

STRESS MANAGEMENT: TEN SELF-CARE TECHNIQUES

TO RELAX. Throughout the day, take "mini-breaks". Sit down and get comfortable. Slowly take in a deep breath; hold it; and then exhale very slowly. At the same time, let your shoulder muscles droop, smile, and say something positive like, "I am r-e-l-a-x-e-d." Be sure to get sufficient rest at night.

PRACTICE ACCEPTANCE. Many people get distressed over things they won't let themselves accept. Often, these are things that can't be changed, for example someone else's feelings or beliefs. If something unjust bothers you, that is different. If you act in a responsible way, the chances are you will manage that stress effectively.

TALK RATIONALLY TO YOURSELF. Ask yourself what real impact the stressful situation will have on you in a day or in a week, and see if you can let the negative thoughts go. Think through whether the situation is your problem or the other person's. If it is yours, approach it calmly and firmly. If it is the other person's, there is not much you can do about it. Rather than condemning yourself with hindsight thinking like, "I should have...", think about what you can learn from the error and plan for the future. Watch out for perfectionism -- set realistic and attainable goals. Remember: everyone makes errors. Be careful of procrastination -- practice breaking tasks into smaller units to make it manageable, and practice prioritizing to get things done.

GET ORGANIZED. Develop a realistic schedule of daily activities that includes time for work, sleep, relationships, and recreation. Use a daily "thing to do" list. Improve your physical surroundings by cleaning your house and straightening up your office. Use your time and energy efficiently.

EXERCISE. Physical activity has always provided relief from stress. In the past, daily work was largely physical. Now that physical exertion is no longer a requirement for earning a living, we don't get rid of stress so easily. It accumulates very quickly. We need to develop a regular exercise program to reduce the effects of stress before it becomes distress. Try aerobics, walking, jogging, dancing, or swimming.

REDUCE TIME URGENCY. If you frequently check your watch or worry about what you do with your time, learn to take things a bit slower. Allow plenty of time to get things done. Plan your schedule ahead of time. Recognize that you can only do so much in a given period. Practice the notion of "pace, not race".

DISARM YOURSELF. Every situation in life does not require you to be competitive. Adjust your approach to an event according to its demands. You don't have to raise your voice in a simple discussion. Playing tennis with a friend does not have to be an Olympic trial. Leave behind your "weapons" of shouting, having the last word, putting someone else down, and blaming.

QUIET TIME. Balance your family, social, and work demands with special private times. Hobbies are good antidotes for daily pressures. Unwind by taking a quiet stroll, soaking in a hot bath, watching a sunset, or listening to calming music.

WATCH YOUR HABITS. Eat sensibly -- a balanced diet will provide all the necessary energy you will need during the day. Avoid nonprescription drugs and avoid alcohol use -- you need to be mentally and physically alert to deal with stress. Be mindful of the effects of excessive caffeine and sugar on nervousness. Put out the cigarettes -- they restrict blood circulation and affect the stress response.

TALK TO FRIENDS. Friends can be good medicine. Daily doses of conversation, regular social engagements, and occasional sharing of deep feelings and thoughts can reduce stress quite nicely.