

Menu of Options

Cognitive-Behavioral Techniques

Cognitive-behavioral techniques (CBTs) are among the most effective ways of reducing stress. A 2005 study found that CBT training can have a long-term impact on one's ability to cope with stress. This effect was observed in both men and women, although the CBTs had a greater effect on men. CBT may be particularly helpful when the source of stress is chronic pain or a chronic disease. In fact, in a study of patients with HIV, CBT was more helpful than support groups for improving well-being and quality of life.

A CBT typical approach includes identifying sources of stress, restructuring priorities, changing one's response to stress, and finding methods for managing and reducing stress. This is not as easy as it sounds because we learn cognitive errors or negative thinking when we are young and the habit becomes engrained. For more information on CBTs go to: www.healthatoz.com.

Relaxation Methods

Since stress is here to stay, everyone needs to develop methods for invoking the relaxation response, the natural unwinding of the stress response. Relaxation lowers blood pressure, respiration, and pulse rates, releases muscle tension, and eases emotional strains. This response is highly individualized, but there are certain approaches that seem to work.

There are many different types of relaxation techniques. Some that have documented results are acupuncture, hypnosis, deep breathing, yoga, guided imagery, and muscle relaxation. Combinations are probably best. For example, in a study of children and adolescents with adjustment disorder and depression, a combination of yoga, a brief massage, and progressive muscle relaxation effectively reduced both feelings of anxiety and stress hormone levels. No one should expect a total resolution of stress from these approaches, but if done regularly, these programs can be very effective. Other activities and hobbies such as music, pets, art, sailing, woodworking, and gardening are relaxing to people. It's important to identify what works for you.

Meditation

Meditation, used for many years in Eastern cultures, is now widely accepted in this country as a relaxation technique. The goal of all meditative procedures, both spiritual and therapeutic, is to quiet the mind (essentially, to relax thought). Small studies have suggested that regular meditation can benefit the heart and help reduce blood pressure. Some recommend meditating for no longer than 20 minutes in the morning after awakening and then again in early evening before dinner. Even once a day is helpful. Note: Meditating before going to bed may cause some people to wake up in the middle of the night, alert and unable to return to sleep. New practitioners should understand that it can be difficult to quiet the mind, and should not be discouraged by lack of immediate results. The only potential risks from meditating are in people with psychosis in whom meditating may trigger a psychotic event. A number of different type of techniques are available. For more information on mediation go to: www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_relief_meditation_yoga_relaxation.htm.

Discuss Feelings

The concept of communication and letting your feelings out has been so excessively promoted that it has nearly lost its value as good advice. Nevertheless, feelings of anger or frustration that are not expressed in an acceptable way may lead to hostility, a sense of helplessness, and depression. Expressing feelings does not mean venting frustration on waiters and subordinates, boring friends with emotional minutia, or wallowing in self-pity. In fact, because blood pressure may spike when certain chronically hostile individuals become angry, some therapists strongly advise that just talking, not simply venting anger, is the best approach, especially for these people. The primary goal is to explain and assert one's needs to a trusted individual in as positive a way as possible. Seeing a counselor is an option for some but not for others. Direct communication may not even be necessary. Writing in a journal, writing a poem, or composing a letter that is never mailed may be sufficient. Expressing one's feelings solves only half of the communication puzzle. Learning to listen, empathize, and respond to others with understanding is just as important for maintaining the strong relationships necessary for emotional fulfillment and reduced stress.

Special—Coping with stress when you are quitting smoking (or smokeless tobacco).

Quitting smoking causes a different kind of stress than changing other habits. When you quit smoking, you may feel anxious. You may also have mood swings that feel too intense. This is natural and it will get better and better as you wean yourself from using nicotine to deal with these feelings. It will be important to think about and use other ways of coping with stress, relaxing and finding pleasure. Some of the above techniques may work especially well. If your anxiety or negative feelings gets too bad or won't go away, check in with your provider.