

# Stress Management Strategies

Material adapted from Concern Worldwide (U.S.) Inc.'s *Innovations for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health* initiative. (Direct quote, except where noted otherwise with ellipses or brackets; pages 15-18) ([http://innovationsformnch.org/uploads/publications/HHWC\\_Stress\\_Management\\_Manual\\_Final.pdf](http://innovationsformnch.org/uploads/publications/HHWC_Stress_Management_Manual_Final.pdf))

It is helpful for everyone to find ways to integrate stress management techniques into our daily lives. Let's face it – life is stressful, we need to be proactive in order to learn ways to better cope with it at work, at home, and in our communities. With practice, we all can learn how to better spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds.... With stress management, we strive to relax and find the opposite physical reaction to fight or flight – decreasing our heart rate, blood pressure, respiration and muscle tension.

Like developing any new skill, it takes time, commitment, self-exploration and experimentation. A central part of stress management is finding ways to build new habits for yourself, so that you have practical tools readily available as stressful situations arise....

## Basic Stress Management Techniques

### Tip # 1: Recognize warning signs of excessive stress

#### ***Self-awareness is the foundation of stress management***

Feeling overwhelmed at work or in your personal life is draining and can make you feel irritable, withdrawn and ineffective. Many of us feel stress so often that it begins to feel normal. The first step in better managing your stress is to simply recognize it, so that it does not grow into bigger problems – affecting your physical and emotional health. We can learn simple ways to “check ourselves” for stress.

#### ***Become aware of stress by observing your muscles, insides and your breath***

If you notice muscle tension or other internal signals (such as tightness in your jaw or hands, neck, tightness in your stomach, headache), your body is telling you that you are under excessive stress. Another signal of stress is when you notice that your breathing becomes shallow, or when you “forget” to breathe (versus relaxed deeper belly breathing).

### Tip # 2: Reduce Stress through Self-Care

The better you feel, the better you will be prepared to confront stress without being overwhelmed. This means taking care of your health physically and emotionally. Even small things can help you to have more energy and feel more in control of your situation, both at home and at work.

Some self-care ideas include:

#### ***Exercise***

When we move our bodies our heart rate is elevated, which helps to lift our mood, increase energy, and relax our mind and body. Try to get at least 30 minutes of activity most days. If it is

difficult to find that much time in your day, break the activity into two or three shorter segments. Try walking, stretching, or participate in a sport (examples might include football, dancing, etc.)

### ***Socialize and Connect with Others***

Talk with your family or friends when you feel stressed. Simply sharing your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust can help. Develop friendships with your co-workers, as this can help protect you from the negative effects of stress. Find a “vent partner” – a trusted friend who you know will listen to you and give objective advice. Listening and supporting one another can relieve stress.

### ***Take Breaks, Time away***

When you become aware that stress is mounting, take a quick break to move away from the situation. Go on a quick brisk walk, take a minute to meditate or pray. Sometimes physical movement, engaging in positive self-talk and changing your environment can help you to “reset” and enhance your ability to cope.

### ***Make Healthy Food and Drink Choices***

Eat healthy meals and snacks, including fresh fruits and vegetables daily. Drink plenty of water to keep hydrated. If you get hungry between meals, eat snacks with protein (such as groundnuts, cashew nuts, etc.) to keep your energy up during the day. Avoid foods with lots of salt, sugar (including sweets, juice and soda drinks), and processed foods, as these types of foods can make you tired and more vulnerable to health problems. Use caffeine in moderation, as your mood and energy can “crash” afterwards.

### ***Avoid Drinking, Smoking or Taking Pills or Drugs to Relax***

Alcohol can temporarily reduce stress, but it can be hard on the body and lead to abuse and dependence. Similarly, the nicotine found in tobacco can be temporarily calming, and later lead to higher levels of anxiety and health problems. Medications to ease pain, like any drugs, can help us to feel better in the short term but do not address underlying stressors and can become addictive.

### ***Practice Healthy Sleeping Habits***

Getting adequate sleep is critical. When you are rested you are better equipped to deal with stress during the day. Aim for eight hours of sleep a night and take naps if you are able. Arrange your sleeping area so it is comfortable for you and avoid watching TV, working on the computer, worrying, arguing, etc. before going to bed.

### ***Enjoy Cultural, Spiritual and Social Activities***

Get engaged with your community for song, dance, and cultural activities. It is good to express yourself and socialize with your neighbors. Another critical part of self-care involves nurturing your spiritual side – so try to make time for self-reflection, meditation and prayer [if of interest].

### ***Look for humor***

When used appropriately, humor can be a great way to release stress. When you feel things are getting too serious or heavy, look for ways to lighten the mood by sharing a joke or story. It is important to have fun and laugh, even at work.

### ***Know your limits***

Don't over commit yourself! Don't try to fit too much into one day. If you feel you have too much on your plate, prioritize and drop tasks that are not essential. Ask for help. Learn to say “no” and set limits when you are asked to take on more than you can handle. If you feel overwhelmed at

work, ask to meet with your manager (CHO) and discuss how best to prioritize the tasks at hand.

### ***Create a balanced schedule***

Analyze your schedule, responsibilities and daily tasks. Plan at least one fun or enjoyable social activity into your schedule every day. Find a balance between work and family; alone time is also important to avoid burnout.

What do you think of these suggestions? What other strategies have you tried or what other ideas have you heard of that might help us cope with stress?

## **Stress Reduction Exercises** (see Appendices 3, 4, and 5)

We would like to discuss a few specific relaxation techniques, proven to be effective in stress reduction. They include: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualization/imagery. Remember that effective stress management requires practice over time in order to see results. You may find that one of these techniques might work better than others. Once you have tried out these techniques, adopt the one(s) that work(s) best for you and stick with it.

### ***Deep Breathing***

Deep breathing is a simple but very effective method of relaxation. It can be used to “take a deep breath” to calm someone down in a crisis, as well as in meditation, prayer or during slow stretching of your muscles. You can use this technique in combination with the other two techniques (progressive muscle relaxation and visualization) to reduce stress.

### ***Progressive Muscle Relaxation***

Progressive muscular relaxation is useful for relaxing your body when muscles are tense. The idea behind this technique is that you focus slowly on tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. Normally you tense each muscle group for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 (or more) seconds, repeating as needed. This helps you become more aware of physical sensations in your body and is very practical because it can be done anywhere, anytime.

### ***Visualization***

Visualization, or imagery is a powerful method of stress reduction, and can be combined with other types of physical relaxation such as deep breathing. The general idea behind positive visualization is to use your imagination to create a situation in your mind that is relaxing and calming – like taking a “mini holiday.”

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## **Wrap up**

There are many other techniques for preventing stress and improving coping skills in addition to the three types (deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation/CALM and visualization) [mentioned here]. Some others include meditation, prayer, engaging in “talk” counseling, and other forms of exercise. We encourage you to use the handouts... [mentioned here and others]... to experiment further with these stress reduction strategies and see if you might be able to integrate any of them into your regular self-care routine.

# My Stress Management Responses & Next Steps

What stood out to me from this resource/discussion and past resources on stress management (from Shoshanna/on LinkedIn, etc.)? Why?

What do I do now when I am stressed?

What do I want to STOP doing, KEEP doing, and START doing when I am stressed?

- STOP
- KEEP
- START

If I am feeling overwhelmed, to whom will I reach out to for support within the next week?

[This page not adapted from the source listed on prior pages.]