

TWU Counseling Center

Strategies For Coping With Stress

1. Try this breathing and attention-focusing exercise devised to cope with stress:
 - a. take a deep breath and let it go suddenly
 - b. tell oneself to relax
 - c. redirect attention to problem situation
 - d. if anxiety recurs, repeat a-c again

2. Meichenbaum and Cameron (1974) urge the use of positive self-statements to reduce the threat of anxiety-provoking situations, including, for example:
 - a. "I'm going to do well at this..."
 - b. "I'm well prepared..."
 - c. "I can handle this!"
 - d. "My (ability, whatever) is as good as anyone else's here..."
 - e. and so on...

They suggest the person say these to him/herself ahead of time, i.e., before getting into the performance situation itself. This technique helps by relaxing and countering irrational, self-denigrating avoidance statements.

3. Lazarus (1971) has described several methods for dealing with various stressful circumstances. These include:
 - a. Getting into a comfortable position and saying to oneself calming phrases such as "feeling warm and relaxed," "totally at peace," "utterly calm," etc.
 - b. Use of contrary questioning to undo worrying about consequences of inadequacy. Whenever tempted to ask oneself "what if ...," simply precede the statement with "so what if...," or "what is the worst thing that could happen if..."
 - c. Countering anxious, even low mood moments by "projecting ahead in time." For example, when you are feeling in the midst of worrisome times, imagine ahead to a time when one might be in a "better place," engaging in more enjoyable behaviors, for instance, restfully enjoying music, basking in a change of season, a new skill or activity, new acquaintances, more pleasant places, and so on. One would do this gradually, projecting first to a week, then two weeks, a month, three months, etc., to about six months hence. At this point, you can reflect on that future time to give yourself the perspective that now is not forever.
 - d. Use of "thought control," a technique for vigorously "bossing" one's adverse or troublesome thoughts around. It involves a vehement, assertive interruption of a negatively tinged thought pattern by shouting, out loud or silently, to oneself words like "STOP!" or "NO!" in the middle of an anxious series of worrying. This approach does work, but requires repetition over approximately a month's time.

4. Break out of the Type A habits.

Type A behavior includes speaking fast, eating fast, constant competition, ignoring or denying tiredness, setting quotas, doing two things at once, pretending to listen, over scheduling, and clenching muscles in fists or jaws. You can systematically slow down your life and your drive.

5. Maintain adequate exercise, rest, and nutrition.

Adequate exercise, rest, and nutrition are keys to developing your physical resistance to stress. Most specialists encourage vigorous exercise, including running, brisk walking, jumping rope, swimming, hiking, or active sports. Nutrition includes balanced dieting. Stress causes the body to use B and C vitamins rapidly and these vitamins may be used as supplements in coping with continuous stress.

6. Reappraise your schedule and habits: avoid stress-producing situations.

Instead of scheduling to do as much as possible, schedule to maximize your enjoyment of life. Allow time to get places, time to enjoy the trip, time to reflect. Write down what you are trying to do now and what price you are paying in terms of discomfort, stress, and lack of enjoyment of life. Decide what you would find meaningful and try to plan a schedule that adds meaning. Practice saying, "No." Avoid stress-producing people and activities by design. Where this is impossible, reduce the stressful situation to a manageable level or consider a new environment altogether.

7. Problem solving instead of worrying.

One decision-making approach involves the following steps:

- a. Determine your options in the situation that worries you.
- b. Look at the pros and cons of each option, separately, visualizing every aspect of choosing that particular alternative; then check out your feeling about choosing that particular option; go through this process for each alternative.
- c. Weigh your feelings about choosing the various alternatives against each other; go with the option about which you have the most positive feeling. Another approach: ask yourself: What do I want to do? What should I do? If there is a conflict between the two, ask: What is in my best interest to do? Make a decision and close the issue.

8. Talk out your worries.

Discussing your concerns with an empathetic friend or with a competent professional helps get emotions out and provides you with emotional support. Verbalizing a problem with a person often helps you get a more objective view of your feelings and thoughts and helps you to see solutions more easily.

9. Focus on the present, not the past.

If you made a mistake in the past, learn from it rather than blaming yourself for it. It is also important to give up old resentments rather than dwelling on them and making yourself miserable with them.

10. Remember that growth involves risk.

Living does involve risk taking. This statement does not mean or suggest that a person take unnecessary or dangerous risks. However, to live means to be vulnerable. Consider your risk-taking behavior in the context of your current stress-related situation. Productive gains are possible only by commitment to a venture. Change is inevitable, but growth does not come automatically, without effort or without some risk.

11. Expand, explore, and experience your environment.

Many of us live in very small worlds when other worlds are only a few steps away. Visit a place on campus or in the community where you have not been recently or at all. Get acquainted by using your senses of vision, hearing and taste. Be aware of your thoughts and feelings as you experience the new environment. Examples include visits to a laboratory, play rehearsal, courtroom, hospital emergency room, chapel, or cattle auction.

12. Save and use some "alone" time.

Having time by yourself and for yourself can be very helpful in the management of tension. Use the time for reflection, for single person activity or for just "doing nothing." In other words, at various times, get in touch with your "you." Experience who you are by thinking, feeling, and being "you" in alone time.

13. Employ constructive time management procedures.

Plan your day's activities. Construct a plan for the week. Although we only have and know the here and now, scheduling in the present for what we plan to do in the future helps us to stay on top of work and play. Be knowledgeable of the responsibilities and opportunities before you. Plan ahead with flexibility, but do plan ahead.

14. Change your usual routine.

On occasion, variation of our usual daily procedures stimulates and refreshes us. For example, in the morning get out of bed on the other side. Shower first and brush hair and teeth later. When leaving your residence, go to class or to your office by a different route. For lunch or dinner, try a "far-out" or at least different place. Try something you have not done before. Vary your routine; stay out of the habit rut.

15. Maintain a steady pace.

Energy is wasted when people make quick spurts. When we maintain a steady pace, the wearing effects of stress are diminished. If you are under time pressures, if you are a late arriver, or if you attack tasks impulsively and at a rapid speed, learning pacing skills will be useful. Plan your pace and develop consistency in your daily activities.

16. Examine personal, social, career and educational priorities.

Periodically, we need to examine our goal priorities. To set and reset goals stimulates us to make more constructive efforts. A helpful procedure involves listing responsibilities, tasks and opportunities in terms of the most important to the least important. From this list, attention should be given to doing what is necessary and valued. Do not postpone or eliminate the high order needs, wants, and desires.

17. Become knowledgeable about your talents and skills.

Each person as a unique being has limitations as to what can be accomplished as well as abilities and characteristics to be developed and used for healthy and productive living. Use available resources to become aware of your unique talents and potentials.

18. Use resources to develop needed skills.

We develop, grow, and become proficient by hard work and practice. We are assisted in our work and practice by the use of available resources specifically related to our needs but unlearned skills. For example, if you are a student and have trouble in studying, consult with your college for assistance. Most colleges offer tutoring & study skills workshops. Also, look for study skills handouts at the TWU Counseling Center.

19. Use time for "other directed" involvement and assistance.
Constant introspection and preoccupation with your own thoughts and feelings can be counterproductive. Get in touch with other people and their life processes. Respond to others' needs.
20. Allow for break times.
When you are involved in work, study, or any other type of activity, structure some break times in your plan. A break from an activity can provide some refreshing results. Nourishing stop periods can be for a few minutes or for a few hours. Some break times include body stretching, a brief glance at your surroundings, a snack, or changing to another activity. Rather than doing what we call "resting," usually we are more relaxed, refreshed and prepared to return to a particular task after we have engaged in vigorous and unrelated activity.
21. Make a fearless inventory.
List the busy work you do which is not really essential to or a real part of your schedule and throw the list overboard.
22. Address your strengths.
Attend to the positive inner resources in your life. Express thanksgiving for your strengths and give them notice. Too many times people hide their positive resources more from themselves than they do from others.
23. Develop a sound philosophy.
Epictetus, a first century A.D. philosopher, said, "People are disturbed not by things but the view which they take from them." Adherence to a particular system of principles for conducting one's life provides a stabilizing, functional structure. Psychologists of the rational-emotional approach to therapy emphasize that we are what we believe ourselves to be. Some helpful rational beliefs have been presented in the strategies listed thus far. Hans Salye (1974) presents some similar suggestions which include: "don't waste your time trying to befriend a mad dog; don't strive for perfection (it doesn't exist); genuine simplicity in life earns much goodwill and love; keep your mind on the pleasant aspects of life and on actions which can improve your situation; forget ugly events; when frustrated, take stock of your past successes and rebuild your confidence; when faced with a very painful task, yet very important, don't procrastinate -- cut right into the abscess to eliminate the pain instead of prolonging it by gently rubbing the surface; love your neighbor and work hard to earn your neighbor's love."
24. Seek professional help.
With all the strategies presented and the many more not listed here, there are occasions when professional help is needed. Many opportunities for this assistance are available at TWU. The final decision to use these resources is your decision, your choice.

**TWU
Counseling
Center
Locations:**

*Denton
West Jones Hall
940-898-3801*

*Dallas-
Parkland
FPH 120
214-689-6655*

*Dallas-
Presbyterian
DPB 16
214-706-2416*

*Houston
Suite 2250
713-794-2059*