

# creatively coping with stress

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*Editor's Note: This section contains materials from three different articles written on ways to cope with stress. The majority was taken from an article submitted by Roger T. Williams, "Creatively Coping with Stress." Other materials were taken from articles by Arlinda McCumber, "How Are You Coping?" and Linda E. Moody, "Managing Life Stress Events."*

Roger T. Williams

What can we do to cope more creatively with stress? Many stress management seminars and workshops emphasize centering or relaxation techniques as a way of dealing with stress. While these techniques offer tangible help to some people, they should hardly be viewed as an answer to the question of how to deal more effectively with stress. It may be more realistic to view centering or relaxation techniques as one aspect of a *lifestyle* aimed at more effectively dealing with stress. What would that lifestyle look like? Here are some strategies it might be centered on.

## **Find Meaning and Purpose in Life**

No amount of centering or relaxation techniques can overcome the stress created by an aimless life. Without direction, without purpose, without a reason for being, one's life becomes random, scattered, hit-and-miss. So the first aspect of a stress-centered lifestyle is that of finding meaning and purpose in life. Recently, it seems, people have sought meaning in narrow, self-centered, or self-absorbing forms of activity. Yet this search for meaning is short-sighted and may ultimately be frustrating and anxiety-producing.

Selye reminds us that finding purpose involves altruism as well as egoism, or to use his term, "altruistic egoism."<sup>1</sup>

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And Frankl states in a succinct and pointed way that self-actualization can't be achieved directly—that it only comes about as the unintended effect of self-transcendence.<sup>2</sup>

In short, our meaning springs from purposes and goals that lie at least partly outside ourselves. It springs from our ability to develop a unique and personal sense of purpose, yet one that's closely tied to the goals, aspirations, and well-being of others.

### **Build Personal Support System**

Caplan, in a book that's practically a classic in the mental health field, has argued that our response to stress depends on three things: (1) the nature of the stressor(s), (2) the current strength of the individual, and (3) the emotional support provided by the individual's social network.<sup>3</sup>

The recent emergence of various self-help and mutual support groups reminds us how important it is to have emotional supports to draw on in time of need. Groups for divorcees, parents, parents of mentally retarded or mentally ill children, alcoholics, family members of alcoholics, people who have cancer, women who have had mastectomies, people who are widowed, and others help people cope with various life-stress situations.

However, while these groups provide a new resource for supporting individuals through emotional crises, most have a time-limited quality. Thus, it's important to develop a continual, ongoing network of people that can provide emotional support over an extended period of time. For most people, this means drawing support from family and friends—a support system once referred to as "kith and kin." Some may also gain support from colleagues or fellow workers in job settings.

The important thing to keep in mind is that a support system involves mutuality and reciprocal helping relationships over a period of time. This means that a person must be as willing to lend support to others as to receive support from them.

### **Watch What You Ingest**

While not all of the evidence is in yet, there appears to be reason to do the following as one aspect of a stress-conscious lifestyle:

1. Watch your intake of saturated fats. A high intake of saturated fats can combine with hypertension or high blood pressure to increase your susceptibility to strokes, heart attacks, and hardening of the arteries.
2. Watch your intake of refined carbohydrates. Such foods are absorbed directly into the bloodstream,

requiring an immediate insulin treatment from the pancreas, and upsetting the endocrine balance within the body.

3. Watch your intake of coffee, tea, cola, and chocolate, All contain caffeine, which stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and causes the body to use stored body sugars at an excessive rate, alternately raising and then lowering your blood sugar level.
4. Watch your intake of alcohol and other addictive drugs. While alcohol and drugs are common ways of dealing with stress, they have an addicting effect and tend to deal only with the symptoms of problems. Thus, they tend to mask the roots of illness without eliminating them.
5. Eat a full and nutritious breakfast each day. Skipping breakfast can cause dangerously low blood sugar levels, interfering with concentration and stimulating you to splurge (often on junk food) as hunger pangs increase.<sup>4</sup>

### **Get Exercise You Need**

Again, not all of the evidence is in. However, there appears to be a close connection between our sedentary lifestyle and hypertension, chronic fatigue, lower back pain, and physiological inefficiency. A basic exercise program that's likely to have an effect on one's ability to manage stress involves flexibility and stretching exercises. Stretching the muscles of the neck, arms, shoulders, back, thighs, and midsection reduces the chance that these muscles will tighten up and result in either of three common indicators of stress: headache, neckache, and backache.<sup>5</sup>

A more advanced exercise program that's likely to have an effect on stress is one that involves cardiovascular fitness. If carried out over a period of time, cardiovascular exercise will benefit the heart, lungs, and arteries and result in biochemical changes that elevate one's mood and reinforce a healthy self-concept.

A cardiovascular program is one that involves "aerobic" exercise or exercise that is rhythmic, repetitive, and carried out over a sustained period of time. The activities most commonly used for cardiovascular or aerobic conditioning are running, cycling, swimming, rowing, and cross-country skiing.<sup>6</sup> Needless to say, if you're over 35, it would be wise to have a thorough check-up to determine if any of the coronary heart "risk factors" are present before beginning such a program.

## **Use Centering/ Relaxation Techniques**

Centering techniques have the effect of quieting one's mind and body by shifting attention away from external events and activities. More specifically, they have the effect of lowering the body's oxygen consumption, blood sugar level, heart and respiration rates, and fatty acids in the blood. Thus, they try to replace our normal "fight-or-flight response" with the "relaxation response."

A variety of centering or relaxation techniques have surfaced recently: transcendental meditation, yoga, autogenic training, self-hypnosis, and progressive relaxation, to mention a few. While there are a number of different techniques, they all build on the following four basic components:

1. A quiet environment: Choose a quiet, calm environment with as few distractions as possible.
2. A comfortable position: A comfortable position is important to reduce the possibility of muscle tension.
3. A mental device: One repeats a sound, word, or phrase or fixes attention on a specific object as a way of shifting the mind away from externally oriented thought.
4. A passive attitude: When distracting thoughts occur, they're to be disregarded and attention redirected to the repetition or gazing.

Benson asserts that these four basic components can be used as an alternative to the many specific approaches that have emerged.<sup>7</sup> Thus, one can enter meditation without many of the mystical qualities associated with other approaches.

## **Summary**

Centering or relaxation techniques are frequently touted as the solution for dealing with our stressful world. While their value shouldn't be discounted, it may be more realistic to view them as one aspect of a lifestyle aimed at reducing the effects of stress. The five strategies listed here hold promise for helping us to deal with an increasingly more stressful world.

**Arlinda McCumber**

## **Verbalize Feelings and Frustrations**

Stress-induced illnesses were formerly thought to be more likely to occur in males because of job stress. *However, current medical studies are finding that women in stress-related jobs are developing some of these same illnesses, but not at the rate expected.*

Irving H. Tracer, a psychiatrist at Michael Reese Medical Center in Chicago, found that females are by no means the weaker sex when it comes to handling on-the-job

stress. He has found that while working women are subject to more on-the-job pressure than men, they're able to cope with it better. Tracer believes that *women aren't as likely to suffer stress-related illnesses as men in similar jobs* because females find it easier to vent their emotions and verbalize their frustrations at work.<sup>8</sup> The person who can be more open about his/her feelings and verbalize his/her frustrations will be the person most likely to develop effective coping strategies for dealing with stress regardless of sex.

Linda E. Moody

### **Managing Life Stress Events**

Contemporary man's enemies are often faceless—arguments, deadlines, boredom, ambition, lack of exercise, and pressure to achieve. Many of the things our society has labeled as the "good life" lead to lifestyles that are deadly. Thomas Holmes, a well-known researcher of stress, emphasized the challenges and threats that we have to continually adapt to in everyday life.

Given the rapidly accelerating pace of life today, with one national crisis after another, with an unpredictable job market and social and political instability, one thing that touches us all is change. More and more of us are moving from small towns to urban areas; we move frequently; we eat on the run; we grab a nap when we can; we change jobs; we change spouses. Even those of us who stay put most of our lives have to contend with change. Our children are bussed to school; they grow up and leave home; our parish church is torn down to make way for a supermarket; property taxes go up; our old friends get sick and die; we make new ones. The routine of our lives is constantly being revised. We have to filter incoming stimuli, assign them priorities and try to fit them into our own way of life. If we refuse or are unable to deal with this input, our circuits may become overloaded with a massive life crisis and our systems are at great risk for a breakdown in functions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Is Your Circuit Overloaded?**

Medical research has shown us that the more stress a person is exposed to as a result of life changes, the greater are one's chances of getting sick.

What are your chances of getting sick? Use the checklist in Table 1 to determine how many life changes you've had in the last year.<sup>10</sup>

As you may have noticed, even desirable changes can produce stress: changing jobs, getting promoted, or taking a vacation.

**Table 1. Life change test.****WILL STRESS IN YOUR LIFE MAKE YOU SICK?**

Score yourself on the Life Change Test

If any of these life events have happened to you in the last 12 months, check *happened* column and enter *value* in *your score* column.

Item value	Happened	Your score	Life event
100	_____	_____	Death of spouse
73	_____	_____	Divorce
65	_____	_____	Marital separation
63	_____	_____	Jail term
63	_____	_____	Death of close family member
53	_____	_____	Personal injury or illness
50	_____	_____	Marriage
47	_____	_____	Fired at work
45	_____	_____	Marital reconciliation
45	_____	_____	Retirement
44	_____	_____	Change in health of family member
40	_____	_____	Pregnancy
39	_____	_____	Gain of new family member
39	_____	_____	Business readjustment
39	_____	_____	Sex difficulties
38	_____	_____	Change in financial state
37	_____	_____	Death of close friend
36	_____	_____	Change to different line of work
35	_____	_____	Change in number of arguments with spouse
31	_____	_____	Mortgage over \$10,000
30	_____	_____	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan
29	_____	_____	Change in responsibilities at work
29	_____	_____	Son or daughter leaving home
29	_____	_____	Trouble with in-laws
28	_____	_____	Outstanding personal achievement
26	_____	_____	Spouse begin or stop work
26	_____	_____	Begin or end school
25	_____	_____	Change in living conditions
24	_____	_____	Revision of personal habits
23	_____	_____	Trouble with boss
20	_____	_____	Change in work hours or conditions
20	_____	_____	Change in residence
20	_____	_____	Change in schools
19	_____	_____	Change in recreation
19	_____	_____	Change in church activities
18	_____	_____	Change in social activities
17	_____	_____	Mortgage or loan less than \$10,000
16	_____	_____	Change in sleeping habits
15	_____	_____	Change in number of family get-togethers
15	_____	_____	Change in eating habits
13	_____	_____	Vacation
12	_____	_____	Christmas
11	_____	_____	Minor violations of the law

Total score for 12 months \_\_\_\_\_

*Note: The more change you have, the likelier you are to get sick. Of those people with over 300 Life Change Units for the past year, almost 80% get sick in the near future; with 150 to 299 Life Change Units, about 50% get sick in the near future; and with less than 150 Life Change Units, only about 30% get sick in the near future.*

If you scored less than 150 points, you have about 1 in 3 chances of a serious illness in the next 2 years. A score between 150 and 300 increases your risk to 50% and a score over 300 means that your chances of becoming sick are 80%.

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### Preventing Circuit Overload

Some of the life changes, like death of a spouse, can't be avoided, but you *can* postpone certain changes: marriage, college, a move, or a new job, to keep your score *under* 300 in a 2-year period. These measures will help *reduce* your chances of illness.

### Footnotes

1. Hans Selye, "On the Real Benefits of Eustress," *Psychology Today*, XI (March, 1978), 69.
2. Victor Frankl, *The Unheard Cry for Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 35.
3. Gerald Caplan, *Support Systems and Community Mental Health* (New York: Behavioral Publications, 1974).
4. Donald B. Ardell, *High Level Wellness: An Alternative to Doctors, Drugs and Disease* (Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press, 1977), pp. 113-33.
5. Hans Kraus, *Backache, Stress and Tension: Cause, Prevention and Treatment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).
6. David Sherpo and Howard Knuttgen, *Complete Conditioning: The Complete Guide to Fitness and Good Health* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1975).
7. Herbert Benson, *The Relaxation Response* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1975).
8. Irving H. Tracer, "Job Stress: Women Cope Better," *Human Behavior*, VIII (January, 1979), 34-35.
9. Thomas H. Holmes and Richard H. Rahe, "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, XI (August, 1967) 214.
10. *Ibid.*