

How I Manage Stress Activity Packet

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We all manage stress differently. These differences can occur due to:

- Physiology (nature)
- Events or situations we experienced in the past (nurture)
- What family or caretakers taught us about how to manage difficult situations (nurture)

We can feel more “stressed out” when we:

- Need to make a decision (big or small)
- Experience a life transition (graduation, getting married, growing your family)
- Experience pressure to attend to multiple people or situations at once (kids, work, aging parents)
- Experience a traumatic event or situation (car accident, a violent loss)

ACTIVITY #1

When do you feel stressed out? Think about both situations and people that prompt this state in you.

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Physiologically, our bodies can experience stress in a variety of ways, including:

- An increase in heart rate
- Tension in the muscles
- Feeling clammy or sweating more than usual
- Shortness of breath

ACTIVITY #2

What have you noticed happening to your body when you get stressed out?

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While it may seem counterintuitive, symptoms of stress can actually be useful. They can serve as an early warning signal that something out of the ordinary is happening and prompt problem-solving. The thing is, when we are stressed, something also happens to our ability to think clearly and figure out not only what is making us stressed but what to do about it. Extreme and unrealistic “negative thoughts” creep in and make it almost impossible for us to use creative, flexible, “out of the box” problem-solving skills. Left unchallenged and unrevised, these thoughts alone can harm our mental and physical health.

So which do we tackle first, the body’s physiological response to stress or the negative thoughts we are more vulnerable to having when we are stressed out? Well, it’s the chicken or the egg, but researchers John and Julie Gottman studied thousands of people and found that when the heart rate is above 95-100 beats per minute, it is virtually impossible to problem-solve effectively. So...let’s consider for a moment some approaches to soothing and calming your body. More about negative thoughts in a moment.

Soothing the Body

There are many pathways to soothing the body. Use this first activity to identify what you already do that helps soothe your body, and brainstorm about what new ideas you’ve heard of and would like to try. Your aim should be to use several of these “tools” regularly (even when you are feeling good) so that your body builds the muscle memory around how to soothe itself. This way, you can depend on your body to more quickly draw on these tools and soothe you when you are stressed.

ACTIVITY #3

I already know that to help soothe my body, I can:

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I am curious about how these other methods would work for me as well:

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Over the next few weeks, I can commit to doing the following to help soothe my body so that I can manage stress more effectively.

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Challenging Negative Thoughts

Now back to negative thoughts. While we all have unrealistic or extreme “negative thoughts” from time to time, we are most vulnerable to them when under stress. Some examples of negative thoughts include:

- Everyone hates me
- I’m a fraud
- I can’t do anything right

These thoughts usually:

- Are spontaneous reactions that pop up quickly after a “trigger”, like seeing someone or something in particular
- Can come as words or images
- Can seem reasonable and even probable at the time

Sometimes, negative thoughts reflect the following patterns of thinking called “thought traps”:

Thought Trap	Definition	Example
<i>All or nothing thinking</i>	Seeing things in extreme black and white.	I’m either very smart or very stupid.
<i>Over-generalizing</i>	Assuming a single bad outcome means the same bad outcome will occur again in similar circumstances.	I saw on the news a girl was abused at a friend’s house. My daughter will get abused if I let her go to a friend’s house.
<i>Mind reading</i>	Making assumptions without checking facts.	Others think I’m a bad parent.
<i>Fortune telling</i>	Jumping to conclusions and predicting how bad things will turn out.	If I volunteer to host this party, I’ll let everyone down.
<i>Catastrophizing</i>	Assuming the worst possible scenario.	This plane can crash and my kids can be left without a parent.
<i>Emotional reasoning</i>	The way I feel is reality, never mind the facts.	I feel like a failure...I am a failure.
<i>Should/must reasoning</i>	Setting standards and expectations that are too high or unrealistic. Can lead to guilt if <i>you</i> fail. Can lead to anger, resentment, and frustration if <i>others</i> fail.	If I don’t get a 4.0, I am a failure. If my child can’t be calm and use her words, she is a brat.
<i>Labeling/mislabeling</i>	Attaching a negative label to yourself or others.	She’s a fraud. I’m an idiot.
<i>Personalizing</i>	You see yourself as having caused a negative external event.	My mother may have lived had I realized she had a tumor and found the right doctor to treat her.

Don’t be surprised if one or more of these thought traps sound familiar. Once you know which ones you are more vulnerable to, you can then begin to isolate the specific negative thoughts you have during times of stress. Unexamined and unchallenged, these thoughts get in the way of effective problem-solving and can become toxic to your health. They can trigger and/or worsen your experience of anxiety, guilt, shame, frustration, anger, and even hopelessness. In many cases, they can impact your relationships. The good news is you can begin to challenge and replace them with more realistic thoughts, and begin your journey towards re-shaping the way your body responds to stress.

ACTIVITY #4

I find myself falling into the following thought traps when stressed out:

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While not all negative thoughts clearly fall under one of the common thought traps, reviewing the list of thought traps may have helped you isolate one or two you tend to have while under stress.

ACTIVITY #5

Here are some negative thoughts I tend to have while under stress:

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Identifying negative thoughts is the first step to challenging distorted and extreme versions of ourselves, others, and situations. The exercise below will walk you through the rest of the steps involved in this process. You will then have an opportunity to do this using one or more of the negative thoughts you just identified above.

1. Negative thought:

- I'm a failure.

2. What was going on the last time I had the negative thought:

- My partner and I were at a party yesterday. I had the negative thought as soon as we arrived at the party...a full hour late because I had the wrong start time in my head. Other parents from our kids' school were already there.

3. This negative thought reflects the following thought traps (if any):

- Emotional reasoning: I feel like a failure therefore I am a failure.
- Should/must reasoning: I shouldn't be making mistakes like this.

4. Evidence that supports the negative thought:

- I thought the party started at 8 when it started at 7.
- I have gotten things mixed up in the past from time to time.
- My partner got annoyed with me and told me I'm scatter-brained.

5. Evidence that challenges the negative thought:

- I do many things "successfully" at home like taking care of household chores.
- I finished college with a strong GPA.
- I am generally a good person who tries to help others and be honest and trustworthy.

6. A more accurate thought to replace my negative thought is:

- I have a lot of balls to juggle right now and sometimes I let one of those balls drop.

7. What I think makes me especially vulnerable to this negative thought is:

- When my failure is public.
- When my partner says things like "You're scatter-brained" instead of helping me put things into perspective and saying "No worries, it's fashionable to be late honey!"
- When I don't get a good night's sleep.

ACTIVITY #6

Take out a piece of paper. Choose a negative thought you have had before and challenge it using the 7-step process above.

Understanding Your Tendencies

After going through this packet, you should have a better understanding of what can happen to both your body and your mind under stress. You also have a sense of what you can do to soothe both. The last step in this activity packet is to write a brief profile of what happens to you under stress and how you manage it. To do so, assume you are an outsider describing you, almost like a writer who is describing one of the characters in a play or movie. This will help you externalize some of the challenges you face when under stress, and help you feel more capable of re-shaping your body's response.

ACTIVITY #7

Write your name into the blank below and complete each sentence using what you have learned from this packet so far.

_____’s main unhelpful ways of thinking occur when s/he:

In these situations, _____’s body tends to:

The next time _____ is feeling this way, s/he will try to: