

Module 7 v Activity 10 v ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS

Six Ways to Cope with Stress

Two points about the six ways to cope with stress: (1) These changes you can make may also help with panic disorder and panic attacks. (2) Don't expect instant results. You *might* feel instant results. You might feel instant results after, for example, taking a long walk. However, most times, it's the long-term results you'll be seeking. So, stick with it, and notice how you feel over time.

1) Exercise regularly

Remember: stress is your body's reaction to change. It is an **internal** reaction although external factors (i.e. work pressures) may **trigger** stress. Exercise can help your body release pent-up stress. It will also make your body stronger and better able to cope with the ongoing stress. The best exercise for improving the way your body reacts to stress is aerobic. You have many options for aerobic exercising, from walking to racquetball. Some people with panic attacks. Indeed, as your heart rate increases and you begin to sweat, you may **feel** as if a panic attack is starting. My advice? Start slowly! Try **walking** a little bit everyday, at first. Personally, I think exercising is a good way to help yourself distinguish between a panic attack and those "false alarms" many of us experience. Of course, always check with your doctor before starting any exercise regimen.

2) Relaxation

Relaxation is mental and physical, but you'd be surprised how quickly your mind can relax if you can make your body truly relaxed. And, many of us don't know what actual relaxation feels like. My favorite kind of relaxation is **progressive muscle relaxation**. In this exercise, you systematically tense a muscle group in your body, holding the tension for about ten seconds, and then releasing the tension for another ten seconds. The contrast is a great way to teach yourself the difference between feeling tense and relaxed.

Relaxation exercise **must** be practiced, preferably once a day. It only takes twenty minutes (even less as you become more familiar with the exercise). If you practice relaxation exercise regularly, you will begin to feel more relaxed in general (not just after the exercise) over time. In addition, you will be better able to perform "mini" relaxation exercises throughout the day when you really need it.

3) Sleep Well

Not getting enough **quality** sleep can make your body extremely vulnerable to stress. If you have difficulty getting to sleep each night or staying asleep, you may have a sleep

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disorder. If you feel exhausted all day or if you actually fall asleep at unexpected times during the day, you may have a sleep disorder. You may be causing yourself problems if you don't get the correct amount of sleep for **you**.

If at all possible (and you might want to seriously think about **making** it possible), try to sleep the same hours **every** night—including **weekends**. Basically, you cannot catch up on sleep, so don't try to cut yourself short on week nights and then make it up on the weekend. Also, your body likes cycles (remember—it reacts to change). Here's one cycle you have control over: your sleep. Start by getting up at the same time each morning, and adjust your bed time as needed until you have a regular schedule. It may be rough for a week or two, but it will ultimately help. Insomnia can even be cured by sticking to a regular sleep schedule.

4) Laugh It Up

You probably don't need to be reminded that laughter can release stress—but you may need to be reminded to **do it more often!** Don't wait for humor to come to you. Sit down (right now!) and think about what makes **you** laugh. It's an individual thing, you know. Maybe you feel like you're wasting time by watching **The Simpsons** every week, but it's therapy!

5) Make Time for Fun

Somewhat related to #4, this suggestion is to give yourself some leisure time. Doing this is not always easy. However, you need to do it. Again, you need to sit down and decide what is leisure for **you**. Whatever activity you choose, you **must** do it regularly, and you **must not** feel guilty for taking the time to do it. Explore a **hobby**, play soccer with your kids, take a **drawing** class, walk in the woods . . . anything. Just devote a little time to yourself (not something you don't enjoy). You needn't spend a lot of money, and you needn't make excuses to anyone for being good to yourself.

6) Change Your Diet

There are a number of different dietary changes you can make that may help your body cope with stress. **Consider eliminating caffeine** (or, at least, reducing the amount you consume). Caffeine is a drug, and it is a stimulant. As a stimulant, caffeine can actually cause your body to react as it would to stress. Therefore, your body can be more sensitive to actual changes in your life and less able to cope with them. Like any drug, it affects each person differently, so only you can decide if you need to eliminate it. If you do decide to eliminate caffeine, do so gradually. As with any drug, you could experience withdrawal symptoms if you quit too quickly. Another good reason for reducing caffeine consumption is that caffeine may cause panic attacks in some people.

Another stimulant you may want to avoid is nicotine. If you smoke, you might consider how this drug is affecting you.