

Managing Stress with Cognitive Therapy and Self-Reflective Practices

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Stress management differs from stress relief. Stress management provides a long-term solution to many short-term problems life throws our way. Effective stress management skills use an understanding of the internal sources of stress that we create within our minds and problem-solving on the external factors that we often blame for our emotional turmoil.

To grasp the true essence of stress and its management, we can break it down into components: Internal and external stressors and internal and external stress management tools.

We may want to believe that our distressed emotional state is due to external stressors that we have little control over. This simple process empowers us to reduce some stress through direct problem solving:

- a) identifying external stressors, like traffic, change, and the neighbor's barking dogs,
- b) applying problem solving behaviors by identifying which of the external stressors we identified are amenable to direct problem solving,
- c) generating possible solutions (such as reducing the stress of congested traffic by 1) taking a different route, 2). changing the time you leave for your destination, c) some other solution),
- d) using cognitive therapy to change up your cognitive distortions' contribution to your stress about that situation,
- e) make enduring lifestyle changes that reduce your overall stress,
- f) practicing acceptance of external stressors that you have no control over.

We can alter our lifestyles to incorporate healthy daily practices like regular exercise, a balanced diet, ample rest, and prioritizing essential matters. These stress management tools and methods empower us to handle life's challenges with more vitality and efficiency.

We can engage in some self-reflective exploration into our thoughts and feelings to challenge and modify our "distorted" thinking. Entrenched patterns of stereotypic thinking develop through life experience and can be challenging to change. However, there are solutions, and they do work.

Cognitive behavioral therapy encourages us to accept that much of what we believe to be fact is "explanations" that we develop to understand the events, situations, and people in our lives. We are very vulnerable to being incorrect. When we can challenge preconceived notions and start with a fresh, flexible, growth-oriented mindset, much of the stress we experience will be eliminated. When we can reevaluate the sources of our beliefs, opinions, and attitudes and challenge the possibility of their accuracy, we can reduce specific internal stressors and more effectively problem-solve to reduce stress.

The distorted beliefs and attitudes that we operate from are automatic negative thoughts or cognitive distortions. They come together to form schemas that influence how we see things and live in the world. These distortions in thoughts and perceptions are at the core of our experience with stress and stress management.

Here are some common beliefs that many people carry in some form that creates or increases stress:

- "I should excel in all aspects.
- I should be accepted and liked by everyone.
- Some people deserve punishment.
- Life should always go my way.
- External factors cause my emotional distress.
- I have the right to worry and feel upset.
- It is better to avoid difficulties than confront them.
- I have the right to be upset about problems.
- There is an absolute right and wrong.
- The world should be fair, and justice must prevail.
- Certain things are undeniably true."

- Some (other) people should change.
- I have the right to seek revenge.

Our daily encounters often challenge our beliefs and attitudes, leading to defensive, angry, or fearful reactions and, consequently, stress. For instance, consider the following scenario: Someone cuts you off in traffic. These thoughts and feelings go through your mind: "That driver cut me off on the highway. He's dangerous and wrong. He scared me and could have harmed me. I have every right to feel upset and angry. If I see him again, I'll give him a piece of my mind."

In reality, it's not the driver who upset us, but our thinking. Here's how cognitive therapy works—in a nutshell.

1. We experience an event
A. Activating Event: Someone cuts us off in traffic.
2. We assess the situation and give it meaning:
B. Belief about that event: "That guy is dangerous, disrespected me, and should be taught a lesson."
3. We experience feelings based on our assessment:
C. Feelings: I feel fear and anger.
4. We respond to our assessments and feelings with behavior:
D. Corresponding Behavior: "I will give him a rude gesture when I catch up to him."

If you challenge your initial assessment, your feelings and behavior will change in response to a new evaluation.

- A. Activating Event: Someone cuts us off in traffic. (Activating event is the same.)
- B. Belief: "That guy didn't look good. He looked like something was wrong." (Alternative possible assessment.)
- C. Feeling: I feel concerned about his driving and him. (Feeling changed based on changed belief.)

D. Corresponding Behavior: "If/when I catch up to him, I try to get a better look to see if he is having a heart attack or something that may put him and others in danger." I act on the further information I gather.

If we challenge our automatic negative assumptions, we will enjoy a broader range of possible responses. If we replace assumptions that involve a negative view of self with a more neutral or even positive explanation, how we see things will change, and stress will go down. Think about a time that you came home to someone that you love standing in the doorway with a scowl on their face and hands on their hips. It would be easy to assume that they are mad at you. (In my house, it would be easy to assume that they can't find something and are frustrated.) If you ask about that person's look of distress and discover that it has nothing to do with you, do you immediately feel relieved of the stress or anxiety you felt when you first saw them?

When considering how you internally generate much of your stress, consider the role of "negative self-talk." We're almost constantly engaged in self-talk, much of which is hostile and rooted in the common upsetting beliefs mentioned earlier.

To effectively manage stress, it's crucial to monitor our self-talk and alter its content. Using this skill does not make for an instant transformation; it takes practice. Use a self-inquiry tool to explore any cognitive distortions you may have when you feel upset, angry, or stressed:

- What thoughts are triggering my feelings right now?
- What negative thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs are involved?
- What unrealistic expectations do I have?
- Is this about me? Am I taking this situation too personally?
- How much of an actual threat to me is this?
- How could this situation be in my best interest?
- How am I judging myself or others?
- How important is this?

When our emotional reaction to something seems out of proportion to the activating event, chances are that there are some cognitive distortions at work. We are responsible for how we think and feel and, ultimately, how we deal with stress. We can make conscious decisions about our stressors and how we manage stress.



As you continue your journey toward mastery of stress management, another helpful resource, "Mastering Worries With Thought Stopping Techniques:" A Brief Lesson, guides the practical application of techniques for breaking the cycle of worrisome and anxiety-inducing thoughts that feed stress. It is a helpful bridge between understanding stress and taking action to reduce your specific worries that maintain stress. You can incorporate this new tool into your daily life beginning now.

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