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Changing your mind about stress

How we mentally approach a situation can do a lot to make it harder or easier to bear. Research indicates that people who handle stress well create an accurate picture of what they can change and what they can't. Then they marshal their attitudes, expectations, and resources to make a plan. You can do this too.

When circumstances are beyond your control



When under stress, it's common to assume that feeling better is right around the corner, just as soon as you get everything done.

But when the "to do" list is infinite and your personal motor is always "on," you are more likely to achieve breakdown sooner than completion.

The goal is not to stop what you are doing. Instead, learn to keep going, but with more internal calm. According to the Mayo Clinic, learning to "adapt and accept" is an effective way to respond to situations that simply are beyond your control.

Consider these tips to de-stress even when the list does not get shorter.

- **Stay positive.** Train yourself to notice what's going well or feels good. Put your mind's spotlight on the good. "Dad enjoyed watching the ball game today. He laughed just like old times." Give yourself positive feedback for your accomplishments as well, no matter how "small" they seem.
- **Accept imperfection.** You don't expect perfection in others! Extend the same graciousness to yourself. Give each task your best attention, and then accept the outcome without harsh self-judgment. Remind yourself, "There are only 24 hours in the day. I did my best, and that is all anyone can do!"
- **Find the lesson and move on.** Dwelling on the negative takes energy and achieves nothing. Are you constantly revisiting a decision you made or an action of someone else's that was not the wisest choice? Take some time to constructively reflect on what you could do differently "next time," and then move forward.
- **Promote perspective.** Imagine yourself some years into the future. Looking back on today, does what you're anxious about still seem important? If not, don't let it run your life. Save your energy for issues that WILL matter five years from now.



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Working smarter



When times are hard, many of us grit our teeth and keep plugging away. While such commitment can be admirable, it can also lead to resentment and burnout. Instead of just toughing it out, think about ways to “work smarter.” There may be opportunities to change how you approach situations that could directly reduce your load. The Mayo Clinic suggests looking for ways to “alter or avoid” stressors.

- **Speak up.** Others may do things in ways that irritate or disappoint you. Let them know your preferences. Use “I” statements so it is clear that you are not criticizing: “I worry that if pills are in sight, Dad will take an extra dose. Let’s keep them in the cabinet.”
- **Protect your time.** Make a plan and aim for efficiency: Instead of dealing with mail daily, pay bills once a week. Group errands so that you’re not driving all over town every day. When you are running short on time, let others know (“I have only 10 minutes”) and bring things to a close when time is up.
- **Respect your limits.** You honestly can’t do everything. Nor can everything always go smoothly. “No” is not a bad word. It simply tells others where you stand. Remove nonessential tasks from your to-do list (even if you believe you “should” do them).
- **Prioritize the positive.** You need to replenish your personal well. Avoid topics or people who do not contribute to your well-being. Instead, spend quality time with the people who renew your spirit.
- **Get help.** You don’t have to do everything. Start by delegating tasks you don’t like or that aren’t your strong suit.
- **Cultivate flexibility.** It’s fine to ask others to alter their behavior. By the same token, you can reduce your own stress level if you look for ways to reinterpret their actions. Blessed are the flexible, for they do not get bent out of shape!

Living with uncertainty

Uncertainty can be very stressful. For instance, your relative’s condition and needs could change at any time, especially if he or she is seriously ill. Such uncertainty brings practical problems and an emotional cost.

Worrying about a problem may seem like it will eventually produce useful ideas and create certainty. But habitual worry itself causes stress. Confine your worry time to once a day at a specific hour. During that time write down what is fact and what is emotion or assumption. Write yourself a more balanced view of the situation, positives and negatives, based on what the evidence tells you is true. Strategize from there.

Another approach is to learn to feel more comfortable with uncertainty. Challenge your “need” to be sure:

- Is it possible to be 100% certain about everything?
- In what ways has your need for certainty been helpful to you? Are there ways it has been unhelpful?
- Do your predictions focus mostly on bad things happening? Can you imagine other possible outcomes?
- Are there uncertainties that you currently tolerate well? What helps make that possible?

You may find that your responses indicate you can, and are, coping with more uncertainty than you had realized. In addition, try these strategies:

- When your thoughts involve a lot of worries and “what ifs,” take a moment to notice them. Remind yourself, “Oh, there’s my desire for certainty again. That’s a preference, not a life requirement.”
- Take a slow, deep breath, exhale, and visualize your need for certainty wafting away.
- Refocus yourself on the here and now. Pay attention to sights and sounds and to your present task.

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