered sex drive	Confusion	Weight changes	Colds
Depression	Doubt	Resentment	Poor concentration	Tension	Restlessness
Mood swings	Unforgiving	Loneliness	Low productivity	Fatigue	Foot-tapping
Irritability	Emptiness	Nagging	Negative self-talk	Pounding heart	Finger-drumming
Nightmares	Loss of meaning & purpose	Distrust	Negative attitude	Insomnia or sleeps too much	
Discouraged	Cynicism	Clamming up	Whirling mind	Muscle aches	Digestive upsets
Bad tempered	Spiritually disillusioned	Lack of intimacy	Boredom	Increased alcohol, drug or tobacco use	
Feels "No one cares"	Apathetic	Outbursts of anger	Lethargy		
Little joy or happiness	Hopeless	Less social contacts	Spaces out		

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 HELPGUIDE.org – Understand, Prevent and Resolve Life's Challenges
www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm
 The Mayo Clinic.com – Tools for Healthier Lives www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-relief/SR0003
 National Victim Assistance Academy, U.S. Department of Justice Mental Health Needs -
 Section 2, Stress Management www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/assist/nvaa2002/chapter6_2.html

Too stressed to be blessed? When we are stressed, depressed, or filled with fear and anxiety, it is difficult, if not impossible, to recognize or receive God's blessings. God loves us and desires to bless us – that's His nature. The Bible has much to say about overcoming fear and anxiety. It is possible, even in the midst of adverse circumstances, to be hopeful and at peace if we put our trust in a power greater than ourselves. For me, that power is found in having a personal relationship with the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. These are just a few of the promises of God that have helped me through difficult situations:

"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray! Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious — the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies." Philippians 4:6-9 THE MESSAGE Bible

Jesus said, *"I've told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I've conquered the world."* John 16:33 THE MESSAGE Bible

"When I get really afraid I come to you in trust." Psalm 56:3 THE MESSAGE Bible

"Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track." Proverbs 3:5-6 - 5 THE MESSAGE Bible

***If you make these promises a part of your stress management strategies,
you may find you're too blessed to be stressed!***

If you have never received Christ, you can pray this simple prayer inviting Christ into your life: *"Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I now invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name. Amen."*



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