

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Identifying and Managing Stress

We all live with a little stress. Parents get it from all sides, personal growth causes stress—even just being part of a family can be stressful.

The consequences of stress can be productive, as when stress gives us the adrenaline we need to meet a deadline or cope with a challenge. But too much stress can be debilitating. Learning a few strategies to help manage the stresses in your life can help you be healthier, have more fun, and feel some measure of control over your life.

Symptoms of stress overload can include:

- **Irritability.** Becoming overly critical and/or annoyed by petty things or subject to uncontrollable anger.
- **Insomnia.** Having trouble falling or staying asleep, because you are too tired, worried or keyed up.
- **Fatigue.** Feeling weary for no apparent reason, with odd aches and pains, especially in the head, neck or back.
- **Weight changes.** Experiencing significant weight gain or weight loss and a change in appearance.
- **Breathing problems.** Experiencing shortness of breath or hyperventilation.
- **Psychological upsets.** Feeling sorry for yourself and finding that small disappointments are overwhelming.
- **Heart irregularities.** Feeling your heart flutter or unexpectedly beat fast and loud.

You Can Help Manage Stress by Working with These A-B-Cs

A is for action. When stress is created by something you can control, take action to change things. Many people say that “too much to do, with too little time to do it” is their greatest cause of stress. Here are five time-management techniques that can help:

- **Make lists.** It's easier to do a job when you remind yourself about it by writing it down.
- **Prioritize.** Do important jobs first, when your energy is high.
- **Combine similar tasks.** Make all phone calls in one sitting. Run all errands in one trip.
- **Avoid time-wasters.** Postpone chit-chat until you have "downtime."
- **Delegate.** Can co-workers, children, spouse or friends take some of the load?

B is for bear it. If there's nothing you can do, you'll just have to "grin and bear it." Learn to master your thoughts and impulses even if, at first, you can't control your feelings. When anger threatens, count to 10, or 20. Recite the multiplication tables. Change your thoughts, then later, once you've calmed down, analyze the problem objectively. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into reacting emotionally.

Keep things in perspective. Don't over dramatize. Sometimes the words we use to describe our stressful situations are emotionally charged and can worsen the way we feel.

Self-talk is another technique many people use to handle stress. They repeat a saying that helps them accept and deal with stressful situations. Here are some common ones:

- "One day I'll laugh about this."
- "It's a learning experience."

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- "This is just one more chapter for my book."

A sense of humor and a positive attitude are guaranteed stress reducers. If you avoid taking things overly seriously, and can focus on the positive side, you're already on the road to finding a solution to your stressful situation.

C is for cope. One of the best ways to cope with stress is by using relaxation techniques. Constant stress is hard on you, and your body can ‘forget’ how to fully relax. Practising relaxation techniques will help your body regain its natural ability to slow down.

Breathing deeply is one quick, easy way to relax. Try folding your hands together over your stomach. Now inhale and fill up the bottom of your lungs breathings from your abdomen, not your chest. Inhale to the count of four, then exhale slowly and focus on relaxing.

Freeing up tension in muscle groups is another stress-reducer, and it can be combined with deep breathing. First, scan your body looking for tense muscle groups. Start with your feet and work up through your legs until you reach your neck and head. At each place you feel tension, take a full breath and imagine the tightness "dissolving" as you exhale.

Auto suggestion is a third key to relaxation. Allow random thoughts to pass through your mind without paying any attention to them. Then, begin to repeat things like the following:

- "I fell relaxed and calm."
- "My hands are warm and heavy."
- "My heartbeat is slow and regular."

By identifying and managing the stressors in your life and accepting the things you cannot change, you can regain control, relaxation, and balance in your life.

If your stress level begins to affect all aspects of your life, leaving you unable to function normally, you may need some professional help to get you through a stressful period.