

Some Suggestions to Help Manage the Stress of Daily Life and Maintain a Healthy, Balanced Lifestyle

Managing normal life stress and establishing a healthy and balanced lifestyle requires you to take care of yourself at physical, mental, emotional and behavioural levels. Here are a few suggestions that might help you to look after yourself at each of these different levels.

At A Physical Level

- Adequate sleep on a consistent basis
- Balanced diet and nutrition to fuel the mind and body
- Regular exercise in accordance with medical status (helps expel 'toxic' chemical build up and produces positive body chemistry (endorphins) which also facilitate better sleep)
- Relaxation (physical & mental) – quieting our mind and body each day is important for physical and mental “batteries” to be recharged

At A Mental Level

- Daily practice of realistic and encouraging thinking and appraisal of events or circumstances occurring in life – seeking creative solutions/possibilities instead of focusing/fixating on the problem and feeling stuck . Also try and replace 'shoulds' and 'musts' with 'I'll do my best in the circumstances'
- Set realistic expectations of self – to include setting of realistic personal standards and goals flexible enough to take into account your unique and changing life circumstances. Confidence grows and motivation can be inspired by being realistic and yet flexible in setting your personal goals, expectations and standards
- Avoid comparing yourself with others. Making comparisons is generally an unhelpful thing to do, given the unique individual differences that exist between us all in terms of: past opportunities and background circumstances; and range and level of skills and experience. Your task is to do your best within the context of your own life circumstances and avoid the unhelpful 'comparison trap'.
- Learn to talk good sense to yourself – avoid dumping on yourself and being your own worst critic. Train yourself to exercise patience & tolerance towards yourself. Practise realistic but encouraging “self talk” and try becoming your own best friend – this helps build confidence and motivation and shows you value yourself, which is the basis of sound self esteem.

At A Mental Level (Cont.)

- When faced with a difficult situation, approach it using realistic and encouraging mental rehearsal versus negative mental rehearsal. Focus on what you will attempt to do in a constructive way to bring about a helpful solution versus worrying about or focusing on all that might go wrong. 'What if' thinking breeds anxiety and more worry.

At An Emotional Level

- Learn to 'read' your feelings – ie. label the feeling you're experiencing. This will help you decide on what action you may need to take to help improve things. Our feelings create signals that tell us something's right or wrong in our life – don't ignore them. Reading/labelling them helps you to take the necessary steps to restore personal well-being, eg. "I'm feeling angry" – "Who am I angry at?" – "What can I do?" – "When and how will I do it?" – "Do I need some help?"
- Learn more and more to express (versus suppress) your feelings by practising and developing an ASSERTIVE response style of communication. This is two way respect communication. RESPECT my feelings and needs. When necessary and appropriate, express them in a way which demonstrates RESPECT for the other person involved. Recognise that they may perceive, think or feel about things differently than me. ASSERTIVE communication is the cornerstone of building solid self esteem
- Learn to convert "worry" into a 'problem to be solved' and search creatively for some possible solution(s) to then take action
- How you think about yourself and/or your current life circumstances and what you do, or don't do, in any given situation can have a significant impact on your resulting mood. Often, our thinking and our behaviour can contribute in a significant way to what we feel. We often induce the type and intensity of our mood by how we think and what we do (or don't do). Being mindful of this can be very self empowering – experiment and discover how much influence you really do have over your emotional state by being more realistic and flexible in your thinking and more ready to find solutions and take some constructive action about problems you encounter, rather than keeping yourself "stuck"

At A Behavioural Level

- Taking the time each day to quickly conduct a "stocktake" of the day you've had can help you to recognise and appreciate the positive/good aspects, but also to identify the more negative/bad aspects and what action you may need to take and/or consider how you might better handle/deal with a similar situation in the future.

At A Behavioural Level (Cont.)

- Learn to face and address what's wrong in your life by **doing** what you can about what's happening versus avoiding the problem. Avoiding problems often leads to them just piling up and can lead to other secondary problems. So wherever possible practise addressing, not avoiding, problems or concerns as they arise in your life – and if you don't know what you can do then seek guidance from someone you trust.
- If unable to do something about a problem in your life then use your mental strategies to accept (whilst not liking) what you can't change and move on and focus on other aspects of your life which you can act on and influence in constructive ways
- Difficult situations/relationships encountered don't need to develop into conflict. Conflict can often be minimised by addressing the problem sooner rather than later by using ASSERTIVE (respect/respect) communication when expressing your views. Learning to practise helpful LISTENING skills to understand the other person's point of view will also help. Two people can perceive a situation differently and both be right, due to their differing backgrounds, values, attitudes and life experiences. Good listening and assertive communication skills can greatly help to 'defuse' difficult situations and promote win/win outcomes, or at least improve each parties' understanding of the other's perception of things
- Develop a range of recreational/fun activities to regularly engage in. This can help retain a balance in your life between work and play and minimise the build up of stress. Fun is an important human need that each of us is responsible for fulfilling in our own preferred way.
- Practise and/or seek help to develop sound personal management and time management skills. Often poor time management stems from poor personal discipline. Improved personal discipline can only develop from starting to practise it daily. Old bad habits can only be replaced by more helpful habits with consistent and persistent practice.
- Remember that confidence and motivation most often follow action. They don't often just spontaneously appear from inaction or just wishing/hoping that they will somehow 'kick in'. If we wait for motivation and confidence to come before taking action, they might never arrive. Experiment and discover that it's by acting first that typically results in motivation and confidence growing. Remember that they both then start 'feeding' off each other ie. the more you do, the more confidence and motivation grows, which inspires you to do and achieve more. Sometimes it might help to inspire you to act on the NIKE slogan and '**JUST DO IT**'

The selection of stress management strategies included here is by no means proposed as a panacea". These strategies are simply intended to provide you with some suggestions for consideration. You are encouraged to be creative and active (not passive) in deciding upon variations to the above, or on other possibilities that you can experiment with. "*Experiment*" is the key word. Keep doing what works and stop what doesn't work for you – but at least keep "experimenting" on finding the most helpful ways of managing your own life stress. There will be natural consequences if you do and also consequences if you don't. It is your CHOICE.

Good luck with your management program and please remember that the Student Counselling Service in Student Services is available to help if you don't consider you're getting anywhere on your own, or if practising some of the strategies suggested doesn't seem to be working.

Compiled by Paul Rutherford, Registered Psychologist