

# World Mental Health Day Blog Stress Relief And Management

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## **Stress Relief and Management**

*"Stress management is thought management." – Dr. Ron Rubenzer*

On any typical work morning, pre-covid-19, you are sitting in traffic late for an important meeting while the minutes are ticking away, slowly. Suddenly, your hypothalamus (a tiny control tower in your brain) sends the order: release the stress hormones!

These stress hormones are the same ones that trigger your body's *"fight or flight"* response which makes your heart race, your breath quicken and your muscles twitch in readiness for action. This response is designed to protect your body in an emergency, preparing you to react quickly but when the stress response keeps firing, day after day, it could put your health at serious risk. It is this response by the body to physical or emotional demands that, if left unchecked without relief or management, can play a role in causing depression, anxiety, psychosis and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or being a symptom of it.

Stress is an unfortunate but often unavoidable side effect of our busy lives and knowing how to manage stress is a good way to combat its physical, mental, and emotional impact. In fact it is something that people of all ages and from all walks of life experience, yet, despite being unpleasant, stress in itself is not an illness. It is, however, one of the great global public health challenges of our time, which still isn't being taken as seriously as physical health concerns. Research into stress - its causes, effects on the body and its links to mental health - is vital. The more we understand stress, the better we can tackle it. You are no stranger to stress, especially right now as the world grapples with the Covid-19 pandemic, whether you are a business owner or employee or student. In fact, balancing work-life / school-life / family-life demands when work, life, your children's education, and everything in-between takes place in your own home is stressful.

Even when there's not a virus holding the globe hostage, you are familiar with stress be it the big projects at work, the term paper you must write or your child's schedule that conflicts with your work demands, you are quite familiar with stress. It is also the leading cause of illness and disability, responsible for up to 90% of all medical visits in the United States, according to American Psychological Association (APA), with the latest estimates showing that unmanaged chronic stress costs the US Business economy \$600 billion annually.

Although stress research clearly demonstrates a debilitating impact to both physical and mental health and performance, most individuals and organizations are at a loss when it comes to assessing, understanding and improving their relationship with stress.

There are a few ways that you can identify the sources of stress in your life and, along with your family or loved ones, learn ways to reduce or manage that stress and build resiliency while spending more time together during the

coronavirus quarantine. The Singapore Association of Mental Health (SAMH) states that stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life while noting that it may not be obvious where your true sources of stress lie since it is all too easy to overlook your own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. The following are some of the common sources of internal and external stress:



**Internal stress** can be caused, in part, by an inability to accept uncertainty; pessimism; negative self-talk; unrealistic expectations; perfectionism and a lack of assertiveness.

**External stress** can be caused, in part, by major changes in life; work pressures; relationship difficulties; financial problems and having too hectic a schedule.

In a study conducted by Europe's PubMed Central, researchers sought to explain the specific effects of stress on the body's physical and mental wellbeing as follows:

- **Stress and the Brain Function Complications**

The study indicated that stress has many effects on the human nervous system and can cause structural changes in different parts of the brain. While the amount and intensity of the changes are different according to the stress level and the duration of stress, it is widely accepted that stress can cause structural changes in the brain with long-term effects on the nervous system

- **Stress and Memory (Central Nervous System / CNS)**

Memory, one of the important functional aspects of the CNS, is categorized as sensory, short term, and long-term. The study found that the effect of stress on memory is highly dependent on the time of exposure to the stressful stimulus and, in terms of the timing of the imposed stress, memory can be either better or worse.

- **Stress, Cognition and Learning**

Cognition, another important feature of brain function, means reception and perception of perceived stimuli and its interpretation, which includes learning, decision making, attention, and judgment. The study detailed that different people may exhibit varied responses in cognition when exposed to the very same stressful stimulus.

- **Stress and Immune System Functions**

The study found that the prevailing attitude between the association of stress and immune system response has been that people under stress are more likely to have an impaired immune system and, as a result, suffer from more frequent illness.. It also stated that severe stress can lead to malignancy by suppressing the immune system

- **Stress and the Function of the Cardiovascular System**

Whether acute or chronic, stress has a deleterious effect on the function of the cardiovascular system which can lead to an increase or decrease in tempo as well as increased blood pressure, an increase in blood lipids as well as disorders in blood clotting. As a result, training programs for stress management are aimed at reducing the consequences of stress and death resulting from heart disease.

- **Stress and Gastrointestinal (GI) Complications**

Stress can affect appetite and adversely affects the normal function of the GI tract with extensive research examining the effect of stress on the function of the GI system.



To find relief from and learn ways to manage stress, the Singapore Association of Mental Health (SAMH) suggests the four As: **Avoid, Alter, Adapt** and **Accept**:

**Avoid** unnecessary stress. Not all stress can be avoided as certain situations must sometimes be addressed or it could impact your health and quality of life. Still, you may be surprised that there are quite a lot of stressors in your life that you can eliminate by: learning how to say “no”; avoiding people who stress you out; taking control of your environment; avoiding hot-button topics and reducing your to-do list.

**Alter** the stressor. If you are unable to avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life by: expressing your feelings instead of bottling them up; being willing to compromise; being more assertive and managing your time better.

**Adapt** to the stressor. If you are unable to change the stressor, try changing an aspect of yourself. Adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude by: reframing problems; looking at the big picture; adjusting your standards and focusing on the positive.

**Accept** the things you cannot change. There are events in life that you cannot change or prevent, such as the loss of

a loved one or an economic recession. Acceptance may be difficult at first but, in the long run, it is easier than being angry at a situation that you cannot change.

Some common ways to improve mental health and wellness include meditation; practising positive self-talk and expressing gratitude daily; breathing exercises; getting a hug from a loved one; eating a balanced diet; going for a walk; practising yoga; enjoying aromatherapy and getting a restful night's sleep.

Finally, the American Institute of Stress recommends these 'stress relieving' snacks that you can incorporate in your daily routine to improve your health and wellness: dark chocolate, nuts, avocado, yogurt, salmon, berries & citrus fruits.



These are just a few points and tips to help get the stress you may have under control and as simple as these strategies may seem, they are difficult to implement when your mind is clouded with stress. Force yourself to attempt them the next time your head is spinning, and you'll reap the benefits that come with disciplined stress management.

Another way you can help control your stress is by coming up with ideas on your own that have worked for you in the past because sometimes the best stress manager is yourself. If all else fails, don't be afraid to seek professional help if you feel that you are struggling to manage on your own. It is important to remember that you can get the help you need, and that you deserve to get better.