



FOCUS NEWSLETTER

Vista Psychological & Counseling Centre

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How to Reduce Stress in Tough Times

It is no surprise that a new study by the American Psychological Association reports that 80% of Americans are stressed by the economy, with 60% feeling angry and irritable and 52% having trouble sleeping at night.

In tough economic times, it's understandable that many people feel financially vulnerable and emotionally stressed. But even in a national crisis, we're never as helpless as we think. Those who develop mental fitness are in a much better position to weather this and other stressful times.

To achieve mental fitness, we need to open our "locks," behaviors or habits that prevent us from finding solutions to problems and keep us from reaching our full potential.

Example: One of my clients coped with his high-stress job by eating too much and drinking heavily after work. These negative strategies (his locks) eased his stress momentarily but did nothing to increase his overall resilience and, in fact, undermined his mental fitness.

People who handle stress well use a series of skills, or "keys," to overcome obstacles and unlock their full potential. The main ones...

DIRECT YOUR ATTENTION

Your brain can focus on one issue at a time (the laser

mode), or it can expand its attention to everything around you (glow mode). Both skills are useful. An air-traffic controller, for example, has to

thought to thought and task to task. We're mentally scattered, which means we excel at nothing—and stress builds. What to do...

Decide what has to be done first.

The process of prioritizing requires that we rank tasks along two dimensions—what is most important and what is most urgent. Maybe there's a project that you have to finish by the end of the day or a meeting later in the week to prepare for. Establish these as your one or two priorities, nothing more. Then selectively ignore everything else. Keep communication flowing when others are on the waiting list.

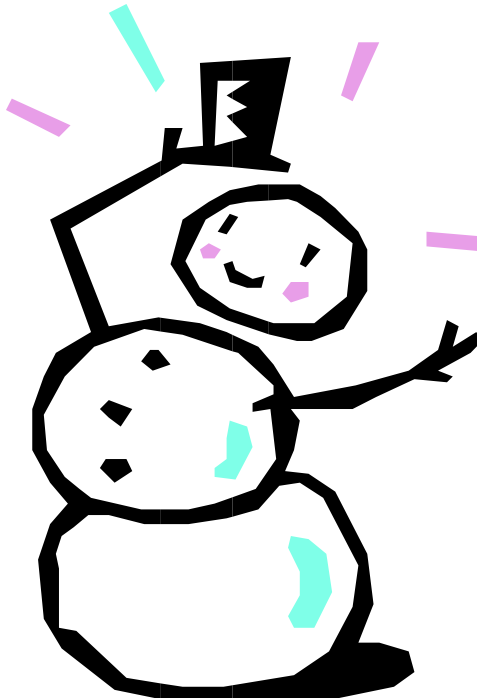
Create reminders.

Jot down your immediate goal on an index card. Keep the card somewhere in your field of vision. If your attention begins to wander, seeing the card will remind you to stay on target. Some people also find it helpful to set an alarm or cell phone to ring every 15 to 30 minutes as a reminder to focus on the goal.

STAY ALERT

We all get distracted when life is stressful. We forget to pay attention to what's going on around us. That's when we do stupid things, such as forget where we put our car keys or bounce a check because we forgot our account balance.

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keep track of fast-moving and constantly changing situations. He/she needs to be comfortable with the glow mode. But when you're dealing with a specific problem, the laser mode is more efficient.

Many of us have a hard time meeting deadlines not because we have too much to do, but because too many things compete for our attention. We jump around from

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Interviewing?

What does your handshake say about you?

A firm grip conveys confidence and is always appropriate. Placing your left hand on top of the handshake is more intimate and should be used only with people you know very well. Offering only your fingers conveys a sense of superiority and should be avoided. Also: Always stand when shaking hands while saying hello or goodbye, and make eye contact while you shake.

Business Week, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, New York City 10020

How to Reduce Stress During Tough Times

(continued from page 1) People who handle stress well almost always are observant. They watch what's going on around them in order to acquire information and choose the best course of action.

What to do: Practice observing every day. When you put down your car keys at home, for example, notice the whole environment, not just the spot where you put them. Notice the table you put them on, the lighting in the room and so on. Not only will you find your keys more quickly, you'll sharpen your ability to acquire new information.

KNOW THE OBJECTIVE YOU

We all have two visions of ourselves. There's our subjective self-image, which often is colored by self-doubt and insecurity. Then there's the objective self, which is closer to reality.

Many experienced people with impressive resumes fall apart when they lose their jobs and have to find new ones. They're paralyzed with self-doubt because all they see is their subjective (inferior) self. It's the equivalent of stage fright. Even though they have done the same type of work a thousand times, an inner voice tells them that they're not good enough.

What to do: Do a reality check. Suppose that you have spent three months looking for work without success. Before doubting yourself, get objective verification. Show your resume to different people in the field in which you're applying. Ask them what they think about your qualifications.

Maybe you're not qualified for the jobs you're applying for. More likely, you've just had a run of very bad luck. Trust your

objective history of accomplishment.

BOOST WILLPOWER

This is one of the most vital skills during difficult times. Someone with strong willpower, for example, will find it relatively easy to cut back on spending. Most people think that willpower just means resisting temptations. It's much more than that. It's a set of skills that you can use to achieve specific goals. **Example:** Suppose that you're in debt and know you need to create a budget and stick to it, but you've never been very good at that. Willpower means knowing your weakness...identifying ways to correct it...and then taking the necessary steps to improve it. These might include taking a personal finance class at a community college or getting a book on that topic from the library.

What to do: Some people naturally have more willpower than others, but everyone can develop more. The trick is to start small. Maybe your goal is to save 10% of your paycheck each month, but the first step is to reduce your credit card debt by paying off 10% more than the minimum payment each month.

REDUCE NEGATIVE PATTERNS

We're creatures of habit. Any behavior that's repeated a few times can become an automatic pattern. These patterns can be positive (such as arriving at work on time) or negative (thinking you're going to fail).

Negative patterns are particularly hard to manage because they're often internalized—we don't always know that we have them. People often have an inner voice that says things such as, *I can't succeed...I'm not smart enough...It's not*

worth my trouble.

Negative self-talk has real-world effects because it guides our behavior and prevents us from coping effectively with difficult situations.

What to do: Pay attention to the thoughts that go through your mind. Are they helpful and affirming? Or do they inspire fear and anxiety?

When your thoughts are negative, create opposite mental patterns. When you think, *I'll never get this project done*, consciously come up with a positive alternative and say it aloud if you can or to yourself if the situation warrants. Be specific. Rather than something general such as, *I can do it*, say something such as, *I'm glad to be completing this project with pride, on time.* Say it three times.

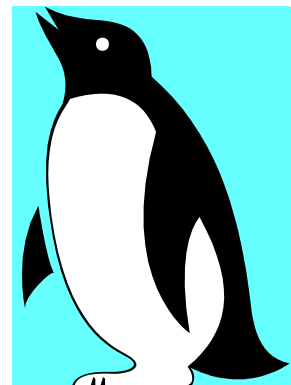
This might sound like a gimmick, but our brains like routines. Focusing your mind on positive outcomes—even if it seems artificial at first—causes the automatic part of the brain to build more positive thought patterns that enable us to achieve more. The key is to constantly monitor yourself. Are you aiming at the center of the target? If not, refocus on the bull's-eye.

Bottom Line/Personal interviewed John Ryder, PhD, psychologist in private practice in New York City. He has been an assistant professor at Mount Sinai Medical Center and is a psychological consultant to executives, athletes and celebrities. He is author of *Positive Directions: Shifting Polarities to Escape Stress and Increase Happiness* (Morgan James). www.positivedirections.com

Husbands and Wives Who Repress Their Anger

Husbands and wives who repress their anger tend to die earlier than spouses who express it, according to a recent study. Conflict in marriage is inevitable—but couples who air their differences and try to solve them stay healthier and live longer than ones who hold in their resentments. *Possible reason:* Repressing anger leads to increased stress, which can shorten life.

Ernest Harburg, PhD, research scientist emeritus, department of psychology, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, and leader of a study of 192 married couples, published in the *Journal of Family Communication*.



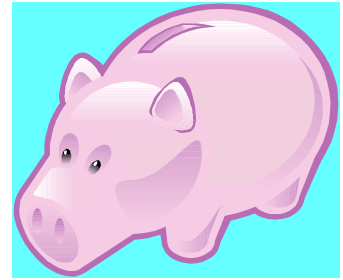
Sad People Spend More

Is there a woman around who hasn't erased a blue mood with a little "retail therapy"? And, actually, a lot of men do the same thing, though perhaps they don't talk about it as much. Buying yourself something new can boost your spirits—and now research shows that there is, in fact, a real connection. People spend more money when they're feeling bad...a finding we should all be attuned to and wary of as we face the most challenging economy in many years.

At Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, doctoral student Cynthia E. Cryder and her colleagues studied the effect of mood on spending by showing two different kinds of movie clips to different groups. Those who watched a sad movie (*The Champ*, about a down-and-out boxer) were willing to pay nearly four times as much for a product (in this case, a water bottle) as those who enjoyed scenic documentary footage of the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. These findings were published in the June 2008 issue of *Psychological Science*.

People tend to focus more on themselves when they are sad, Cryder explains, which drives this effect. Researchers found that it was the combination of feeling sad and being self-focused that led to the greatest increase in spending. The next phase of research will try to more precisely identify the nature of this interaction between emotions and economic decisions, says Cryder.

Especially now, with more people feeling the pinch of trying to make ends meet, it's important to understand that being down about finances or life may make you more likely to spend more than you should, and more than you'd spend if you were in a better mood. With credit card companies battling for your business, it seems easy to just "charge away" your problems but those bills must somehow get paid. Rather than drowning your sorrows in credit card debt, take charge by doing things that will elevate your mood. Exercise, of course, is always a good way to reduce stress and increase energy.



Another strategy: Consider keeping a gratitude journal, in which you consciously focus on things to be thankful for (your health, a delicious dinner your spouse made, the individual freedoms we have in the US or simply a beautiful day). Take a walk with a friend or a young grandchild, and really focus on the conversation. Do everyday chores with "conscious intent," for instance making the effort to notice the fresh smell as you put away the laundry or the satisfaction of simply replacing (finally) the light bulb in the hallway, where it has been so dark. Meditate, breathe deeply, count your blessings...you'll feel good and spend less, a win-win in any economy.

Cynthia E. Cryder, doctoral student and study coauthor, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

This Year I'm Going To Get Organized!

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF CLUTTER

I. STOP PROCRASTINATING

Stop putting off until tomorrow what you can do today, especially when you probably won't do it tomorrow anyway. Decide to decide what you are going to do with the next piece of clutter that you pick up.

II. QUIT MAKING EXCUSES

Stop making tiresome excuses for your clutter. You are only fooling yourself, and the clutter is not going to go away by itself.

III. USE IT OR LOSE IT

If you're not using it, lose it. Period.

IV. LEARN TO LET GO

As lives change, needs change, but somehow clutter accumulates with no regard for our changed lives. Clutter that is merely taking up valuable space and giving you nothing in return should be

given away.

V. BE A GIVER

Give things away, right away. Don't wait until you die to give away china that you don't ever use now. Every garment that you never wear could be worn by a less-fortunate person. Friends, relatives and charities all appreciate a giving person far more than they do a pack rat.

VI. SET LIMITS

Limit the amount of space you allocate to house your clutter. Closets, bookcases, filing cabinets—all should be limited. Just because one space fills up doesn't mean you should find or buy more space. It means it's time to weed out your clutter to reclaim the space you already have.

VII. USE THE IN-AND-OUT INVENTORY RULE

If something new comes in, something old goes out. Apply this rule to everything from toys to clothes to books and magazines. Stick to it, and you'll always be in

control of your clutter.

VIII. LESS IS MORE

The less clutter you have, the more time, money, and energy you will have. People will stop nagging you, and you will be under less stress. You will be more productive with a streamlined life.

IX. KEEP EVERYTHING IN ITS PLACE

Find a place for everything and keep everything in its place. (The blender doesn't belong in the bedroom, and the mail doesn't belong in the bathroom).

X. COMPROMISE

Compromise when you organize your clutter. Don't let perfectionism keep you from doing it or allowing someone else to help you. Functioning efficiently is more important than functioning perfectly.

Remember: perfect is not the same as excellence, and sometimes good is good enough.

Stephanie Culp, *Streamlining Your Life*



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The Symptoms of SAD Coping with Seasonal Affective Disorder

There are many things to love about living in this area of the country, but for some people, winter isn't one of them. As the days grow darker, your mood can grow dark too. This affliction even has a name: seasonal affective disorder or (accurately enough) SAD.

SAD is a type of depression brought on most commonly in northern regions by winter's short days, long nights and harsh weather. Though not fully understood, health experts think that the lack of daylight and sun exposure during winter is the main cause of SAD. About half a million people in the United States might suffer from SAD. It is more common in women than in men.

ARE YOU SAD?

Although everyone experiences SAD a bit differently, typical symptoms of SAD include the following:

- A change in appetite, especially a craving for sweet or starchy foods
- Weight gain

- Fatigue or a drop in energy level
- A tendency to oversleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability and anxiety
- Avoidance of social situations
- A loss of interest in the activities you used to enjoy

Most people experience short bouts of these symptoms from time to time. In contrast, the symptoms of SAD keep coming back every year. They usually appear at about the same time every year as well, and tend to go away once spring arrives.

TREATMENTS CAN HELP

If you think you or a loved one is suffering from SAD, see a professional. Get back to enjoying all of the seasons—even winter.

SIX WAYS TO WEATHER WINTER

1. Make your home as bright as possible by opening blinds, adding skylights and trimming tree branches

that block sunlight.

2. Get outdoors whenever the sun comes out, even for just 15 minutes.
3. Exercise regularly. Exercise boosts natural brain chemicals that help lift your mood.
4. Get enough sleep, eat a balanced diet and avoid depressants like alcohol and drugs.
5. Socialize with people you enjoy. "Cabin fever" can make symptoms worse. Get out and have fun.
6. Head south. If at all possible, take a vacation to somewhere sunny and warm.

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