

Need stress relief? Try the four A's

Expand your stress management tool kit by mastering these four strategies for coping with stress: avoid, alter, accept and adapt.

When we feel the effects of stress weighing us down, it's like lugging a backpack that's becoming heavier by the minute. Too much stress can make life a difficult journey. When your stress level exceeds your ability to cope, you need to restore the balance by reducing the stressors or increasing your ability to cope, or both. Try using one of the four A's: avoid, alter, accept or adapt.

Changing the level of your stressors

Attempt to adjust the sources of stress in your life by avoiding or altering them.

Avoid

A lot of needless stress can simply be avoided. Plan ahead, rearrange your surroundings and reap the benefits of a lighter load.

- **Take control of your surroundings.** Is the traffic insane? Leave early for work, or take the longer, less traveled route. Hate waiting in line at the corporate cafeteria? Pack your lunch and eat at your desk.
- **Avoid people who bother you.** If you have a co-worker who causes your jaw to tense, put physical distance between the two of you. Sit far away at meetings or walk around his or her cubicle, even if it requires some weaving.
- **Learn to say no.** You have a lot of responsibilities and demands on your time. At a certain point, you cross the line between being charitable and being foolish. Turn down the neighborhood sports league. Pass on coaching T-ball. Those around you will appreciate more time with a relaxed you. And you'll have time to enjoy them, too.
- **Ditch part of your list.** Label your to-do list with A's, B's and C's, according to importance. If it's a hectic day, scratch the C's from your list.

Just remember: A certain amount of avoidance is healthy, but some problems can't be overlooked. For those situations, try another technique.

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Alter

One of the most helpful things you can do during times of stress is to take inventory, then attempt to change your situation for the better.

- **Respectfully ask others to change their behavior.** And be willing to do the same. Small problems often create larger ones if they aren't resolved. If you're tired of being the butt of your wife's jokes at parties, ask her to leave you out of the comedy routine. In return, be willing to enjoy her other jokes and thank her for humoring you.
- **Communicate your feelings openly.** Remember to use "I" statements, as in, "I feel frustrated by shorter deadlines and a heavier workload. Is there something we can do to balance things out?"
- **Manage your time better.** Organize your day so that like tasks are lumped together—group your phone calls, car errands and computer-related tasks. The reward of increased efficiency will be extra time.
- **State limits in advance.** Be proactive. Instead of stewing over a colleague's nonstop chatter, politely start the conversation with, "I've got only five minutes to cover this."

Increasing your ability to cope

For those cases in which the source of your stress can't be avoided or altered, try to adjust your ability to tolerate it.

Accept

Sometimes we have no choice but to accept things the way they are. For those times try to:

- **Talk with someone.** You may not be able to change a frustrating situation, but that doesn't mean your feelings aren't legitimate. Phone a friend or schedule a coffee break. You will feel better after talking it out.
- **Forgive.** It takes energy to be angry. Forgiving may take practice, but by doing so, you will free yourself from burning more negative energy. Why stew in your anger when you could shrug and move on?
- **Practice positive self-talk.** It's easy to lose objectivity when you're stressed. One negative thought can lead to another, and soon you've created a mental avalanche. Be positive. Instead of thinking, "I am horrible with money and will never be able to control my finances," try this: "I made a mistake with my money, but I am resilient. I'll get through it."
- **Learn from your mistakes.** There is value in recognizing a "teachable moment." You can't change the fact that procrastination hurt your performance, but you can register the regret to make sure you allot more time in the future.

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Adapt

The perception that you can't cope is actually one of the greatest stressors. That's why adapting—which often involves changing your standards or expectations—can be most helpful in dealing with stress.

- **Adjust your standards.** Do you really need to vacuum and dust twice a week? Would macaroni and cheese be an unthinkable substitute for homemade lasagna? Redefine success and perfection, and you may operate with a little less guilt and frustration.
- **Practice thought-stopping.** Stop gloomy thoughts immediately. Refuse to replay a stressful situation as negative, and it may cease to be negative.
- **Reframe the issue.** Try looking at your situation from a new reference point. Instead of feeling frustrated that you're home with a sick child, look at it as an opportunity to bond, relax and finish a load of laundry.
- **Adopt a mantra.** Create a saying such as, "I can handle this," and mentally repeat it in tough situations.
- **Create an assets column.** Imagine all of the things that bring you joy in life—vacation, children, pets. Then call on that list when you're stressed. It will put things into perspective and serve as a reminder of life's joys.
- **Look at the big picture.** Ask yourself, "Will this matter in a year? In five years?" The answer is often no. Realizing this makes a stressful situation seem less overwhelming.

Choosing the right technique

Stressors good and bad are a part of every life. Practice applying these techniques to balance your stress equation. With practice, that once-hefty backpack will become your private bag of tricks. Soon, you'll be able to pull out just the tool that will keep you hiking through life at a steady clip.

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