50 Simple Coping Strategies to Deal with Everyday Stress

When you are feeling stressed out, take extra care in choosing your activities, food, and entertainment. Depending on what we eat, think, do, watch, say, read, and listen to, we can either speed up or slow down our internal engine. During periods of stress our body’s natural response is to speed things up. If stress persists without breaks, then we begin to wear down, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

The longer we let the stress build the greater our chances of developing illnesses (physical, mental, and emotional), having chronic pain, harming our relationships, decreasing our productivity, making bad decisions, and forming unhealthy habits.

What are some things we can watch for in ourselves and others to help us know that they or we are under lots of stress and starting to get overwhelmed?

- Significant changes in attitude or emotions that last more than a day or two
- Feeling numb, uncaring, helpless, and/or hopeless about the future
- Ongoing unexplained health issues that don’t respond to treatment
- Withdrawing from others, wanting to be alone much of the time
- Doing or saying things out of the ordinary for their personality
- Changes in family, friend, and/or romantic relationships
- Unexpected emotional reactions given the situation
- Not wanting to do things usually found enjoyable
- Changes in typical sleeping and eating patterns
- Giving away prized possessions
- Unusual changes in grades
- Risk taking behavior

Use the stress indicators listed above to investigate the stress level in yourself or others. Don’t make a decision by yourself or assume what others are experiencing. Get a trusted responsible adult involved.

A crisis occurs when our usual ways of coping with stress aren’t helping us deal with our current stress. Crises may be experienced when there is stress in many areas of our life or we have had several stressful incidents in a row. A single incident can cause a crisis when it is a significant meaningful loss or change that we interpret negatively. A person in crisis will think, act, and/or speak differently than their usual self as they try to find new coping methods.

These new coping methods may be helpful or may make the problem worse. Examples of harmful coping methods include using prescription drugs without doctor care, using illegal drugs, drinking alcohol, smoking, and suicidal thoughts. During periods of crisis or chronic stress, we are more likely to use coping methods that we used in previous situations. Frequently-used coping methods, whether helpful or harmful, form into habits. It is much easier to establish new coping methods when we have used helpful methods in the past.

If you are having suicidal thoughts or someone makes statements about suicide, take it seriously and get a trusted responsible adult involved. Your school counselor is an available resource.

Below are suggested helpful ways to reduce stress. Some techniques below may work better for you than others and you may have to practice some several times until they become a stress-reducing habit. Try the strategies below that sound interesting to you until you find several that work for you. Highlight the ones that work and cross out the ones that don’t work for you. If you find that you are experiencing stress that cannot be controlled with these simple coping strategies, please visit with your school counselor or other responsible trusted adult.

1) Take deep breaths: focus on using your stomach instead of your shoulders and chest; slowly inhale, hold it for 2 seconds, slowly exhale, hold it for 2 seconds; repeat 10 times
2) Count to yourself by 1’s, 2’s, 5’s, or 10’s until the intense emotion passes
3) Count down from 100 or say the “A,B,C’s” backward
4) Recite a favorite upbeat and positive song in your head
5) Think about an uplifting happy scene from your favorite movie
6) Think about a very happy day: imagine all the details in your mind for the people, places, and things from that day
7) Think of your favorite place to be: focus on all of the colors, sounds, smells, and sights
8) Squeeze your fists tight while counting to ten and slowly release them while counting to ten
9) Smile and laugh: make a pleasant joke that does not put anyone down
10) Play a game of your favorite sport for fun without keeping score or competing
11) Play an instrument: piano, drums, guitar, violin, or any instrument
12) Write down how you feel
13) Write what you are mad, sad, or unhappy about and tear up the note - throw it away
14) Throw rocks in a pond, lake, or river; shred old mail either by hand or with a shredder
15) Throw ice cubes against a hard surface that will not get damaged (e.g., sidewalk or brick wall)
16) Exercise: run, walk, jog, go biking, do aerobics, do yoga, lift weights, go to the gym, dance
17) Develop a daily stretching routine to loosen your muscles and release trapped tension
18) Punch a pillow or punching bag
19) Scream into a pillow
20) Curl your toes while counting to ten and let them uncurl slowly while counting to ten
21) Memorize a peaceful poem and recite it in your head
22) Break problems and projects down into smaller parts and make a goal for each small part
23) Draw a picture
24) Think something nice about yourself, repeat it until you believe it
25) Make a realistic goal in your mind and repeat in your mind that you can do it
26) Take a break, don’t think about the problem for a day and try again later
27) Meditate for 15 minutes and only think about what is good and going right in your life
28) Practice paying attention to the clues your body is giving you; figure out how you are feeling and see the different ways you feel during the day; are there unnecessary things in your life that you could eliminate that cause stress
29) Sit in a comfortable chair or lie on your bed; close your eyes; slowly tighten, hold, then relax each muscle in your body starting with the top of your head and working down to your toes
30) Listen to relaxing music or sounds, such as waves
31) Have a good cry, alone so you can cry freely, cry into a pillow
32) Get a massage
33) Take up a new hobby
34) Learn to recognize and accept what you cannot change and/or control
35) Get enough sleep and rest, keep as regular a sleep schedule as possible (weekdays and weekends)
36) Balance work and recreation, take one thing at a time, prioritize and keep it simple, mix easy and hard tasks so you experience the feeling of accomplishment
37) Do something for others, become a volunteer
38) Alternate periods of exercise with periods of relaxation
39) Avoid caffeine: coffee, chocolate, tea, sodas, etc., which increase stress responses
40) Rehearse an upcoming stressful situation using imaging: visualize the entire stressful event from start to finish in your mind, what you will wear, what you will say, what you will do, what you will accomplish, imagine the event going well and you accomplishing your goal
41) Plan ahead, don’t procrastinate, allow extra time for unplanned interruptions, get up or leave 15 minutes early
42) Write things down to free your mind up to think about other things
43) Accept the reality that all people fail some time or another, learn and try again
44) Turn off your phone(s), unplug from the world for a moment
45) Avoid unnecessary competition
46) Recognize and accept your limits, remember that everyone is unique and different
47) Eat a balanced diet daily
48) Talk with friends or someone you can trust about your worries/problems
49) Get a pet; take care of and spend time with it
50) Reward yourself for successes, big and small

Suicidal thoughts and/or statements:

1) Talk with a trusted responsible adult.
2) Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255); 1-888-628-9454 (en espanol) or go to http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/
3) Call 1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)
4) Call 911 or 852-1234

If you find that nothing seems to be helping and/or you are dealing with stress in ways that are harmful or potentially harmful, please visit with a parent/guardian, teacher, counselor, coach, school staff, doctor, religious leader, or responsible adult you trust. Continue talking to people until you receive help allowing you to cope in a positive manner.

✓ Save this handout and share it with family and friends.
✓ Put it somewhere you can find it again.
✓ You may not need it now, but you will need it someday.
✓ Life is unpredictable and this will help you be prepared.