

SOS!

Surviving Our Stress

In the last month, have you ...

- ... left work with a headache?
- ... dreamed about work?
- ... taken aspirin, tums, Maalox?
- ... eaten meal as you drove down road?
- ... binged on sports reruns or talk radio?
- ... treated stress with shopping or chocolate?
- ... snapped at a loved one?
- ... had moment of stress in your life?

Ah ha! Looks like you're ripe for a refresher on stress – and a chance to choose options for dealing with your life stress.



About the Author

TJ Titcomb has been helping organizations manage change, develop leaders and prevent problems for more than forty years. She holds a master's degree in counseling psychology and a PhD in organizational development. Now mostly retired, Dr. Titcomb is sharing workbooks from presentations she has given at conferences.

The Basics of Stress



Stress is a reality of today's world. Stress can come from ...

... **positive** and **negative** events

we expect stress from illness or a flat tire but a promotion, vacation, or a baby are also stressful – almost any deviation from your normal life and routine

... **big** crises and **little** hassles

you've probably seen the classic Holmes-Rahe stress scale where points are assigned to various life events – this model led to the big crises view of stress – another view recognizes that stress is cumulative – it builds up until some little hassle pushes you over the edge

... **expectations** of work, of the world, of adult life ... and, especially, of ourselves

Short-term stress actually revs up the immune system and can serve as a motivator for action. Long-term or chronic stress causes too much wear and tear and the system breaks down. It's like jamming on your car's accelerator at the same time you're pushing down the brake.

If not dealt with, stress can lead to burnout – one step beyond stress. Burnout affects the best folks – the ones who are committed, hard-working and people-oriented. They also tend to be perfectionists who give 110% ... and who don't admit to their own limitations.

Rather than trying to eliminate stress, we need to monitor our stress levels and develop effective ways of managing pressures.

What are your most common stressors?

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____





Smoke Signals of Burnout

Take note of your stress symptoms. They are the early warning signs of **burnout**. Check the symptoms you have most often:

PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL
☐ exhaustion	☐ depression	☐ irritability
☐ anxiety	☐ frustration	☐ defensiveness
☐ sleep changes	☐ boredom	☐ negativism
☐ digestion problems	☐ resentment	☐ diff concentrating
☐ head/backaches	☐ overload	☐ don't finish tasks
☐ stiff neck	☐ overwhelmed	☐ scattered activity
☐ sore/tight shoulders	☐ apathy	☐ withdrawal
☐ clenched jaw	☐ powerlessness	☐ hard to relax
☐ lowered resistance	☐ hopeless	☐ loss of humor/zest
		☐ use/misuse of ...
		☐ caffeine
		☐ tobacco
		☐ food
		☐ alcohol / meds
		☐ credit
		☐ work

Note the pattern of your responses. The early focus in stress management was to teach progressive deep muscle relaxation. That technique worked really well if you have a physical stress style. But if your symptoms are more often emotional/mental, you need to choose coping approaches that deal with that style. Behavioral stress may respond to a combination of copers.

You also need to change your attitude about stress symptoms.

Symptoms are **your friends**

They are simply the way your mind and body are telling you to **do something** – to take care of yourself.



Discover the SOS Copers

Now is the time for anyone who regularly experiences stressful events to develop or enhance coping strategies to **Survive Our Stress**.

Strengthen your resistance

- ☒ Boost your Energy Reserves
- ☒ Express Yourself
- ☒ Develop a Support System

Open your mind

- ☒ Know your A-B-Cs
- ☒ Talk Back to Yourself
- ☒ Take Charge with Positive Action

Soothe your spirit

- ☒ Enjoy your Sense of Humor
- ☒ Lean on your Sense of Serious
- ☒ Remember What's Important



The more stress you accumulate, the heavier it becomes. If you accumulate too much, the weight of carrying it can break you.

– Oscar Auliq-Ice

Boost your Energy Reserves



You can build up your stress resistance and increase your energy reserves by working to have a **healthy lifestyle**. Plan for:



EAT RIGHT

- ✓ multiple servings of Fruits and Vegetables (citrus, fleshy fruit, dark leafy vegetables, green and yellow vegetables, berries potatoes)
- ✓ multiple servings of Bread, Cereals and Legumes (complex carbohydrates and protein sources such as rice, pasta, whole grains, beans)
- ✓ reasonable use of Dairy Products (milk, cheese, yogurt, ice cream)
- ✓ reasonable use of Meat and Poultry (lean beef and pork, chicken, eggs, fish)
- ✓ replace soda / coffee with water ... avoid tobacco ... limit alcohol

Work off tension with **physical activity**:

EXERCISE + REST

- ✓ choose an activity you like – ideally out in the fresh air
- ✓ schedule a regular time for exercise and stick to it
- ✓ consider the easiest cheapest, and safest exercise – a brisk 20 minute walk at least 3 times a week
- ✓ you could also do yoga, run, bike, swim, dance
- ✓ there are many other ways to stay active - gardening, house-keeping, playing with the kids ... whatever is fun and gets your heart pumping

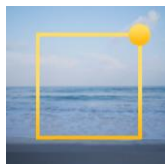
And don't ignore the importance of **rest**. Get 7-8 hours of sleep every night.

Practice conscious deep breathing so you can draw on this skill when under stress. Stretch out on the floor with a book on your abdomen – or sit with your hands on your belly. Your abdomen should expand and fill when you inhale and empty completely when you exhale. Try **Box Breathing**:

BREATHE

- ✓ Find a comfortable pace – start by counting to four at a medium pace and see if that feels right for your breath. Don't count so slowly that you feel dizzy.
- ✓ Visualize a box – picture each four-count as a side of a box and complete a side with each step.
- ✓ Inhale for a count of 4 ... hold for 4 ... exhale for 4 ... hold for 4 ... Repeat the cycle four times.

check YouTube for videos that guide breathing



Express Yourself and Build Support



Don't hold it in! If you're carrying quiet concerns to keep the peace, know that things rarely get better when they're hidden. Speak up. Share your views openly with assertive communication: direct and respectful. Promise yourself to never complain unless you have a **Make It Better** suggestion. Work with others to solve problems.

Support is out there if you remember **three steps**:

- 1 **Know** what is supportive for you ... a listening ear, suggestions to help you problem solve, a chat about life outside work, a chance to sit quietly in a dark room – all are legitimate but very different forms of support.
- 2 **Give** support to others ... what goes around, comes around – you get what you give – and even if support is never returned, the good feelings you get from helping someone else are immeasurable
- 3 **Ask** for support ... so often we *hint* for support and then get mad when others don't pick up on the hint – it's amazing how many folks, including complete strangers, will be supportive when asked

Build your **Support System**

by adding names in the boxes.

The more names, the stronger the system.

And, it's impossible for any one person to be in all the boxes.



LISTEN

listens deeply to you without advice, judgment, or platitudes – works to understand you

LAUGH

is your Stress Buddy – laughs at the same things you do – helps you get perspective

ENCOURAGE

lifts you up with a kind word or pat on shoulder – helps you find the courage to keep on keepin' on

VALIDATE

understands what you do and can tell you when you're on the right track

CHALLENGE

listens and supports but also confronts and challenges you to be better

Open your Mind Know your A-B-Cs

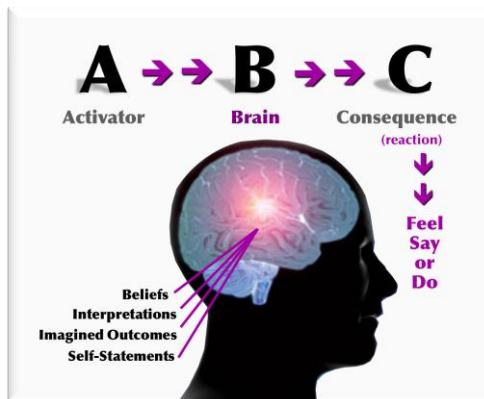
A lot of stress is related to the issue of → **CONTROL** ←
We try to control situations. We try to control other people.
We need to put our energy into the **one thing** we have complete control over ...

our reaction

to stressful situations and people.

Start by learning your **A-B-Cs**. You can't change your reaction until you understand where your reactions come from.

We are constantly influenced by our beliefs and expectations, by how we interpret events and people, by what we imagine will happen, and by what we say to ourselves. This **B** step – the brain – is the source of all our reactions.



Most often this process is unconscious and automatic. Take your brain off auto-pilot and challenge your hidden **Beliefs**. Seventy years ago psychologist Albert Ellis proposed that we are all influenced by irrational beliefs. Common ones are

- ... Life **should** be fair.
- ... Things **should** be the way I want them to be.
- ... People **should** know what I want and give it to me.
- ... I **should** be able to handle this better.

This is called shoulding on yourself. Fight back:

Wait a minute! Who said so? What's the worst that can happen? How likely is that to happen?

Open your Mind Take Control Back

Now consider the next part of the **B** step - your **Interpretations**. There is no difference in **what** happens to pessimists and optimists. The difference lies in **how** they respond to people and events. Optimism is closely linked to how we explain to ourselves why things happen ... and their impact on our lives. Psychologist Martin Seligman identified 3 Ps that contribute to Learned Optimism ...

→ **Permanence** – *how long will this affect me?*

→ **Pervasiveness** – *how much of my life is affected?*

→ **Personalization** – *how much of this did **I** cause?*

Moving on to **Imagined Outcomes**: it's so easy to slide into imagining really awful things happening. When we fail to say hello to the boss, in our mind the next step is getting fired for insubordination. A slight headache morphs into a fatal brain tumor. Ellis called this insidious process **catastrophizing** – imagining that the worst will happen. Here are some ways to interrupt and/or replace the images ...

- ☐ Keep a Thoughts Diary – helps you break the pattern and begin to distrust your brain
- ☐ Write down upsetting or stressful situations – look for patterns
- ☐ Distract yourself by doing something active
- ☐ Create solutions to your imagined “what-ifs”
- ☐ Challenge yourself – *is this reasonable? how likely is it to happen?*

Finally, let's look at **Self-Statements**. Do you talk to yourself? Sure, that's perfectly healthy; everyone does. Do you **talk back** and **talk smart** to yourself? That's the most effective technique to change your reaction. Come up with three generic, fit any situation, **Coping Self-Statements** – a saying, a verse, a poem, whatever - use something that works in your brain. Practice these so your brain will automatically call on them when you're confronted with a stressful situation. The research is really interesting on this technique: you don't have to believe what you say – you just have to say it. The most effective approach is “distanced” self-talk. Instead of starting with “I” say, **You're coping remarkably well. You can do this.**



Your sense of humor gives you the ability to laugh in spite of all the reasons there are NOT to laugh. Laughter has ...

... **physiological** (body) benefits

relaxes muscles – exercises vital organs – releases endorphins,
the body's natural pain-reducing chemicals/hormones

... **psychological** (mind) benefits

increases energy – transforms negative emotions – changes
perspective

Choose more Positive Labels

Change complaints into jokes – when you hear yourself complaining, force yourself to retell the story in a way that makes it funny. If this is something you'll laugh about in five years . . .

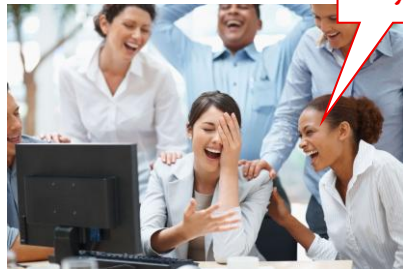
WHY WAIT ?

Remember the Rule of the Five P's

How many times a day do you laugh? The average American laughs 15 times. Do you want to settle for just being AVERAGE? Are you satisfied with scoring a C on the laughter test?

Look for – and share – the humor in daily life.

Laugh **WITH** instead of AT ... attack humor separates people and adds to stress - one professional comedian said there's a term for laughing with – it's called *oo, yeah* humor because people respond by saying, "oo, yeah!"



And the Rule of the Five P's is the simple one that applies to so much in life → Practice ... Practice ... Practice . . .

The last of human freedoms – the
ability to choose one's attitude
... to choose one's way.

– Viktor Frankl



If you have a sense of purpose in life, you are more likely to be positive and resilient under stress:

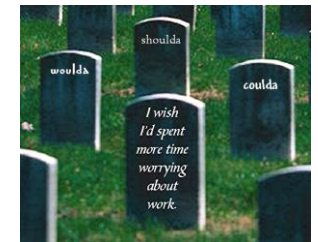
- ◆ **Strong Values**
- ◆ **Personal Goals**
- ◆ **Plans for the Future**
- ◆ **Faith through Hard Times**
- ◆ **Connection to Something bigger, greater, more significant**

Take the time *now* to think about your **Goals, Beliefs, Values** – the principles you live by. How do you want to live your life? How do you want to treat other people? What memories do you want to create? What do you want to accomplish? When your time on earth is finished, what do you want to be remembered for?

Turn dreams into action plans. Break down the big goals into smaller steps with deadlines and checkpoints. Always have something you are looking forward to ... in the short term (in the next three months) ...in the middle term (in the next 1-2 years) ... and in the long term (in the next 3-5+ years) ... Promise yourself to take some action on one of your plans at least once a week.

Remember What's Important

What's **REALLY** important to you in your life? Where are you currently investing your time and energy? Work to achieve a balance in your life. Choose to LIVE your priorities.



Another thought to keep in mind: when we're under stress, our life problems seem to become ALL-IMPORTANT in the universe. An alternative is to **LOOK OUTSIDE** yourself – broaden your perspective. Help someone else; take up a worthy cause; volunteer your talents, really listen to a friend ...



Take Positive Action

SOS! Strengthen your Reistance: Increase Your Energy

List two changes you will make to develop healthy habits.

1. _____
2. _____

SOS! Strengthen your Reistance: Build Support

In the next month get together in person or online with your **Stress Buddy** – share some memories and laughter. S/he who laughs, lasts.

SOS! Open your Mind: Know your A-B-Cs

In what situations – or with which individuals – are you most likely to get stressed out, upset or respond automatically? **Analyze** two of these, identifying your Beliefs, Interpretations, Imagined Outcomes, and Self-Statements. How could you challenge each area to get control back?

SOS! Open your Mind: Talk Back and Talk Smart

Write down three generic, fit-any-situation coping self-statements:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Choose ones that make sense in your brain - use distanced self-talk: **you**

SOS! Soothe your Spirit: Remember What's Important

What are the three most important things in your life right now?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What will you do **today** to demonstrate their importance in your life?



Resources to Learn More

- Charlesworth & Nathan, *Stress Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Wellness*
- Davis et al, *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*
- McKay et al, *Thoughts and Feelings: Taking Control of Your Moods*
- Seligman, *Learned Optimism*
- Taitz, *Stress Resets: How to Soothe your Body and Mind in Minutes*
- Wilson, *Instant Calm: Over 100 Easy-to-Use Techniques*

- www.apa.org/topics/stress – *American Psychological Assn*
- www.verywellmind.com – *articles on Stress Management*

- Josh Green, *How to Challenge Your Negative Self-Talk*
- Kati Morton, *25 Amazin Coping Skills Everyone Needs*
- Sussex Partnership, *A to Z of Coping Strategies* and various vids ... [10Minutes2relax](#)

- The Happiness Lab, *How Do I Stop Negative Self-Talk*
- The Happiness Lab, *Stop Stressing about Stress*
- Hidden Brain, *Reframing Reality*
- ReThinking, *You have More Control Over Your Emotions than You Think* – [Adam Grant](#) and [Lisa Feldman Barrett](#)

Imagine life as a game in which you are juggling five balls in the air. You name them – work, family, health, friends, and spirit – and you're keeping all of these in the air.

You will soon understand that work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back.

But the other four balls – family, health, friends, and spirit – are made of glass. If you drop one of these, they will be irrevocably scuffed, marked, nicked, damaged, or even shattered. They will never be the same.

You must understand that and strive for balance in your life.

— Brian Dyson CEO of Coca Cola 1959-1994