

Identifying and Reducing the Stress That Hurts You

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Most people recognize when their stress is high. The symptoms of elevated stress reach a point where they get their attention. Self-aware people can identify significant sources of their stress and tell you when they are experiencing a higher-than-normal stress level.

Many can even tell you some stress management techniques. However, these same people often identify many reasons or excuses for not using those techniques. Excuses include, "I already have too much to do without adding more tasks, I don't have time, I'm too tired," or even "I'm too stressed out to manage my stress." They may be so accustomed to specific persistent stressors that they may not acknowledge the impact of the build-up of stressors and may not recognize the need to use their stress management tools. They may not realize that what stresses them out may not be the same as what stresses their spouse, boss, or neighbor across the street. We may take it for granted that everyone has stress and not see the importance of monitoring, managing, and reducing it for well-being.

Stress is a physical and psychological response to a perceived threat. Your resources being stretched to the limit and you don't know whether you can rise to the occasion to do what is necessary for the desired outcome. Fear is a physical and emotional response to actual danger. Your body experiences a fight-or-flight response to the perceived threat. In the past, the danger might have been a predatory animal wanting to have you for lunch. Today, the threats we experience are usually less acute and more chronic. Today's threats might be a boss's ill temper, recurrent overdue bills, sleeplessness from a baby still awake, fear and worry about an aging parent's health, or other contemporary daily living issues.

People often compound their stress with the belief that they "should" be able to handle all their stressors without experiencing stress. The idea that you "should" magically be able to rise to handle more stress without the need to develop or muster additional resources reduces your ability to cope with those stressors. The idea of knowing how to do something automatically without developing the skills necessary to do something well is self-sabotaging. Stress management like any other skill, involves knowledge, experience, and competence which requires learning, practice, and refinement over time. When you leave your stress management to chance, you handicap your efforts. Stress is best managed by maximizing your resources and skills, especially when stress is elevated beyond the usual.

It is helpful to conceptualize stressors as internal and external sources of stress. Internal sources of stress are those beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive distortions you hold that get in the way of practical living and problem-solving. External sources of stress include traffic jams, homework and report deadlines, relationship conflicts, and lack of financial resources.

For effective stress management, it's helpful to recognize both internal and external stressors. Internal stressors include beliefs, attitudes, and cognitive distortions that hinder practical living and problem-solving, while external stressors involve external events like traffic jams, deadlines, and relationship conflicts.

To address these stressors, match them with corresponding management methods. External stressors, for example, can be reduced by problem-solving on logistics or the environment, such as taking a different route to avoid traffic. Identifying and replacing unrealistic beliefs with realistic ones can improve self-acceptance and self-esteem for internal stressors like perfectionism.

Enhance stress management by adapting your lifestyle to support new behaviors and attitudes. Cognitive therapy can help challenge distortions that increase stress. Effective stress management also involves improving self-care, including exercise, rest, nutrition, assertiveness, and positive self-talk. This proactive, skill building approach is essential to make stress

more manageable. **Note:** This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2009 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language and concepts, clarity and accuracy.

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By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

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