

STRESS

Everyone experiences stress. Stress can come from anywhere: day-to-day activities, relationships, work, life changes, illness, even from fun events.

Everyone reacts differently to it. Many people don't even know they are stressed until they begin to experience serious symptoms. Symptoms can be psychological, physical, or both.

What Are the Symptoms of Stress?

Symptoms can include irritability, lack of concentration, worrying, minor headaches, eating too much or too little, not sleeping well, lower back pain, rashes, an upset stomach or ulcers, migraine or tension headaches, high blood pressure, and chest pains, to name a few. Stress can also make physical problems worse, lower your resistance to disease, and affect how well your body responds to sickness and how well you recover from minor setbacks.

Stress affects us all in one way or another. Some people deal well with their stress. Some people have learned to identify their stressors (those things that cause people to feel stress) and deal with them appropriately. Unfortunately, many of us do not deal effectively with the stressors in our lives.

Stress Management Techniques

Things I Can Do on My Own

Do you work too much? Do you get so busy with the kids that you are too tired to go out and have fun or relax? Do you put things off until the last minute? Do you avoid dealing with problems? Do you feel stuck in your life? Do you plan too much but feel ineffective?

People can manage their own stressors by taking time out of their busy lives and identifying potential conflicts, changes, worries, or time constraints that they have. First, figure out what your stressors are; then, see if the stressor is within or outside of your control.

For example, if your job is based on deadlines, unless you decide to change jobs, the stressor is outside of your control. In this case, while you can't control the stressors, you may be able to do things to make them more manageable. For instance, in a job with tight deadlines, you might schedule 5-minute breaks, just to catch your breath and relax. Also, you might try to get to bed earlier so that you are more refreshed and less tired; you might even try to delegate more or see if the work flow can be rearranged to make things move more smoothly. A key is to determine what is within your control to change and what isn't, and then try to affect those things that are within your control.

What is within your control is what you do for yourself to help get rid of the stress on a regular basis. Some people work out at a gym, others meditate. So you can influence how stressors affect you. A lot of times it is something we are doing to ourselves that makes something even more stressful. In the example we just discussed, perhaps you did not take a break to eat a healthy lunch, or you are really mad that a co-worker left extra work for you, but feel there is nothing you can do about it. In the first example, you could try to schedule a break or eat more

What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy?

Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Behavior Therapy are types of treatment that are based firmly on research findings. These approaches aid people in achieving specific changes or goals.

Changes or goals might involve:

- **changing behaviors**—getting more sleep or scheduling rest periods;
- **changing feelings**—feeling less anxious or becoming less stressed;
- **changing thoughts**—learning to control overreactions that increase stress;
- **helping to deal with physical or medical problems**—reducing stress to alleviate headaches or back tension;
- **helping with coping**—learning to effectively solve problems

Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists usually focus more on the current situation and its solution, rather than the past. They concentrate on a person's views and beliefs about their life, not on personality traits. Behavior Therapists and Cognitive Behavior Therapists treat individuals, parents, children, couples, and families. Replacing ways of living that do not work well with ways of living that work, and giving people more control over their lives, are common goals of behavior and cognitive behavior therapy.

HOW TO GET HELP: If you are looking for help, for yourself or someone else, you may be tempted to call someone who advertises in a local publication or who comes up from a search of the Internet. You may, or may not, find a competent therapist in this manner. It is wise to check on the credentials of a psychotherapist. It is expected that competent therapists hold advanced academic degrees and are trained in techniques for treating anger management. They should be listed as members of professional organizations, such as the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies or the American Psychological Association. Of course, they should be licensed to practice in your state. You can find competent specialists who are affiliated with local universities or mental health facilities or who are listed on the websites of professional organizations. You may, of course, visit our website (www.abct.org) and click on "Find a CBT Therapist."

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) is an interdisciplinary organization committed to the advancement of a scientific approach to the understanding and amelioration of problems of the human condition. These aims are achieved through the investigation and application of behavioral, cognitive, and other evidence-based principles to assessment, prevention, and treatment.

healthy snacks; in the second example, you could talk with your colleague about the extra work.

We all know about eating healthy, sleeping enough, exercising, relaxing, enjoying friends and family, and taking care of our bodies. However, many of us don't do these things and, consequently, we add to our stress level. Some people can figure out what to do on their own, but many of us require a behavioral psychologist to help us put together our own unique program that matches our individual needs.

There are several techniques that can be taught by trained behavior therapists or cognitive behavior therapists to help you identify and effectively deal with your stress.

Therapy Techniques I Can Learn

There are many techniques available to manage stress. Below are some that are commonly used by behavior therapists to help their patients reduce stress. You and your therapist must thoroughly assess which of these would be most useful for your life and your unique stressors.

1. Progressive Relaxation Training and Controlled Breathing Techniques effectively reduce physical tension, anxiety, and overall stress level. Progressive Relaxation Training involves a series of exercises that train your body and mind to become gradually more relaxed. It requires an initial time investment, but, with practice, can be effective in reducing stress. Controlled Breathing requires less time at first, and works well with people who can clear their mind and learn to regulate their breathing, thus relaxing the rest of the body. Sometimes this is harder to do because many people who are used to being stressed tend to breath in a shallow and quick manner. Your therapist is trained to determine which individuals respond better to which treatment, and can also help determine which technique is likely to benefit you most. Some therapists may use biofeedback techniques to help determine which techniques work best for you.

2. Cognitive Restructuring works very well with accumulated stress and for people who tend to overreact or underreact to situations. In cognitive restructuring, your therapist will help you look at situations to see when you might be incorrectly viewing a problem and help you see the problem for what it is. For instance, many of us make assumptions or have unnecessary worries that go far beyond what the situation calls for. Your therapist can help you identify when your thoughts and feelings are inappropriate to the situation and when they actually contribute to your stress. They can teach you a method to catch yourself when you do it, and teach you how to use logic to revise your reaction to a level appropriate to the situation. This treatment works well for people feeling stuck in their lives, who fly off the handle, and who get upset even with little things. Because this technique teaches you to question how you think about things (or how you feel about things), this also helps people feel more comfortable standing up for themselves and about their ability to be effective in their own lives.

3. Assertiveness Training and Communication Skills Training can be used jointly with one of the above techniques or may be effective when used alone. Both techniques teach you how to deal with difficulties in a fair and tactful way, where everyone's rights are considered. Many people avoid dealing with stressful situations, such as asking for more money or asking the *neighbors to keep their cat away from the bird feeder. They feel they have no right to ask for

what they want, fear they will make matters worse, or fear rejection. Learning how to approach others, speak up for oneself, and use good speaking and listening skills can be extremely effective in reducing the stress that results from interacting—or the mere prospect of interacting—with others.

4. Problem-Solving Techniques are extremely helpful in combination with the above or on their own to help people, couples, groups, and families reduce stress. You learn techniques that help you focus on solutions instead of focusing on the problem. Because we often focus on the problem, rather than thinking of solutions, we increase stress and feel hopeless, helpless, or out of control. The therapist can teach you how to use these techniques and discover ways to focus on solutions, which will help overcome the stressors or, at least, minimize their effects.

Please feel free to photocopy or reproduce this fact sheet, noting that this fact sheet was written and produced by ABCT. You may also link directly to our site and/or to the page from which you took this fact sheet.

For more information or to find a therapist:

**ASSOCIATION for BEHAVIORAL
and COGNITIVE THERAPIES**

305 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10001
212.647.1890
www.abct.org