

Foster Care to Good Health

Dealing with Stress

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Plain and simple, stress is how your body deals with any kind of change in your environment, whether good or bad. Stress is when your body releases chemicals into the blood that give you more energy and strength. This can be a good thing, as in the “fight or flight” response: you’ve heard the stories of somebody lifting a car off of their young child (somehow it always seems to be a Volkswagen Beetle) or rushing through a fire to save a loved one. Stress is also helpful before you go out on the football field, onto the stage as an actor, or even into the classroom for an exam – it compels you to action and heightens your awareness of yourself and your surroundings.

Positive stress provides the means to express your talents and energies, and to pursue happiness. Experienced in certain forms it is normal and essential to a productive and vivacious life. Everybody thrives under a certain amount of stress, and if there is no stress in our lives we may feel bored, dejected and even depressed. You’d probably agree that it’s better to be too busy than to have nothing at all to do. Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life.

Tee-shirt philosophy defines negative stress as when “Your gut says no but your mouth says yes.” Oh, you know that feeling, do you? When you are on the debate team and co-chair of the winter ball and running a 5K and helping your friend deal with her boyfriend issues and writing two 10-page papers due by Tuesday and one more due on Wednesday. You PROMISED your nephew you’d take him to a movie and your roommate’s snoring has been keeping you awake and your boss just put you on the Saturday shift ... These are all things you either have to do or agreed to do, and you are STRESSED.

We know where too much stress can lead. Besides high blood pressure, strokes and heart attacks, it can lead to depression, alcoholism, eating disorders and other harmful behaviors. A quarter of all drugs prescribed in the United States are for the treatment of stress and related disorders.

When you are under stress your muscles tighten, your heartbeat rises, your stomach hurts and you may feel sweaty or clammy. One of the quickest ways to feel relief is to BREATHE. Yes, that’s right. Just stop what you’re doing and take several calm, deep, slow breaths. Close your eyes and count to 10 while you breathe in and out; focus on your breathing and let other thoughts fall away just for a few moments.

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You can also get up and take a little walk. Go and check your mailbox or get a drink of water or just go outside and sit on a bench for a little while. Turn on some music – or turn it off. Wash your face. Turn the volume up on your computer, go to www.snapbubbles.com and annoy the people around you for a couple of minutes. Read the comics. There are many little ways to relax when you are stressed.

Don't ignore your problems or make light of them. If something is bothering you, stop and ask yourself why. Maybe something larger is bothering you and it has seemed easier to focus on the small things. This may help you cope in the moment-to-moment, but eventually you must face up to your larger issues. Taking the time to identify the serious stressors in your life will help you come up with a strategy for managing them.

- **Recognize what you can change:** Can you change what's bothering you? If not, can you change your response to the problem or learn to channel your frustration in another way?
- **Reduce the intensity of your reactions:** Should you be reacting so strongly to the situation? Sometimes, we need to put things in perspective. You may be overreacting and seeing the situation as more stressful than it is. Step back and ask yourself if what's bothering you deserves all your attention and energy. Maybe the time you're spending worrying could be better spent on other, more productive activities.
- **Stop and examine your priorities in life:** Don't forget to name yourself as one of those priorities. Determine what is most important to you, and what can go by the wayside. Maybe you are taking on too much: learn to say no to things that will not affect your class work, job or relationships, or just that you do not want to do. Spending time with family and friends is important, but sometimes you need down time and time to rest. Are you trying to be all things to all people? It could be that in trying too hard to do good for others, you don't do well for yourself.
- **Ask yourself what you expect from other people, and expect the same from yourself:** Learn to forgive yourself and others when, on occasion, you can't meet the standards you have set – it's called being human. Learn to accept help. Ask your family, friends, or partners for assistance. Instead of straining your relationships, you may find this helps. By handing over responsibilities to others (and letting them handle them their way, not 'your' way), you're building trust and making them feel an important part of your life.
- **Talk to people:** Do you have someone you can talk to about your life? Having someone you can share both the good and bad with is important. If you have a good group of friends, lean on them in times of stress. You wouldn't turn them away if they needed you, would you? If

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you don't have a large network start to build one, perhaps by joining a group or organization where people share your interests.

- **Journal:** *Self-therapeutic things like writing/journal keeping, painting, even if only in a kid's coloring book are very important...even now, as okay as I am with where I come from, I still don't have too many people that can handle hearing about the things that are really going on in my head. They love me, mean well, and try, but they can't hear it. But it has to go somewhere so it ends up as color in a notebook or a whole lot of embarrassing poetry. It also helps me think out what's really going on, or at least pieces of it, so I can express what I need and want to others.* (reported by OFA student Tish, from the University of Michigan)
- **Finally, let it out if you need to:** Laugh. Cry. Scream. Sometimes you have to let out your emotions, but do try to do it in private – crying, screaming or laughing hysterically in class is more likely to add to your stress than reduce it! But what's wrong with having a good cry? Or with hiding in a closet and yelling on top of your lungs for a minute? An occasional outburst might leave you more relaxed and relieved than any amount of time management, deep breathing, or rational discussion.

The best way to deal with stress, however, is to lead a healthy life and not let it get to you in the first place. Exercise regularly – eat a healthy diet – manage your time – get enough sleep. This should be your mantra!