

Make Every Session Count: A Coping Skills Manual

Staying Healthy/ Reducing Stress



**John Preston
Nicolette Varzos
Douglas Liebert**

Staying Healthy/Reducing Stress

John Preston, Nikki Varzos, and Doug Liebert

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Make Every Session Count* by John Preston, Nikki Varzos, and Doug Liebert

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Staying Healthy/Reducing Stress

AS YOU THINK about how brief therapy may help you deal with emotional distress, consider this: *Physical problems often cause emotional distress, and emotional upsets may produce physical symptoms.* In this chapter, we'll take a closer look at how you can reduce emotional stress by keeping yourself physically well and learning to relax.

Stressful life events often bring on unpleasant and sometimes painful or dangerous physical symptoms including tension headaches, insomnia, fatigue, restlessness, loss of sex drive, ulcers, high blood pressure, and decreased energy. Recent evidence suggests that prolonged, significant emotional distress can also impair the function of the immune system, increasing our risk of certain infectious diseases, and retarding recovery from physical illnesses.

Three primary approaches have been shown to be quite effective in reducing some of the physical symptoms associated with life stress: *changing unhealthy habits, relaxation, and appropriate use of medications.*

Change Unhealthy Habits

Research has shown over and over again that under the impact of emotional distress, people develop bad habits, including excessive use of alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and junk foods. These poor nutritional and health habits can, in the long run, result in serious physical illnesses, such as cardiac disease and cancer. There are a host of short-term risks as well.

Alcohol: Arguably the most used—and abused—drug in the United States, alcohol can provide a very potent and quick sense of release from physical tension and can promote a temporary feeling of euphoria or relaxation. Many people who are experiencing emotional pain seek the quick relief alcohol provides. While we don't intend to be moralistic about the issues of alcohol use, evidence clearly shows that the use of alcohol can backfire, especially over a prolonged period of time, on a regular basis, and in moderate-to-high amounts.

Alcohol, in and of itself, is responsible for tremendous aggravation of the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

However, it is a seductive substance, because the immediate result of drinking is relief, the person perceives that the alcohol is helpful. But prolonged use actually results in a change in the neurochemistry of the brain, increasing—not relieving—*anxiety and depression*. Avoiding, reducing, or eliminating alcohol intake during stressful times is one key self-care action that you can take. *(Note: If you have been drinking heavily, it is important to know that abrupt discontinuation of alcohol can result in very unpleasant and sometimes dangerous withdrawal symptoms. Under these circumstances alcohol detox should only be done under medical supervision.)*

Caffeine: This widely used drug is found in some unexpected places: in coffee, of course, and in a host of other substances that people consume, including tea, certain other drinks (especially colas), and—unfortunately!—chocolate. It can also be found in pain medications (Excedrin) and diet pills. Like alcohol, caffeine is a seductive drug. One common physical effect of stress is a sense of fatigue and decreased energy. Caffeine is a potent stimulant and can provide, rather quickly, a sense of improved alertness and energy. Some researchers believe that caffeine has mild but transient antidepressant effects and may be used by some chronically depressed people to elevate their moods.

Caffeine can also backfire. Studies of caffeine use and abuse indicate that when people ingest more than 250 milligrams per day of caffeine, there is a significant likelihood of developing such stress-related symptoms as jitteriness, tension, anxiety, and insomnia. The risks of symptoms increase dramatically when the amount of caffeine surpasses 500 milligrams per day. (The average cup of coffee contains approximately 150 milligrams of caffeine, and the typical cola drink or tea contains around 50 milligrams of caffeine.)

Another often unrecognized but important symptom of caffeine use is disruption of the quality of sleep. Even if you're able to go to sleep, large amounts of caffeine may produce restless sleep. As a result, you'll fail to get adequate rest during the night, which leads to excessive daytime fatigue. To combat this fatigue, the typical coffee/cola drinker chooses—you guessed it—to drink more caffeine.

In difficult times, it may seem silly to worry about the amount of coffee you're drinking. Many people "pooh-pooh" the notion that caffeine contributes to emotional problems, but clinical research shows that caffeine can cause or exacerbate stress-related symptoms.

The bottom line here: *One decisive action you can take during times of stress is to reduce or eliminate caffeine*. Note that if you are accustomed to drinking large amounts of caffeine, and you quit "cold turkey," you will

likely experience significant caffeine withdrawal symptoms: anxiety, restlessness, tension, and headaches. Thus, if you have become accustomed to ingesting large amounts of caffeine, you'll want to *gradually* decrease your intake of caffeine over a period of two to three weeks, progressively replacing caffeinated beverages with decaffeinated beverages.

Exercise: At times of great emotional distress, you may experience a tremendous sense of decreased energy and fatigue. And during such times, motivating yourself to engage in normal physical exercise becomes even more difficult. You'll probably feel like stopping your normal exercise program, perhaps reducing your normal daily activity level as well. Don't do it. Fatigue feeds on itself. The more tired you feel, the more you're inclined to sit on the couch or lie in bed. Reduced activity almost always leads to a progressive cycle of increasing fatigue.

Another common outcome of emotional distress is significant weight gain because of decreased activity and an increased appetite for inappropriate foods. Weight gain can have negative consequences for both physical functioning and emotional well-being. Significant weight gain may lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

An important decision you can make during difficult times of emotional distress is to take care of yourself as best you can, focusing on proper nutrition, exercise, and a reduction or avoidance of alcohol or caffeine. These are not magical solutions—no one has ever survived emotionally traumatic times simply by ceasing to drink coffee. But such actions can be simple ways to take control of part of your life, to reduce some amount of stress-related symptoms, and to promote a sense of physical well-being.

Learn to Relax

In the early days of psychosomatic medicine, it was commonplace for patients to complain to their family physicians about noticeable physical symptoms, only to be told, "It's just stress" or "It's all in your mind." As a result, many people left the doctor feeling they were crazy, misunderstood, or just imagining these problems.

Emotional distress is more than just a state of mind; it's much more than just feeling bad or having negative, unpleasant thoughts. During times of emotional stress, bona fide physical changes and symptoms do occur, some of which are uncomfortable and painful and some of which can actually lead to life-threatening illnesses. There is clear evidence to suggest that significant stress, including anxiety and depression, can lead to profound changes in brain

chemistry, including the release of many different hormones from the endocrine glands of the body (the pituitary gland, the adrenal gland, and the thyroid gland).

Hormones are specifically designed to regulate normal metabolic functioning, controlling or influencing many basic biological rhythms, drives, and processes. Without the combined effort of intricately complex hormone systems, survival would be impossible. However, during times of stress the brain can activate the endocrine system in a way that results in such stress-related physical symptoms as rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, and decrease or increase of metabolic activity. In addition, the hormone system can profoundly affect the functioning of the immune system, altering the functioning of specific white blood cells.

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The ultimate solution to reducing stress is to come to terms with painful life events or to alter the course of those

events in your life. In the short run, you can employ a number of strategies to reduce physical distress. Relaxation exercises (sometimes accompanied by biofeedback) and meditation techniques are widely used as a treatment (or adjunct treatment) for many physical illnesses, including migraine headaches, hypertension, ulcers, chronic pain conditions, chronic fatigue, and others.

When friends are under stress it is common advice to tell them to "Just relax." We're not talking about "just relaxing" here, but offering specific procedures that have been demonstrated to have a profound effect on physical functioning. The techniques described on the next pages are two proven procedures for learning to relax deeply.

You'll have to discover for yourself whether the *progressive muscle relaxation technique* or *visualization* (or a combination of the two) works best. Please keep in mind that simple relaxation techniques alone don't solve major life crises. "Just relaxing" or "taking it easy" are not the answers as we go through difficult times. We also want to emphasize that the specific procedures described here are of proven value—hundreds of careful studies have shown their effectiveness. Sitting in front of the TV with a beer—or even vacationing in Hawaii—may sound easier and perhaps more appealing, but those activities are not particularly helpful in countering stress over the long haul.

Relaxation Techniques

The following techniques have been found to be helpful ways to learn to relax completely: progressive muscle relaxation and visualization.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

During times of stress, particular muscles and muscle groups tend automatically to become tense. Progressive muscle relaxation techniques are designed to reduced tension in most of the body's major muscle groups.

The relaxation procedure requires a period of time when you will not be disturbed. Sit in a comfortable chair, or recline on a couch or on a carpeted floor. Close your eyes and take two slow, deep breaths. As you exhale slowly, notice the gradual release of tension in chest and shoulder muscles. Feel the weight of your body against the chair (couch, floor), and the gentle pull of gravity as you settle into the chair. After a few moments, you can begin a series of simple exercises, tensing particular muscles, holding the tension for a count of "three" and then releasing. Each time you tense and then release, you can enhance the effect by paying special attention to the experience of relaxation/letting go that occurs immediately after release.

Allow ten or fifteen seconds between each tensing of muscles before proceeding to the next muscle group. The tensing exercises begin with the feet and progress like this:

1. Feet/toes
2. Calves/lower legs
3. Thighs
4. Buttocks (squeeze together)
5. Abdomen
6. Lower back (arch)
7. Chest (hold in a deep breath)
8. Hands (make fists)
9. Upper arms
10. Shoulders (shrug)
11. Face (squeeze eyes and mouth closed)
12. Face (open eyes and mouth)

Many experts on relaxation techniques recommend fifteen to twenty minutes twice a day to go through this exercise, especially when you're first learning the procedure. It's been our experience, however, that few people will find time to do this on a regular basis. A realistic alternative, after you've practiced for a week or so and learned how to relax deeply, is to abbreviate the technique by omitting the tensing step and simply relaxing each muscle group in turn. This whole procedure can easily be done in two to three minutes, and repeated several times a day. When time allows, you can, of course, give yourself permission to expand the procedure and achieve an ever deeper sense of relaxation.

You'll notice immediately a significant reduction of muscular tension. More important, if the exercise is done several times a day (even briefly) on a regular basis, it can reduce chronic tension levels. You may notice less daytime fatigue, more productive energy, and an improved ability to fall asleep, due in large part to a decreased release of stress hormones.

Visualization

Many different visualization techniques have been developed. Here's a description of one of the most commonly employed:

Begin by finding a quiet time and comfortable chair or couch. Close your eyes and take two slow, deep breaths. Notice the physical sensations of relaxation as you gently exhale.

After a few moments, imagine yourself standing at the top of a flight of stairs with ten steps. In a moment you can begin to see yourself slowly and gradually walking down the stairs, one at a time. When you begin your descent, you will notice a sense of increasing relaxation as you move downward. With each step, experience the feeling of deeper and deeper relaxation. As you take each step, silently count to yourself ten...nine...eight...lower and lower as you go. Throughout your descent, you feel safe and in control, as you choose to let go of tension. The mental image of downward movement has been found to trigger a relaxation response.

As you reach the bottom of the stairs...two...one...let your mind take you to a particular setting, a place you know that you associate with feelings of comfort, security, and well-being. It may be a beautiful meadow, a warm, sunny beach, or a rustic cabin in the forest. The choice is yours as you create your own personal image of serenity. The experience of relaxation is enhanced by taking particular note of all sensory experiences in your image (the

sights, sounds, smells, and feelings of the peaceful setting).

After a few minutes, you can decide to leave the relaxing setting by slowly counting from three to one... three...two...one...as your eyes open and you again are fully alert, but relaxed.

Progressive muscle relaxation and visualization clearly do reduce physical tension, and they are ways that you can give yourself some amount of self-nurturing. They are direct ways to exert some control of tension while taking other actions to promote coping and emotional healing. (For a more complete discussion, please see Davis et al. 1995; Benson 1975.)

Your therapist can assist you with these procedures, if you need additional help, or they may have other suggestions to add to your repertoire of tools for dealing with physical and emotional stress. You can't have too many!