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5 STEPS TO REDUCING STRESS

RECOGNIZING WHAT WORKS

Excerpted from *5 Steps to Reducing Stress: Recognizing What Works*

RECOGNIZING STRESS

The first step to managing stress is to understand its nature as well as your preferred way of initiating a relaxation response (stress style). The second step is recognizing when stress is present and how it shows up in your life. If you are asked, “What stresses you out?” do you think of a person or a situation? These are called *stressors* because they trigger a stress response. The stress response can be a valuable indicator of what is happening in your life, acting as a radar detector to let you know when too much stress is present. The stress response can indicate—and even force you to make—changes in your life to reduce the drain on your energies. There are many signs of stress; a few examples that have been reported as symptoms are listed in the following table. There might be other reasons why any of the symptoms listed below occur.

TABLE 1: SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS	MENTAL SYMPTOMS
Being irritable	Difficulty making decisions
Mood swings	Difficulty concentrating
Feel Low	Difficulty problem solving
Lacking concentration	Forgetfulness
Feeling nervous	Being less rational
Easily upset	
Feelings of guilt	
Depression	
Anger at trivial issues	
No enthusiasm	

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BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS	PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS
Being withdrawn	Indigestion
Increased eating	Skin irritations
Increased smoking	Tiredness
Increased alcohol consumption	Constipation
Changes in sleep pattern	Prone to illness
Poor workmanship	Aches and pains
Being accident prone	Muscle twitching
Lack of sex drive	Headaches
Frequent agitation	Unexpected weight gain or loss

RECOGNIZING THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS ARISING

An effective way to reduce stress is to apply your stress-management style to stress that is just starting to occur. In order to do this, you need to identify your stress symptoms for low, medium, and high degrees of stress. If you are able to intervene before the event becomes a crisis, this will leave you with the energy to deal with those unexpected times when crises arrive with no warning.

Identifying low, medium, and high stress enables us to apply the right strategy at the right time and to the right degree. We know what “treatment” is needed. Imagine that you wake up one morning and realize, as you get out of bed, that you have a sore foot. Hmm; something is not right; something hurts. You assess the situation. It doesn’t hurt a lot, but there is definitely something there that does. You take a closer look. Is it a sprain? A cut? A blister? Yes, definitely a blister that must have been caused by the new shoes you wore yesterday. Now, what do you do? Give the shoes away? Keep wearing them? You decide that they are wonderful shoes and are worth breaking in after all. But you will wear other shoes today to give that

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foot a rest. Congratulations! You have just analyzed your situation, assessed the impact on your foot, decided on a course of action, and gone forward with this course of action.

You have understood the situation (Step One), recognized the source of the stress and the level of its impact (Step Two), managed the external by keeping the shoes and giving yourself time to break them in (Step Three), managed the internal by deciding that the shoes are worth it (Step Four), and, finally, used different shoes today because you are aware that the new shoes need some break-in time (Step Five).

We complete such an assessment automatically when it comes to our physical selves, yet we don't when it comes to analyzing our stress. The advantage to assessing your level of stress is that you can intervene at a much lower level of stress and apply the right treatment to prevent further damage. A low level of treatment is generally easier, takes less time, and is amazingly effective.

For example, you realize you are starting to worry about an upcoming meeting. You are becoming irritable, and being irritable is an indicator that you are shifting from low- to medium-level stress. You recognize this and take some time to identify what it is, specifically, about this meeting that is upsetting for you. This recognition is a cognitive-adjustment style. Once you have identified the reason, you can intervene and address the issue. Perhaps you feel you will be unprepared for the questions others might ask of you. Your treatment is to decide to take extra time to prepare, anticipate as much as possible the type of questions you might need to answer, and prepare specific responses. Table 1 lists various responses to stress. This list is just an example of some of the ways stress shows up in our emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and physical selves.

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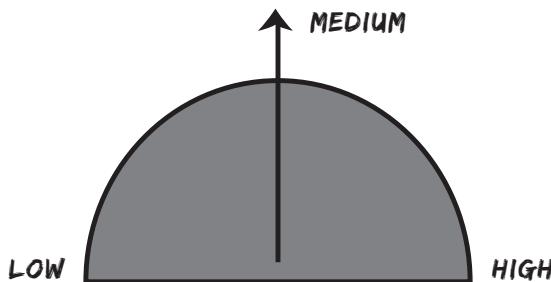
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Your perception of a situation also changes with the level of stress present. For example, if you notice on a Monday that the kids' rooms are messy, you might think, *Those kids. I will have to talk with them about cleaning their room.* However, if on a Friday—the end of a long, stressful week—you come home and notice the same thing, you might react furiously. Guess what? The situation has not changed, but you have. Your perception of the seriousness of the situation is heightened by the stress you are under from things other than the rooms being messy. During such reactive times, you might appear quite differently under stress than when times are good.

Figure 4 separates the overall stress response into low, medium, and high stress. A stress response such as a headache might be one person's medium level response, while headaches for you might be an indicator of a higher degree of stress.

FIGURE 4: GOOD STRESS TO DISTRESS



The boundaries between low-medium and medium-high are not absolute, and it is difficult to tell when stress is shifting from good stress to distress. Remember, distress lies beyond the optimum point, as shown in figure 1.

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It is also hard to tell how quickly you are moving toward high levels of distress. A tragic event or an emergency could elevate your stress level from low to high in a matter of seconds. Depending on the situation, it could remain there until the perceived threat is gone. Except in emergencies, the shifts might be subtle, but there are signs.

TABLE 2: EXAMPLE OF RECOGNIZING STRESS AND STRESS ARISING

	LOW	MEDIUM	HIGH
EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS			
Irritable	✓		
Easy to anger, tears, etc.		✓	
MENTAL SYMPTOMS			
Negative thinking		✓	
Exaggerated (all good, all bad) thinking		✓	
BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS			
Procrastination		✓	
Avoidance			✓
PHYSICAL			
Headaches			✓
Sleeping more	✓		
Poor sleep		✓	

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1. Low: “I can feel tension.” “I feel nervous.” “I’m kind of scared.” For example, consider your first day in a new job. You were both excited and a bit nervous. This would be an example of low stress.
2. Medium: This is often indicated by your stating to someone, “I feel stressed out.” You will be referring to an existing reaction that has been building and in place for a period of time.
3. High: This is usually indicated by a lack of functioning in our work or home life. Perhaps you require leave from work or, at the least, a shift in lifestyle.

Intervening at a lower level of stress is like the old saying “take care of the pennies, and the dollars will take care of themselves.” You get the picture. Now it’s your turn. Here are your instructions for recognizing stress:

1. Identify what symptoms you associate with stress in the following four categories. You may use ones from table 1 and may also add your own.
2. Once you have identified as many stress symptoms as you can, review your list. Place each into a category of low, medium, or high by checking off each symptom in the appropriate column.

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REDUCING STRESS ACTIVITY 4: RECOGNIZING YOUR STRESS AND STRESS ARISING SYMPTOMS