

General Approaches to Reducing Stress

People vary in their ability to handle stress. Some take life's challenges in stride, while others struggle with small frustrations. Since everyone differs in how they react to stress, there is no one perfect solution to dealing with stress. However, there are better ways to handle stress than turning to alcohol or drugs, loading up on comfort foods, or unleashing your emotions on others.

Managing stress is all about taking charge, by controlling the situation or your reaction to it. The following four A's are a helpful reminder when facing stressful situations:

1. **Avoid** unnecessary stress. Not all stress can be avoided, but you can eliminate many daily stressors by:
 - Learning how to say "No."
 - Distinguishing between "shoulds" and "musts" on your to-do list.
 - Steering clear of people or situations that stress you out.
2. **Alter** the situation. If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter the situation by:
 - Being more assertive and dealing with problems head on.
 - Respectfully letting others know about your concerns instead of bottling up your feelings.
 - Compromising and being more willing to meet others halfway on an issue.
3. **Adapt** to the stressor. When you can't change the stressor, try changing yourself by:
 - Reframing problems and remembering the positive things in your life.
 - Focusing on the aspects of your job you enjoy when a task at work has you stressed.
 - Looking at the big picture and asking yourself, "Is this really something worth getting upset about?"
4. **Accept** the things you can't change, by:
 - Recognizing that there will always be stressors in life that you can't do anything about.
 - Acknowledging what is bound to happen rather than complaining and making the situation even more stressful.
 - Looking for the positive in the situation—even the most stressful circumstances can be an opportunity for learning or personal growth.
 - Understanding that no one, including you, is ever perfect.

To ward off stress, make sure you make time to have fun and unwind.

- *Set aside down time to relax.* Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule and don't allow this time to be used for work or family tasks. This is your time to take a break from all of your responsibilities and recharge your batteries.
- *Connect with others.* Spend time with positive people that understand and encourage you. A strong support system of family and friends can protect you from the negative effects of stress.
- *Do something you enjoy every day.* Make time for activities that you enjoy.
- *Keep your sense of humor.* Laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways. This includes the ability to laugh at yourself.

Strengthening your overall health is also important to managing the effects of stress.

- *Practice structured relaxation techniques.* Deep breathing, meditation, and yoga activate a state of restfulness in your body that is the opposite of the body's stress response.
- *Exercise regularly.* Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Nothing beats spirited exercise for releasing pent-up stress and tension.
- *Eat a healthy diet.* Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress. Start your day with a healthy breakfast, reduce your caffeine and sugar intake, and cut back on alcohol and nicotine.
- *Get plenty of sleep.* Feeling tired can increase stress by causing you to think in less than sensible ways. Keep your cool by consistently getting a good night's sleep.

If you are concerned about your stress level or having trouble with stress, make an appointment to see a primary care physician or mental health care provider as soon as possible. These professionals want to talk with you and offer ways to help you better manage your stress.

Adapted from HELPGUIDE.org, Stress Management, found at <http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>.