

# Take Control

Positive thoughts and actions can be powerful tools in combating stress.

by *Kindra Gordon*

**E**ver notice how some people seem to have one good thing after the next happen to them, while others go from one crisis to the next? Why is that? It's not because some people have good fortune while others have none. Instead, it's more likely a result of attitude and actions in dealing with stress.

"People who handle stress the best have negative thoughts and occurrences, too, but it's how they deal with it and turn negatives into positives that helps them cope successfully," says Barb Myers, a registered nurse who works with the behavioral health services offered through the Richard H. Young Hospital in Kearney, Neb.

Similarly, Rosie Anderson, who works with Myers at the Richard H. Young Hospital, says, "Getting ahold of your thoughts gives you power to deal with stress. There is a difference between reacting versus thinking and responding."

These health professionals share why it is important to recognize the sources of stress and the effect stress can have on your health, as well as sharing several coping strategies.

## Sources of stress

Stress is typically the result of demands placed on a person, Myers says. Thus, stress can be both positive and negative. For example, a wedding or a bull sale is a happy time, but it's also a stressor because it involves a lot of details to be addressed that are not part of your everyday routine.

Anderson says it is important to recognize the different sources of stress, so you can identify the circumstances that give you excess negative stress and are better prepared to deal with them. Common stressors can be family and marital issues, illness, death, jobs, finances, and dealing with difficult people.

Additionally, she says to note that stress affects everyone differently — as does the additive effect of multiple stressors. What may affect one person as mild stress, may be severe to someone else, such as your spouse.

Stress can manifest itself in our feelings, behavior and physical health. "When we are stressed, our body gives us adrenaline to give us energy to do what needs to be done," Myers explains. "But, if we can't work through that stress and relieve that energy, it can cause physical manifestations in the body."

Specifically, the extra energy created by

adrenaline can accelerate respiration and heart rate and elevate blood pressure. Long-term effects on the body can include:

- ▶ muscular tension or pain;
- ▶ gastrointestinal symptoms such as an upset stomach or irritable bowel;
- ▶ cardiovascular concerns like high blood pressure and heart disease;
- ▶ decreased immune function, leaving you more susceptible to infections;
- ▶ respiratory issues such as allergic reactions and an increase in asthma; or
- ▶ dermatological symptoms, including rash, increase in acne, hives or shingles.

## Strategies to cope

Because stress can have such serious consequences on a person's health, Myers and Anderson say it is critical that people find effective strategies to take control of their lives and cope with high-stress issues.

As a starting point, this duo says an optimistic outlook is essential. "People who cope with stress best have more positive thoughts than negative thoughts," Myers says.

"Another strategy is to take responsibility for feeling better," she adds. "We can't control what life may throw at us, but we can control how we respond."

Anderson reiterates that taking control of

your thoughts can be empowering in dealing with stress. Coping often includes thought, behavior, physical and social methods, she adds. "There's not one certain coping method that works for everybody. It's all interrelated."

For some people, ignoring a stressful situation is often how they choose to deal with stress. But Myers and Anderson say this can be unproductive.

"That's denial. Bottling the stress up inside can lead to negative effects on relationships and your health," Anderson says. "We all have stress, and we all need to develop effective ways to cope with it."

Anderson and Myers work with their patients to develop a "tool box" of methods for dealing with stress, and they emphasize that a combination of methods is often necessary to help reduce stress. Some of the methods they advise to their patients include:

**Implement relaxation techniques.** While relaxing when you're stressed out is easier said than done, taking a few minutes to ease your mind can be helpful, Anderson and Myers say. They suggest beginning with 10 minutes of deep breathing in a quiet place. It may take a few tries throughout the day, but with practice, deep breathing and visualizing a calm oasis may become a beneficial daily activity to help alleviate stress.

Myers also suggests if stress is preventing you from sleeping well at night, don't stay in bed and toss and turn. Instead, get up and do something calming, such as reading for 20-30 minutes. This helps keep your bed a refuge that you go to only when you are calm and ready for sleep.

Likewise, if you are waking up in the night with stress anxiety, she suggests writing the concern down in a notebook by your bed and telling yourself, "This will be here in the morning to take care of," and then trying to return to sleep.

**Re-evaluate your thinking.** Anderson calls this "rethinking." She explains that we all grow up with certain beliefs, and when specific events challenge those beliefs we get upset or stressed. As an example, she points to the common thought that "life is supposed to be fair." But she questions, "How realistic is that?" In truth, life isn't always fair. Thus, to cope with stress sometimes we need to rethink

**Coping with stress —  
the right way:**

**Stop and take a deep breath.  
Relax and visualize.**

**Tell yourself, "I can handle this."**

**Think about how you are feeling.  
Recognize that you need  
to think before you act.**

**Evaluate what you can do to help  
ease the stress; plan a response.**



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our assumptions and realize we weren't being realistic.

As another example, people may put stress on themselves whenever certain topics or discussions about a certain person come up. Instead, Anderson suggests, "With rethinking, you can tell yourself you are not going to put stress on yourself when that topic [or person] is discussed. By being prepared to listen calmly and control your thoughts you can minimize some of that stress."

Similarly, "all or nothing" thoughts can create stress. For example, someone may feel they must always be on time, or they strive to have everything perfect in their lives.

"Again, you need to rethink your thoughts and realize you are doing your best. No one can be perfect," Anderson says.

**Take a problem-solving approach.** For some people, the directness of "solving the problem" can help diffuse stress. Myers explains that this method is very step-by-step.

First, you identify the problem that is bothering you, who is involved and what is causing the conflict or concern.

Second, you must decide what action

you could take to resolve the problem. This should be a realistic expectation that has a specific, attainable timeframe. In working through this step, you should list at least three possible alternatives and consider the advantages and disadvantages of each outcome and how you would feel with those different scenarios, Myers says.

The final step is to pick the best solution for you. Then take action and evaluate the outcome. The evaluation is an important part of the process, Myers says. "That's how we learn."

**Be willing to seek support.** Myers reports that research has repeatedly shown that people with social support from friends, family or co-workers tend to handle stress better than people without it. Sometimes a support system can also be a pet.

Specifically, she shares that studies indicate married people have less heart disease than those who are unmarried, and single people with a pet tend to have less depression and other health issues.

"The quality and intimacy of relationships is more important than the number of relationships," she concludes.

**Stop negative self-talk and blaming.**

With our thoughts, we all talk to ourselves throughout the day. But, Anderson says, unfortunately, much of the time it is negative self-talk. As an example, we may tell ourselves all the things we "should" have done.

"Negative self-talk puts a lot of stress on you," she explains. "It's a burden on your mind, and it gets in the way of helping you relax. So, try to stop being negative."

Likewise, we often blame others for our problems. But again, Anderson says that is not a productive approach. "Blaming falsely relieves you of taking any responsibility. Maybe you need to get past that and do something differently."

**Live healthy.** Exercise, good nutrition, getting ample sleep and spirituality are also beneficial for managing stress and maintaining a happy lifestyle, Anderson and Myers say.

### The 10-10-10 rule

As a final example, Anderson says many stressful situations can be put into context using the 10-10-10 rule. This entails asking yourself how something is going to affect you in 10 minutes, 10 months and 10 years.

For instance, being late for an

appointment may affect you in the next 10 minutes, but it's not likely going to have an effect in 10 months or 10 years; however, speeding to get to the appointment and being in an accident could have a much broader consequence. Anderson says this simple exercise can be helpful in putting things into context and rethinking what is truly worth being stressed about.

In her own life Anderson says she often uses the mantra, "Just let go and let God." She explains, "Fear imprisons us a lot. We often worry about things that never happen or that we have no control over; that's a lot of wasted energy."

As a final piece of advice, Myers suggests that once you find the two or three methods that best help you handle stress, make them part of your routine as you encounter new stressors.

She also suggests looking for meaning in stressful situations. "By looking back at stressful events," she says, "one can often learn and grow from that experience. Doing so can help prevent you from becoming bitter and instead builds resiliency in life."



## Enhancing communication can help decrease stress

Ineffective communication plays a role in creating stress, says Barb Myers, a registered nurse who works with the behavioral health services offered through the Richard H. Young Hospital in Kearney, Neb.

"When we don't communicate effectively, we don't get the message across that we wanted to," Myers says. "Thus, our needs aren't met, and we become stressed. This miscommunication can also lead to strained relationships."

To resolve these issues, Myers says communication can be enhanced with practice. Start by recognizing that most communication is actually nonverbal. She shares these statistics:

- ▶ 7% of communication is verbal, involving the actual words we speak.
- ▶ 55% of our communication is our nonverbal behavior when we speak, such as posture, eye contact and hand gestures.
- ▶ 38% of communication is based on our tone. For instance, being soft-spoken vs. loud.

Because the words are often overshadowed by tone and body language, Myers advocates a technique called "speaker-listener" to help ensure that the message you are trying to convey is accurately received. Through this process, the speaker talks and then the listener reflects back what they heard.

For instance, if the speaker makes a statement about being stressed about mounting credit card bills, the listener would repeat this back and say, "I'm hearing that you are stressed about finances."

Once both the speaker and listener are on the same page about the concern, Myers suggests they work together to brainstorm solutions and select one to solve the problem.

"Communication goes both ways," Myers says of the speaker-listener technique. "This technique helps make delivery of the message clear and allows for making certain the message was received in the way it was intended."

As the bottom line, Myers says, "Taking time for effective communication reduces conflict and stress and improves self-esteem."