

Creating Your Personal Stress-Management Plan

Following is a 10-point plan to help you manage stress. All these ideas can be helpful in lowering stress. None are quick fixes, but they can help you move toward a healthy life. The plan is divided into 4 parts.

1. Tackling the problem
2. Taking care of my body
3. Dealing with emotions
4. Making the world better

When you read over the plan, you will notice that you can come up with many ideas for each point. PLEASE don't think you should try them all. This plan is supposed to help you reduce stress, not give you more. Try out some ideas, see which fit best for you and then stick to one or two ideas for each point.

Part 1: Tackling the Problem

Point 1: Identify and Assess the Problem.

First decide if a problem is a real tiger or just feels like one. If it can't hurt you chances are that it can be better handled with clear thinking. This means stepping back from those thoughts that make you interpret the situation as a disaster.

A lot of people cope by ignoring problems. This doesn't make them go away; usually they just get worse. People who cope by trying to resolve problems tend to be emotionally healthier. When it comes to studying or chores, it is best getting the work done first. Because work or studying may produce stress, many people put it off and choose to do fun things first. The problem with that is they're not really having fun because they're worrying about the work they're ignoring. And of course, the longer they put it off, the more they worry. The cycle is endless.

Three ideas can help you manage a lot of work:

- Break the work into small pieces. Then do one small piece at a time, rather than look at the whole huge mess. As you finish each piece, the work becomes less overwhelming.
- Make lists of what you need to do. This will help you sleep because your head won't spin with worry about whether you can do everything. At the end of the day, you'll have less to worry about as you check off the things you have finished. You will look at the same huge amount of work and realize you can handle it.

- Timelines can help with big projects.

Point 2: Sidestep stress when possible.

Sometimes we know exactly when we are headed for trouble. Sidestep trouble from a distance is easier than dealing with it up close. You know the people, the places, and the things that upset you or have a negative impact on you. When possible, choose not to be around those people, places, and things that have a strong negative impact on you or that increase your stress significantly.

Point 3: Let some things go.

It's important to try to resolve problems, but sometimes there is nothing you can do to change a problem. For example, you can't change the weather, so don't waste your energy worrying about it. You can't change the fact that professors give tests, so just study instead of dwelling on how unfair it seems. People who invest their energy worrying about things they cannot change often do not have enough energy left over to focus on the things they can. Also learn when not to take things personally. You feel badly for no reason when you take something personally that really has little to do with you.

Part 2: Taking Care of My Body

Point 4: The Power of Exercise.

Exercise is an important part of a plan to manage stress. When you are stressed, your body is saying, "Run!" So do it. Exercise every day to control stress and build a healthy body. You may think you don't have time to exercise when you are most stressed, but that is exactly when you need it the most. If you are stressed about an assignment, but too nervous to sit down and study—exercise! You will be able to think better after you have used up those stress hormones. Some people exercise before school because they can focus and learn better

Point 5: Active Relaxation.

Because your body can only use the relaxed or emergency nervous system at any one time, you can turn on the relaxed system. You do this by doing the opposite of what your body does when it is stressed.

Here are 2 ideas.

- Breathe deeply and slowly. Try the 4–8 breathing technique. Lie on your back and place your hands on your belly with your fingers loose. Deep breaths first fill the belly, then chest, then mouth, the breath expands the belly, and your hands pull gently apart. Take a full breath while counting to 4. Then hold that breath for about twice as long, or an 8 count. Then slowly let it out to the count of 8, or even longer if you can. This will

relax your body after a few breaths, but just as importantly, it requires your full concentration. Your mind is too focused on breathing to also focus on worries. Do this 10 times and you will feel much more relaxed. Yoga, martial arts, and meditation also teach great breathing skills. When you get good at this, you can even do this in a chair during a test and nobody will know.

- Put your body in a relaxed position. Your body knows when you're nervous. If you sit down to take a test and your legs are shaking, you are saying, "I want to run!" Remember, you can't concentrate and run at the same time, so you are making it harder to take the test. Instead, take those deep breaths, lean back, and tell your body there is no emergency.

Point 6: Eat well.

Everyone knows good nutrition makes you healthier. Only some people realize that it also keeps you alert through the day and your mood steady. People who eat mostly junk food have highs and lows in their energy level, which harms their ability to reduce stress. Instead of eating greasy or sugary foods, eat more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—they keep you focused for a longer time.

Point 7: Sleep well.

Tired people can't learn as well and can be impatient and irritable. Here are some ideas to improve your sleep.

- Go to sleep about the same time every night.
- Exercise 4 to 6 hours before bedtime. Your body falls asleep most easily when it has cooled down. If you exercise right before bed, you will be overheated and won't sleep well. A hot shower 1 hour before bedtime also helps your body relax to fall asleep.
- Use your bed only to sleep. Don't solve your problems in bed. When you think about all the things that bother you, you have trouble falling asleep and wake up in the middle of the night to worry more. Instead, have another spot to think, like a worry chair. Give yourself plenty of time to think things through, make a list if you need to, and then set it aside! Go to bed to sleep.
- Don't do homework, watch television, read, or use the phone while in bed.

Part 3: Dealing with Emotions

Point 8: Take instant vacations.

Sometimes the best way to de-stress is to take your mind away to a more relaxing place. Visualize. Have a favorite place where you can imagine yourself relaxing. The place should be safe and calm. When you're stressed, sit down, lean back, take deep breaths, close your eyes, and imagine yourself in your calm place.

1. Take time out for yourself. Everyone deserves time for themselves —a bath or something that allows time to think and destress. Try a warm bath with your ears just underwater. Listen to yourself take deep, slow breaths. Take your pulse and count as your heart rate goes down.
2. Enjoy hobbies or creative art as an instant vacation.
3. Look at the beauty around you and get pleasure from the small things you may have stopped noticing.
4. Take mini vacations. Sometimes we forget that the park around the corner is a great place to hang out. A walk outside can be a mini vacation as you focus on relaxing.
5. Reading a good book is an escape from reality. You have to imagine the sights, sounds, and smells—you are somewhere else for a while.

Point 9: Release emotional tension.

Sometimes feelings become so overwhelming that we cram them all away in an imaginary box and think we'll deal with them later. But later, there's so much stuff in the box that there is too much to deal with. This can make your head feel as if it is spinning. Sometimes you get angry or frustrated without even knowing why. You just know there is too much stuff going on in your head. It's good to pick just one thing to work on and forget the rest for the moment. When we decide to deal with only one thing at a time, it's much less scary to open the box.

Here are some ideas to release your thoughts or worries one at a time.

- Creativity. People who have a way to express themselves don't need to hold it inside. Creative outlets like art, music, poetry, singing, dance, and rap are powerful ways to let your feelings out.
- Talking. Share with some friends you trust.
- Journaling. Write it out!
- Many people find prayer or meditation helpful.
- Laughing or crying. Give yourself permission to feel your emotions fully.

Part 4: Helping a little can make your world better . . . and help you feel better.

Point 10: Contribute.

People who work to make the world better have a sense of purpose, feel good about themselves, and handle their own problems better. It's important to understand that you really can make a difference in other people's lives.

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Now that you have read about the kind of things a person can do to reduce stress, you may be ready to create a plan for yourself. Just check off the ideas you think would work best for you. There are spaces for you to write down your own ideas.

My Personal Stress Plan

Part 1: Tackling the Problem

Point 1: Identify and address the problem.

When I have too many problems, I will work on just one at a time. For example, I am going to pick one problem and break it into smaller pieces.

- I will seek advice from family, friends, and mentors and learn from their experience how to better handle problems.
- I will take larger assignments and learn to make lists or timelines •

Point 2: Avoid stress when possible.

I know that everyone has stress, but there are things that I could stay away from that really stress me out. I will

Avoid certain people, like _____

Avoid certain places, like _____

Avoid certain things, like _____

Point 3: Let some things go; so I can focus on others. I realize that it is not helpful to invest my energy worrying about things I can't fix. Here are some things that I will try to let go, so I can focus on the things I can change. _____

Part 2: Taking Care of My Body

Point 4: The Power of Exercise. *(Please remember exercise may not be appropriate for some individuals consult your health care provider regarding your personal situation.)*

I will do something that makes my body work hard for about 20 minutes every other day. I know that healthy bodies help people better deal with stress, and this will keep me in shape. The kinds of things I like to do include _____

I can commit to _____ minutes of exercise a day. If I have trouble focusing in school, I will try exercising before school for _____ minutes (recommended minimum 20) to see if it helps me concentrate better.

I know that a physical workout will help me calm down when I am feeling most worried, stressed, or fearful. This is especially true when I can't concentrate on my homework because it feels like too much. The kinds of things I might do include

Point 5: Active Relaxation.

I will work on learning how to relax by using things like

Tai Chi,

Deep breathing,

Yoga

Meditation

Warm baths or showers

Imagine I am someplace peaceful and relaxing. The place I could imagine myself being is _____

Point 6: Eat well.

I know that having a healthy body helps people deal with stress better. I have already agreed to exercise more. I understand that good nutrition also makes a difference in my health and how well I deal with stress. The changes I am ready to make include

Eating a good breakfast

Skipping fewer meals

Drinking fewer sodas and sugary drinks

Drinking more water

Eating smaller portions

Eating less greasy meals or snacks

Eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain foods.

Point 7: Sleep well.

I know that people who get a good night's sleep do a better job managing stress and do better in school. For me to get the sleep I need, I will try to go to bed at ____: ____.

I will consider the following plan to help me get the best night's rest.

- Avoid caffeine at least 6 hours before bed.
- Exercise 5-6 hours before bed.
- Finish homework after exercise because I will be my calmest, clearest and most focused.
- Take some time to relax or hang out after homework.
- Shower or bathe 1 hour before bed.
- Begin to dim the lights 30 minutes before bed
- Let go of my emotional tension before bed in a place other than bed (see point 9). If I am really troubled, I will do this earlier in the evening.
- I will use my bed only for sleeping.

I will use another place to do some of the things I do in bed now. I will

- Stop reading in bed.
- Stop doing homework in bed.
- Stop watching television in bed.
- Stop talking to my friends or instant messaging in bed.

- Stop worrying in bed.
- Dock my cell phone in a charger that is not in my bedroom
- Deal with the things that stress me out by having a time to let go of my thoughts and feelings in a place other than my bed.

Part 3: Managing My Emotions

Point 8: Take instant vacations.

Everyone needs to be able to take a break for a while by taking an instant vacation. I will

- Read a book.
- Take a mini vacation to a local park or recreation center
- Imagine I am someplace peaceful and relaxing. The place I could imagine myself being is _____
- Watch television.
- Listen to music.
- Play video games that are not violent or stressful.
- Take a warm bath.
- _____

Point 9: Release emotional tension.

- I will try to let my worries go, rather than letting them build up inside.
- I will talk to a friend I have chosen wisely because I know he or she will give good advice.
- I will meditate
- I will write out my thoughts in a diary, journal, or blog.
- I will let myself laugh more.
- I will let myself cry more.
- I will make lists to get organized.
- When it seems that I have too many problems and they seem like more than I can handle, I will work on one at a time.

- I will express myself through art.
- I will express myself through music.
- I will express myself through creative writing.
- I will express myself through poetry.
- I will express myself through rap.
- _____

Part 4: Helping a little can make your world better . . . and help you feel better

Point 10: Contribute.

I know that people who realize they are needed feel better about themselves because they can make a difference in other people’s lives. I plan to

- Help a friend or coworker by _____
- Volunteer in my community by _____
- Help the environment (or animals) by _____

When to Turn for Help

Even if you are great at dealing with problems, there may be times when stress feels like it is getting to you. You are not alone. This does not mean you are crazy or a failure. Strong people turn to others for support when they have too much to handle. It’s okay to turn to wise friends for advice, but it is also important to remember that professionals are available such as counselors and therapists.

The following signs suggest that you should seek some extra guidance:

Your grades are dropping.

You worry a lot.

You easily get moody or angry.

You feel tired all the time.

You get a lot of headaches, dizziness, chest pain, or stomach pain.

You feel sad or hopeless.

You feel bored all the time and are less interested in being with friends.

You are thinking about using alcohol or drugs to try to feel better.

You ever think about hurting yourself.

You are using unhealthy coping strategies and are having trouble replacing them with healthier ones.

Remember that one of the best ways to be happy and successful is to manage stress well. You can do it!

Adapted from Ginsburg KR, Jablow MM. Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings. 2nd ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2011