



How to Alleviate Stress in a New Environment

You need to make sure you are as comfortable in your new environment as possible. Instead of reaching for that bottle of headache medicine, consider aromatherapy, treating yourself to a massage, or meditation.

Leaving your old home can be depressing, and a common reaction to depression is the loss of appetite. Not eating properly will lower your immune system, so make sure you maintain a nutritional diet (a little exercise never hurt anyone either) or none of the following aides will make any difference.

Stress Reliever #1: Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is the natural use of plants and essential oils in order to help establish physical and emotional well being. Although perfume oils may smell great, they will not provide the therapeutic benefits that essential oils will. Only essential oils are derived from the true plant. Perfume oils are artificially created.

Shampoos, bath oil, perfumes, and body oils are just a few of the many forms oils can be used in for aromatherapeutic purposes. AromaWeb is the most extensive web site I've found providing everything from the history of aromatherapy, to a list of 26 common oils and their benefits. This site also provides nearly 30 detailed, easy to follow recipes including cures for high stress.

You can usually find the essential oils required for aromatherapy at your local health/vitamin store, but if you're having trouble getting what you need, visit Whole Foods on-line at: <http://www.wholefoods.com>

If making your own remedies doesn't sound appealing, you can also find pre-mixed aromatherapy solutions from Whole Foods, too.

Solution #2: Massage

Getting a massage from the right person can help ease tension. There are countless people trained in massage whose prices will range anywhere from \$15 to \$115. For a less expensive massage, consider calling up a local massage school. Usually the students are still learning, and will offer discounted sessions.

Just be careful, you don't want to end up in a massage parlor that offers the "Special Full Body Massage." Make sure you are comfortable with your massage therapist and know about their qualifications. If you aren't comfortable with the therapist, then you'll get tense, and that would certainly be a waste of money, now wouldn't it?

Some people can't stand the thought of having someone else touch them, or can't bring themselves to get partially undressed in front of a near stranger. This doesn't mean you cannot enjoy massage! Amazon.com offers countless books about the art of self massage.

Solution #3: Meditation

I know that when some people hear the word "meditation" they immediately envision some emaciated little old man wrapped in a sheet sitting Indian style on a mountain top humming "OHMMMM." Try to be open minded. It's so much more than that! While meditation can be used as a way to recognize and correct your inner strengths and weaknesses, it can also be used to simply relax by focusing on your breathing rather than your problems.

Here's something that's easy to do, and that works beautifully:

Lie flat on your back on top of the covers in your bed, or on the floor. Clear your mind. You've been stressed out all day, and you can let yourself be stressed out later, but allow the next few minutes only for pure, calm thoughts. You are going to do "isolations." This is where you select one section of your body, isolate it in your mind, and help it relax starting with your feet. Focus on all the tension in this body part. Give it a color. Now start taking in deep breaths in through your nose. Let them out slowly and smoothly through your mouth. When you breathe out, visualize the tension (whatever color you've made it to be) leaving your body through your breath. When you breathe in, choose another color to represent serenity and relaxation, and visualize it replacing the tension color. Once you've filled your feet with this color, move up. Repeat steps 5 through 8 until you've reached your head, making sure to visualize the unstressed body parts in the color you chose. When you've finished... if you've really concentrated and kept the energy focused, you should feel a relaxing buzz. Enjoy this feeling, and keep it as long as you like. As you get more experienced, you'll be able to maintain the feeling of relaxation while you visualize your "happy place." Stop laughing, cynics. It will work only if you allow it to. Anyway, your "happy place" can be a place only you know about. Mine is usually in a butterfly garden. Imagine yourself in this place, and let your mind go free. Just make sure you keep the concentration and you don't start thinking about anything that will ruin the relaxation. For example, don't let your ex-boyfriend creep into your virtual butterfly garden, or a mean boss, or whatever else was bothering you that day. Give yourself this moment to feel good. You deserve it.

You can also relax quickly and calmly through a simple deep breathing exercise. Think about smokers when they're stressed out. They take long, deep drags off of the cigarette or hot box it. You know why? Because part of the reason they feel like they need to smoke when

they're stressed is because their bodies are craving not only the nicotine, but the long deep breaths. So, if you feel overwhelmed, just pick a focal point and do some deep breathing. Try pyramid breathing. It's simple, quick, and it works:

1. Breathe in and count to one second.
2. Breathe out and count to one second.
3. Breathe in and count to two seconds.
4. Breathe out and count to two seconds...

You get the idea. Do this all the way up to thirteen. It slows down your heart rate, and gives you a minute to think about nothing more than your breathing.

These are simple, affordable solutions to alleviate the stress that comes along with a move to a new home.

Managing Stress

We all need stress in order to survive. Teams need stress in order to perform well, and in the right doses, stress can be very healthy, or even enjoyable.

However, when stress becomes excessive it can be very damaging. It can harm:

- health
- happiness
- work performance
- team spirit and co-operation
- relationships
- personal development



Stress management involves, at the simplest level:

1. recognising the symptoms of stress
2. identifying the causes
3. taking action to address the causes and thereby reduce the symptoms
4. where necessary, taking interim steps to relieve the symptoms until the underlying causes have been addressed.

With the pressure of modern life, it is easy to fall into the trap of neglecting steps 2 and 3. That is, only relieving the symptoms. It is important to recognise and address the underlying causes of stress, or else the experience of stress will never go away. For example, suppose 'overwork' is causing stress, which is resulting in headaches. If you only address the symptoms (eg: by taking pain killers to reduce the headaches), the stress remains, and

the headaches will return. However, if you can restructure your work demands so that you are not overworked, the headaches will then disappear without the need for pain killers.

A further complication can arise in that some symptoms may be 'learned', and therefore removal of the underlying causes may not relieve the symptoms. For example, in the overwork example, the headaches might continue long after the problem of overwork has been addressed.

There are many techniques that can help in stress management, and many books that discuss the subject. This webpage aims to give you an overview, so that you have an awareness of a wide range of techniques. This will help you to find the best way to manage stress in your particular circumstances.

Disclaimer: Please note that this article has been written by team building consultants with a view to the effect of stress on team working. The authors are not medically qualified, and cannot give any medical advice by email. If you have any questions about your personal medical condition, you should consult a suitably qualified professional, such as your doctor.

What are the signs of stress?

The symptoms of stress are many and varied, such as:

- irritability
- headaches
- illness (particularly at weekends or during holidays)
- insomnia
- tiredness/lethargy
- and many more....

Sometimes, you can be experiencing stress but your mind and body are so good at hiding it from you that you are unaware of it. In such cases the symptoms might be more subtle and therefore difficult to recognise, such as:

- working endlessly without tiring
- having little feeling or emotion (except the occasional outburst of anger)
- increased use of alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes or other drugs (which may suppress feelings of stress)
- behaviour that is 'out of character'
- an inability to relax

If you are under a lot of stress for a prolonged period of time, but do not feel stressed, eventually it may catch up with you and cause more serious symptoms, such as:

- stomach ulcers

- heart problems
- minor illness (allergies, skin disorders, migraine)
- serious illness (eg: arthritis, cancer, diabetes)
- mental problems (eg: depression)

There may be cultural or social pressure to 'be strong'. Perhaps the employment culture is such that to acknowledge that you are under stress is interpreted as a sign of weakness and could be damaging to your career prospects. If this is the case, you may be tempted to suppress your feelings of stress - which leads to a strategy of stress denial rather than stress management.

Most people experience a significant period of stress or depression during their lives. To feel stressed at various times is to be normal. If you think the stress may be excessive and you need help, then consult a suitably qualified professional (such as your doctor or a counselor).

The impact of excessive stress on teamwork is also harmful, and it can damage:

- individual work performance
- team performance
- working relationships
- cooperation between team members
- team spirit

The more effort team members have to expend in managing their own stress, the less they have to contribute to teamwork and mutual support.

What are the causes of stress?

The factors that contribute to the experience of stress are many and varied. A useful overview of these causes can be gained by using the 'analysis wheel', to view them. Using this wheel, you can take six different perspectives on the causes of stress. Each of the lists below contains a sample of ideas only - there are many more causes of stress than those listed.



Biological

The causes of some stress lie in the biological make up of your body, or the interaction of your body with the food you eat or environment you live in. Some examples of the biological causes of stress include:

- Lack of fitness
- Poor diet (eg: deficiency of vitamins; too much caffeine)
- Allergic reaction to chemicals in food
- Genetic disorder resulting in chemical imbalances in the body
- Changes in bodily functions, such as pregnancy, puberty, menopause, PMT or ageing

Social/cultural

Stress can be caused by a whole range of social and cultural pressures, such as:

- Change of social circumstances (eg: bereavement of spouse, moving job, marriage, holidays)
- Pressure to conform to social or employment patterns of behavior, especially where these behaviors are not the preferred behaviors of the individual (eg: demands on an introvert to behave in an extrovert manner).
- Conflict in relationships, or an absence of praise and being valued by others
- Lack of support, time to be listened to, and time for relaxation.
- Having a high-pressure job, being unemployed, or only having a small range of social circumstances (eg: rarely leaving the house, few hobbies).

Psychodynamic

The term 'psychodynamic' refers to subconscious thoughts and feelings, which often arise from childhood experiences. The way in which you learned to cope in childhood is by using defense mechanisms that involved a degree of self deception. You still use those defenses today. Examples of psychodynamic causes of stress include:

- Inner conflicts that have not been addressed, but repressed (ie pushed out of conscious awareness).
- Encountering situations that evoke stressful feelings that were experienced in childhood
- Expending effort to maintain defenses in situations that threaten self-esteem.
- Lack of self-awareness
- Increasing self awareness and personal growth

Rational

The rational processes in our minds constantly interpret and evaluate the world around. Events can be interpreted in many ways, and the way in which this is done can influence the level of stress that is felt. Some examples of rational causes of stress include:

- Perceiving the consequences of actions as being dangerous or threatening. These perceptions may or may not be accurate - ie the stress might be beneficial, in preparing for a real danger, or harmful, in creating unnecessary stress.
- Having an inaccurate perception of self.
- Believing one is capable of achieving far too much - setting standards and expectations too high (and therefore falling short of them).
- Misinterpreting the actions of others so as to discount (ie: not accept) the love and support that is given.
- Not having the skill or knowledge to cope with certain situations, such as not having a rational approach to problem-solving, or conflict resolution, and therefore being unable to cope with problems as they arise.

Experiential

What are you experiencing at this point in time, and how are you, personally, reacting to it? The way in which each individual experiences each snapshot in time, even in very similar situations, is very different. One person may find a situation highly stressful, whilst another may find it stimulating or enjoyable - every reaction is unique. There may be many instant pressures that cause an individual to experience stress, such as:

- Too many simultaneous demands from different people
- Environmental stresses, such as noise, cramped conditions, or cluttered surroundings.
- Needs that are being unmet or frustrated.
- The appearance of a threat to survival, self-esteem, or identity.
- Change in patterns of eating, sleeping, time zone, relationships etc..

Spiritual

The need for individual spiritual development has long been recognized by religion. It is only during the last 30 years that psychology has acknowledged the existence of a spiritual side to the individual. Some spiritual causes of stress include:

- Violation of personal or religious moral code, contravention of accepted group practice, or violation of laws ("sin")
- Lack of spiritual development
- An absence of truth (eg: self-deception and deception of others)
- The lack of a sense of personal agency - ie that one can influence events - or the failure to recognize and exercise choice.
- Absence of a relationship with God, and lack of forgiveness.

Addressing the causes of stress

Once you have identified the causes of your stress, you can then make plans to address them. For example:

Cause of stress	Action that can be taken to reduce stress
Need for time of privacy and solitude not being met	Find a place and a time of day when you can be on your own, or go on a retreat
Lack of fitness	Engage in some sport or fitness activity (may need to consult your doctor)
Unexplained inner feelings of stress	Consult a doctor, and perhaps get referral to an appropriate specialist (eg: a counselor or dietician)
Stressful job circumstances	Negotiate different working schedules with your boss
PMT	Consult your doctor about available treatments
Lack of skill to resolve conflict or manage demanding workload	Attend training courses in assertiveness, conflict resolution or time management

In conclusion

The analysis wheel can be useful in both recognizing the causes of stress and in planning how to address them. Each perspective offers a different way of explaining the origins of stress. These perspectives do not necessarily provide 'either. or' explanations - they can be complementary and provide different views of the same cause.

For example, if someone is looking after a large number of children, and finding it stressful, the different perspectives might offer complementary explanations:

- From a psychodynamic point of view, the children may be invoking unpleasant memories from childhood (say, of being bullied by a large group of children), and defense mechanisms try to suppress those memories and feelings (to keep them out of conscious awareness).
- From an experiential point of view, the person may be an introvert, and find lots of external demands difficult to cope with.
- From a rational point of view, the person may be fearful that they are not going to be able to cope.
- From a biological point of view, there may be chemical imbalances in the brain that cause the individual unpleasant feelings in such situations.
- From a social point of view, there may be little support from other

people to help the person through a difficult period, or a lack of skill in dealing with large groups of children.

- From a spiritual point of view, the individual is unable to find an inner peace, and is in inner turmoil. This then 'resonates' with the chaos in the world around.

Whilst these explanations are different, they are not totally independent. In fact, they may well be integrated or intertwined. (This can perhaps be likened to several strands of spaghetti on the same plate - you cannot alter one without moving the whole plateful). For example:

- The person, naturally an extrovert, may have become introverted as a result of bullying in childhood.
- The inner preference for extroversion is in conflict with a self-perception of introversion, which may be contributing to a lack of inner peace.
- The person is fearful that they are not going to cope because they know they do not have inner peace.
- The individual feelings of not coping may also be based in past feelings that he/she did not cope well when being bullied in childhood.
- There might be a relationship between the defense mechanisms formed whilst being bullied, and chemical imbalances in the brain.
- Because the individual is behaving in an introvert manner, a network of friends to provide support has not been built up.

When you read books on stress management, bear the analysis wheel in mind. Ask yourself whether the book is considering stress from a number of perspectives, or whether it is focusing on just one. For example, a book on stress that focuses on physical fitness and diet is using (primarily) the biological perspective. For some people, whose causes of stress lie primarily in biological causes, such a book is very useful. But if your stress is rooted in social or psychodynamic causes, taking a biological approach to managing stress is going to be of limited benefit.

Summary

The stages involved in managing stress are:

1. recognizing the symptoms of stress
2. identifying the causes
3. taking action to address the causes and thereby reduce the symptoms
4. where necessary, taking interim steps to relieve the symptoms until the underlying causes have been addressed.

It can help you to identify the causes and solutions of stress by using the analysis wheel:

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