



Preventing Stress Through a Healthy Lifestyle¹

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MAINTAINING GOOD HEALTH

"Lifestyle" refers to personal behaviors and habits such as exercise, eating habits, cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug use, safety, and stress management. Experts say that a person's lifestyle helps him or her resist the negative effects of stress and prevents stress from becoming a problem. You may want to follow the Lifestyle Guidelines listed below to maintain your health and prevent stress:

- Avoid cigarettes. Cigarette smoking is the single most important preventable cause of illness and early death. The effects of smoking can be reversed.
- Exercise regularly. Regular exercise helps people of all ages look and feel better. Different kinds of exercise provide specific health benefits.
- Eat sensibly. A nutritious diet is essential for maintaining good health and proper weight.
- If you drink, drink only in moderation. Alcohol is frequently used to reduce stress because it has a relaxing effect. Regular, heavy use of alcohol leads to disease. Drinking and driving often leads to fatal or crippling accidents.
- Use care in taking drugs. Although drugs may provide temporary relief from stress symptoms, they may not solve ongoing problems and tensions.

Excessive or continued use of either prescription or illegal drugs may cause physical and mental problems.

- Be safety-conscious. Living safely at home, work, and on the road prevents accidents and injuries.
- Learn to manage stress. Stress is a normal part of living. Three major steps to keep daily stress from becoming a problem: take time to relax, talk with a friend, and learn to keep a positive outlook.

KEEPING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Have you ever noticed that, while one person sees a situation as a problem, another views it as a challenge? Research shows that adults who are optimistic maintain higher levels of mental and physical health than those who are more negative. There seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy at work: When a person sees a stressor as a problem or crisis it is likely to become a crisis because he or she feels unable to cope. But when a person sees an event as something that can be managed, he or she is likely to act quickly to solve a problem before it exhausts her or his energy. In other words, how people perceive the situation influences how they react.

It is not clear what enables some people to "see a glass half full" while others "see it half empty." Outlook may be affected by the person's sense of autonomy and

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control--feeling independent and in control of daily life. People who feel in control are more likely to believe they can handle a situation and are able to prevent it from becoming stressful. People who look at a situation as something that can be handled are confident that it will be resolved and takes steps to confront or solve the problem; this may prevent the situation from becoming worse.

Although it is important to maintain autonomy and control, it may also be important to recognize when situations cannot be controlled. This avoids increased frustration and tension. When a solution is out of reach, the most effective coping strategy may be to change your outlook by "letting go," rather than by forcing a solution. Relaxation exercises help in releasing tension.

Another option is to reframe the situation, that is, to look at it in a different, more positive light. This technique often helps a person to accept and to feel better about the situation.

To reframe a situation means to look at what is happening with a different, more positive attitude. When individuals and families keep a positive outlook they can stand up to stress more easily. Some examples of how you can reframe certain situations appear in Table 1. Add your own examples at the end of the list.

Table 1. Reframing

NEGATIVE OUTLOOK	POSITIVE REFRAME
stubborn	determined
stingy	thrifty
bossy	a leader
loud	uninhibited
shy	quiet
picky	attends to details
won't follow rules	creative/innovative
talks too much	outgoing

There are times when reframing doesn't fit the situation. There are also times when it seems almost impossible to feel positive. You may not be able to change the situation or even to look at in a positive light, but it may be helpful to take walks outdoors and to try to appreciate the enjoyable aspects of life. Sometimes taking stock of personal and family strengths and assets helps us to appreciate the positive.

- Make a list of the things you enjoy about your life.

- With your family, discuss the things you enjoy about being together, and the things you like about each other.
- Talk about the things you and your family are looking forward to in the future--events, activities, celebrations. Explore ways you can continue to show your appreciation for your individual and family strengths.

RELAXATION EXERCISES

Relaxation exercises are effective techniques for reducing stress. These exercises help you to feel less tense and more relaxed. The result is a greater sense of physical and emotional well-being. A brief relaxation activity requires 60 to 90 seconds, so it can be done easily and quickly on the job, in the car, or in a few minutes of free time at home.

- Step 1. Assume a passive and comfortable position. Although sitting may be most conducive to relaxation, you can do these exercises while standing, riding in a car, lying down, or as you prepare for an anticipated stressful event.
- Step 2. Practice one or more of the following activities several times each day. This will help keep you calm, and will reduce tension when it occurs.

- **Deep breathing:**
Exhale slowly, and tell all your muscles to relax. Say as you exhale, "I feel tension and energy flowing out of my body". Repeat the above exercise five or six times and you'll become more relaxed.
- **Whole body tension:**
Tense every muscle in your body, stay with that tension, and hold it as long as you can without feeling any pain. Slowly release the tension and very gradually feel it leave your body. Repeat three times. Notice how your feelings change.

- **Shoulder shrugs and head rolls:**

Try to raise your shoulders up to your ears. Hold for the count of four, then drop your shoulders back to normal position. Rotate your head and neck. Vary this by rotating your shoulders up and down, and head and neck around--first one way, then the other, then both at the same time.

- **Imagine air as a cloud:**

Open your imagination and focus on your breathing. As your breathing becomes calm and regular, imagine that the air comes to you as a cloud--it fills you and goes out. Notice that your breathing becomes regular as you relax.

Some relaxation exercises work better for some people than others. Practice whatever exercises seem to fit you best. (These exercises were adapted from Stress and How to Live With It. Cheryl Tevis, Ed Meredith Corp. 1982.)