

A Guide to Eliminate Stress & Anxiety

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It may be a symptom of the strains of modern life: the prevalence of stress and anxiety. It seems that stress is ever-present, attacking us at work, at school, on the road, and at home. To a large extent, it is impossible to escape stress—and perhaps we wouldn't want to. Stress can be a powerful motivator and a catalyst for change. It can enable us to grow and mature. Stress is not something that should be feared—rather, it is an aspect of life that needs to be managed.

You will find that there are a myriad of causes for stress and anxiety. Both can appear on the scene anytime, anywhere. However, a growing body of research suggests that there are numerous ways to reduce the negative effects of stress. If you follow these prescriptions for stress relief, you should find yourself leading a fuller, more productive life. You will no longer be challenged by the demands of stress, and you should feel more relaxed as a result.

Turning a Spotlight on Anxiety Disorders

You may be restless at night, tossing and turning in your bed because of excessive worry. You may find yourself cracking under pressure, whether when preparing for a test or when you get ready to report to the boss. But does your uneasiness qualify as actual anxiety?

We seem to be an angst-ridden society. Television news programs offer us a long list of worries: from what's in your toddler's milk to whether your high schooler will graduate with a 4.0 average. It seems at times as if we are a nation of worry warts. We obsess about crime, the stock market, civil rights, hunger, AIDs, the SATs, and global warming. You might even nickname your local newspaper "The Worry Pages."

In order to effectively deal with anxiety, we must first be able to define it. There are certain recognizable symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder which you should pay attention to. For instance, anxiety can be characterized by restlessness, an inability to relax, shakiness, and tics. You may feel your heart racing or feel light-headed. Your stomach might seem queasy and you may experience shortness of breath.

You might seem overwhelmed by a feeling of fear. You might dread tomorrow because you wonder what disasters will befall your family. You may experience insomnia, irritability, impatience, and an inability to concentrate. You may also feel impatient or on edge.

If any of these symptoms persist for more than a month, you have probably succumbed to generalized anxiety disorder. Your anxiety might be so severe that you also experience a phobia. This is an irrational worry about a situation—a worry so debilitating that you go out of your way to avoid a certain object or situation. While you yourself may sense that something is wrong, you may feel as if you lack the power to do anything about it. If the fear is severe, it is considered a full-fledged disorder. While

phobias may not always plague those with anxiety disorders, they may accompany anxiety.

You should know that there are three major types of phobias. Agoraphobia is a fear of a public place such as a shopping mall or town square. You may have a fear that you will not be able to escape the area if you need to. Meanwhile, a social phobia is a fear of talking with or otherwise interacting with people. You may fear that you will embarrass yourself in front of a person or group. A simple phobia is a fear of a particular object or activity such as dogs, flying, or germs.

Anxiety can also lead to a panic disorder. A panic attack generally involves racing heart beat, chest pain, dizziness, perspiration, or a fear of dying. It can be highly debilitating, preventing an individual from being able to perform work or another important function. It can seriously curtail one's social life, causing an individual to become isolated.

There are numerous causes of anxiety. These include stress, nutritional problems, and chemical imbalances. Treatment most often comes in the form of prescription drugs such as Clonidine or Clonazepam. You should be careful, however, to review the side-effects of such drugs. In some cases, patients might find themselves to be dependent on the medication.

You might also find that it helps to become part of a support group. There is a special bond which grows between individuals who are forced to combat the same demons. You may discover that you can draw strength from talking with other people who share the same struggles you do. With such support, you won't feel so alone. It's comforting to know that there is someone you can turn to in the midst of your pain.

Anxiety can be a painful and debilitating condition, harming one's self-image, one's relationship with family members, and one's ability to perform one's job. It can also lead to panic attacks, which lead to another set of serious problems. Fortunately, there has been a great deal of research in recent years regarding anxiety disorders. With appropriate treatment, people who suffer from anxiety disorders can learn to function effectively. However, treatment often involves a great deal of work and determination. In time, you should be able to ascertain the most effective methods of treating your condition.

Combating Anxiety: Will a Pill Do the Trick?

At certain points in your life, you might have been plagued with worry. It might have been in the wake of beginning a marriage, starting a new career, or caring for a sick child. The worry might have affected you not only emotionally but physically as well. You might have experienced feelings of uneasiness, faintness, or breathing troubles.

There are degrees of severity when it comes to anxiety. For instance, it can be mild, lasting only a day or two, or severe, lasting an entire month. You might experience

generalized anxiety disorder or something more specific such as phobias, panic, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

Anxiety might be treated with an anti-depressant or an anti-anxiety medication. Generally speaking, there are three categories of anti-depressants: selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs; tricyclics; and monoamine oxidase inhibitors or MAOIs. SSRIs include Paxil, Prozac, and Zoloft. These anti-depressants often have fewer side-effects than the older generation of anti-depressants. Initially, you might feel nervous taking SSRIs, but the feeling often disappears after a few weeks. One of the most important side-effects of these drugs is sexual dysfunction, which can often be corrected by changing the dosage.

Tricyclics tend to have side effects such as sleepiness, dizziness, and weight gain. They are older than the SSRIs, so there has been more research conducted on them. Meanwhile, MAOIs can cause a reaction if mixed with certain foods and drinks, such as cheese and wine. These reactions can include increased blood pressure and other life-threatening problems.

Side-effects of anti-anxiety medications include fatigue, confusion, or drowsiness. The medications may be taken two or three times a day or just when needed. Dosage starts low then increases until symptoms disappear. The amount of medication prescribed varies according to symptoms and a person's body chemistry. Doctors generally believe that you should not drink alcohol while taking anti-anxiety medication because the combination can create a life-threatening situation.

Because the medication can lead to dependence, the drugs are usually prescribed for only days or weeks at a time. In fact, a user might be directed to take the medication only when symptoms of anxiety occur. In some cases, individuals suffering from anxiety may need treatment for an extended period of time. If you begin taking anti-anxiety medication, it is important that you stay on it until the doctor recommends that you stop taking it. If you stop abruptly, you may experience anxiety, dizziness, or loss of appetite. Common forms of anxiety medication include Valium, Ativan, and Xanax.

At times, physicians may prescribe beta-blockers to combat anxiety. While beta-blockers such as propranolol may be used to deal with heart damage, they have also emerged as an effective treatment for social anxiety. If you face a stressful situation, such as a job interview, your physician may give you a beta-blocker that can keep your palms from sweating, your head from swelling, and treat other symptoms of anxiety.

There are certain steps you should take before you begin a drug regimen for anxiety. For instance, you should do your homework on the drug. Find out what side-effects it causes, and determine whether you can live with those side-effects. Also, you'll need to inform your doctor of any over-the-counter medications you are using. Be sure to find out how long you will have to take the drug. You should realize that if you decide to stop taking the drug, you could find symptoms of anxiety reappearing.

If you've been diagnosed with anxiety, it can be a daunting experience. You may not know where to go or who to turn to. However, it's best if you begin your search for treatment with your family physician, who can refer you to a psychiatrist if need be. While any type of anxiety medication can lead to side-effects, many people report good experiences, particularly with SSRIs. By working closely with your physician, you can find the medication that's appropriate for you. However, you should know that medication may be only one part of the treatment puzzle. You may also need to engage in talk therapy or join a support group in order to alleviate your symptoms. The good news is that the prognosis is good for those who've been diagnosed with anxiety.

Combating Anxiety: The Alternative Way

Perhaps you break out into a cold sweat when you have to deliver a talk before a group of people. Or perhaps you become nervous when you have to take a test. There are certainly numerous causes for anxiety. Similarly, there are a number of treatment options for those afflicted with the illness. If you don't like the idea of medication, you might try an alternative approach to battling your anxiety.

It is estimated that nearly seven percent of Americans suffer from anxiety and panic disorders. While prescription drugs are routinely offered as a remedy for such illnesses, they can be dangerous if administered over a long period of time. Some of the more popular anxiety drugs include Diazepam and Wellbutrin.

However, increasingly, Americans are turning to alternative medicines in an effort to soothe their anxious feelings. In just the last decade, the demand for alternative medicine has skyrocketed 300 percent. This is partially the result of the fact that many alternative medicines offer relief from symptoms without the side-effects linked to prescription drugs. It should be noted, however, that natural remedies are not meant to be long-term treatments, although they can offer relief in the short-term.

Before you buy a natural remedy, it is important that you do your homework as far as your knowledge of herbs and vitamins is concerned. It is also imperative that you consult your family physician in order to ensure that the alternative treatment is safe for you.

A number of herbs offer relief from the symptoms of anxiety. For instance, St. Johns Wort is one of the most popular anti-anxiety herbs on the market. After taking St. Johns Wort for as little as two weeks, you should notice a difference in your anxiety level.

Valerian Root is another alternative option you might try. It is especially helpful in combating insomnia because of its sedative quality. In other words, it helps to lull the central nervous system to sleep. Research indicates that Valerian Root is effective in improving sleep 90 percent of the time. This is important, since much of anxiety is linked to sleep disorders.

Vitamins can also provide an effective treatment for anxiety. They can be quite important in enabling neurotransmitter synthesis and maintenance. For instance, B-complex can help produce neurochemicals, which in turn assists in the synthesis of serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine.

Yet another aid to combating anxiety is Passion Flower. It helps to calm the central nervous system, leading to feelings of peace. Meanwhile, Ashwaghandha Root can make you feel stronger so that you are better able to handle the effects of anxiety.

But perhaps no herbal remedy is quite as effective as Kava Kava. This is considered to be one of the strongest anti-anxiety remedies in the world. A number of studies indicate that Kava Kava is highly effective in relieving the short-term symptoms of anxiety. It is also considered quite safe to ingest, making it one of the most popular herbs available on the market today.

An herbal remedy called PureCalm is being marketed as a safe way to deal with general nervousness and worry. You may feel relaxed after taking only a few drops of this natural substance. However, if you suffer from severe anxiety, including panic attacks, you might consider a remedy called MindSoothe, which combines St. Johns Wort with Passiflora. Mindsoothe has been linked to good sleep, greater concentration, and better memory. Therefore, it is particularly effective in treating the symptoms of anxiety.

We all have feelings of anxiety from time to time. But how can you tell if your anxiety is out of control? If you experience racing thoughts, rapid heartbeat, extreme difficulty resting or concentrating, you probably need to get help. If you do not like dealing with the side-effects of prescription drugs, an herbal remedy may be in order. You should know in advance, however, that some herbal remedies carry their own risks and lead to significant side-effects. The more you know about herbal remedies, the better consumer you'll be. Don't allow yourself to be a human guinea pig. Take herbal medication only after you have thoroughly studied its effects upon the human body.

Is Your Personality Causing You Stress?

It may sound hard to believe, but experts say that your personality can actually cause you stress. To a certain extent, your personality might have been determined at birth. However, there are certain characteristics that you might have developed over the years that are now contributing to your stress level. While one cannot change his or her personality overnight, it is certainly possible to change certain habits that may now be causing you stress.

To begin with, you should ask yourself if you have low self-esteem. Do you feel as if you are inferior to other people? Do you constantly berate yourself for your faults? Do you consider yourself to be the sum total of your mistakes? There is evidence to suggest that low self-esteem can lead to stressful situations. The problem is that you may be putting stress on yourself unnecessarily. Therefore, what you need to do is to begin to

enhance your self-esteem. This begins by ending the “negative talk” that goes on inside your head. Instead of focusing on your weaknesses, form a list of your strengths. You might also want to list all of your major accomplishments. You might be amazed to discover just how much you have achieved. Whenever you feel the urge to downgrade yourself, think of your attributes. This should serve to end the litany of your failures which you may be repeating to yourself.

Stress can also be the result of being overburdened. Do you take on too much? Are you dealing with too much responsibility? While there are certain responsibilities at home, at work, and at school that we must carry, at times we may be overextending ourselves. List your major responsibilities and see if there is a way for you to whittle down the list. You might be surprised to learn just how much you have taken on. With a little bit of planning, you might be able to shift some of your responsibilities to other members of your household or to your co-workers. Be sure to talk with your mate and your boss if your stress level seems out of control. Together, you can work on strategies to reduce the amount of stress you feel.

Let’s face it. Some of us are control freaks. We feel as if we need to control every detail within our line of sight. If you fall into this category, you may be experiencing stress because of your controlling nature. You may also find that this weakness is negatively impacting your personal life, causing you to feel additional stress in your relationships. In order to combat this tendency, try practicing the old adage, “Let Go and let God (or your Higher Power). Recognize that there are certain things that are simply beyond your control. The sooner you recognize this, the better off you’ll be, and the less stress you will feel.

Another prime cause of stress is fear, especially fear of the unknown. You may be fearful of making mistakes or of being judged harshly. In order to counteract this, you must recognize that everyone commits errors—even major league baseball players! You must also learn to forgive yourself for your faults—otherwise, you will be putting yourself under a tremendous amount of stress. Follow the motto: Do your best and let nature take care of the rest. Try not to agonize over every little thing. In addition, learn to get over the guilt of not being perfect. Otherwise, your stress level is likely to consistently hit the roof.

You have to realize that recognizing your faults is half the battle. Once you know what personal foibles you need to work on, you’ll be in a better position to reduce your stress. Realize that it took you a long time to develop such personality flaws, so it might take some time to eliminate them. In other words, don’t expect to radically change your personality in a week. However, with the proper amount of diligence, you can alter those aspects of your personality that are causing you grief. Once you eliminate these flaws, you should feel more energetic, less stressed, and better able to take on the world. And you may just find your blood pressure decreasing as well.

Is your Relationship Causing You Stress?

Perhaps nothing is as important in our lives as our relationships with other people. It has often been said that a happy family is the key to success. Much of our joy comes from our memories of Thanksgiving dinners around the dining room table or Christmas presents exchanged in the family room. But it is also true that the relationships that provide us with so much happiness can also be a source of stress.

Mental health experts say that our interpersonal relationships can increase our stress level. Since it is not possible—nor advisable—to eliminate these relationships from our lives, we have to work hard to ensure that our relationships do not get the better of us. This means focusing our attention on the inherent stressors within relationships, and doing our best to eliminate or at least reduce stress where possible.

One of the major stressors in relationships is a communication problem. For instance, you may become angry at your mate because he or she fails to do chores around the house. However, the bigger issue at stake is the fact that you feel as if your mate doesn't really love you. By bridging the communication gap—by articulating exactly what your needs are in a loving and supportive way—you can help ease the tension in your relationship.

Another source of stress can be a feeling that your mate is not supportive of your efforts, either at home or at work. You may feel as if your spouse doesn't appreciate all your hard work and effort. This could, in turn, lead you to attempt to overachieve, thinking that, by doing so, you will win your mate's support and love. However, such a tactic could backfire, causing you more stress than you need.

But your relationship with your spouse may not be the only relationship that is causing you stress. You may also be burdened by problems in your relationship with your parents. For instance, you might feel as if your parents disapprove of your career choice, your choice of spouse, or your choices when it comes to parenting your children. The fear of disapproval can lead to tension which can, in turn, give rise to stress. By trying to understand your parents' perspective, you can help smooth out the tensions in your relationship. Also, attempt to boost your self-confidence, as far as your decision-making capability is concerned. This will help you to recognize the fact that your parents' disapproval will not break you—that you can learn from their criticism and can become a better person for it.

Sibling rivalries can also cause a great deal of stress. You might feel as if you constantly need to compete with your brother or sister—that you need to have the better car, the prettier wife, the bigger house, the more prestigious job. If this is, indeed, the case, you might need to re-order your priorities. Recognize that your brother or sister is a talented individual, that he or she should be respected and appreciated. Realize that competition between siblings is seldom helpful and more often counter-productive. Once you stop trying to openly compete, you might find that your sibling calls a halt to the competition as well. In this way, you can both learn to find common ground—to work together rather than against each other.

In addition, you may experience stress in your relationship with one of your co-workers. You might experience continual conflict, as you continue to disagree on the most minuscule details. If the conflict appears to be overwhelming, you may need intervention by a supervisor in order to get your stress level under control. The worst thing you could do is to let things simmer until they reach the boiling point.

It should be noted here that you cannot eliminate stress entirely from your relationships. However, it is possible to minimize it. By engaging in effective communication, trying to view conflicts from the other person's perspective, and dealing with differences of opinion openly and honestly, you can reduce the amount of stress in your interpersonal relationships. You may find that you are a great deal happier and even healthier as a result of such stress-busting techniques.

Is Your Organization Causing You Stress?

We live in a society of "joiners." We like to join churches, clubs, and fraternal organizations. We like to join classes and magazine subscription drives. We simply enjoy being with other people, and so we spend much of our lives in groups. Certainly, this is a good thing—not only for our own mental health, but also for the good of society as a whole.

And yet, no organization is a perfect entity. Organizations often breed conflict within their ranks. The conflicts may be between people on the same level, or between people at different levels of the organizational hierarchy. The conflicts may be one-time disagreements, or bruising fights which last for eons. While some conflicts can be attributed to personality clashes, others stem from the organization itself.

Whether you're involved in parent-teacher organizations or a writers' free speech group, you might find that you're running up against organization-induced stress. This can come in a variety of forms. To begin with, it might be caused by the fact that the organization seems to have lost its sense of purpose. It may be wandering aimlessly and lack clearly-defined goals. As a result, you might feel a great deal of stress since you aren't certain where the organization is headed—or even if you want to go along for the ride. If you come across this problem, the best thing to do is to air your concerns to someone in a position of authority. It is entirely possible that the leadership will ignore your concerns, but at least you've tried. If you fail to achieve a workable solution, you might then be forced to leave the organization. But you'll leave knowing that you attempted to have a positive impact.

While most organizations have people in positions of leadership, many groups lack true leaders. As a result, members of the organization may experience a great deal of stress, having to deal with constant uncertainty. A true leader takes charge of an organization. He or she has a clear vision of what needs to be accomplished and promotes a team atmosphere in order to get the job done. If you are in an organization that appears to be leaderless, try to identify potential leaders. Encourage them to seek

leadership, and assure them that you will support their candidacies. Such a strategy can help to alleviate the stress of all concerned.

Another problem that can lead to stress is an uncooperative organizational culture. There may be a feeling that each person in the organization is on his or her own, that each person should be an independent operator. As a result, the individuals within the organization may feel isolated and alone. The best defense against such a situation is healthy communication. Talk to other members of the group and find out if they are sensing an uncooperative atmosphere too. Then, get together and confront the person in charge. You might be amazed at what your small committee can do to effect change within the organization—and you might find your stress level subsiding considerably.

Yet another stress-inducing situation is organizational pessimism. Do members feel as if things will never get better? Are they frustrated and angry? Is there a sense of hopelessness in the ranks? If so, you and other members of the group may be experiencing a great deal of stress. You can lessen the stress by promoting a positive attitude. Make sure that you offer positive input when confronted with problems, and encourage other members of the organization to do the same. With a little bit of effort, you can turn your organization around—and lessen your stress in the process.

Organizational stress may take you by surprise. You might have joined the organization to relieve your stress, so when stress occurs in the group, you need to undergo a major attitude re-adjustment. The important thing to remember in such a situation is that you are not alone. Chances are other members of the group are experiencing the same kinds of things that you are. Trust your judgment and don't be afraid to express your displeasure if things go wrong. The more you express your feelings, the more likely you are to reduce your stress.

Are You Stressed Out by Your Marriage?

You may remember when you saw your future mate for the first time. Or you might remember the moment you realized that this was the person you were destined to marry. Those memories are special reminders of the excitement of a new relationship...of the euphoria that comes when you have fallen in love. They're moments that you'd like to cling to for the rest of your life.

Then, reality sets in. Perhaps it occurred during the first month of your marriage. Or perhaps it happened within a year of your betrothal. It might not have occurred until five years down the road. In any case, you suddenly find yourself under a great deal of stress and you trace the cause to your spouse. There may be tensions over finances, tensions over the rearing of children, tensions over where to live. At times, the friction may seem frivolous—you might be engaged in a knock-down, drag-out fight over who's responsible for the overflowing toilet. Or you could have serious issues, such as a disagreement on when to have a child.

While we would all like marriage to be a blissful experience, the fact of the matter is that it is a situation ripe with stress. There is the daily stress of simply trying to live together in harmony, in addition to the occasional strains over various disagreements. The tension can be magnified if you or your loved one has just been diagnosed with cancer or a serious heart condition. If your child has just been arrested for drug possession, the tensions between the two of you can also escalate.

Luckily, much of the stress within marriage is entirely manageable. For instance, you can diffuse a great deal of tension just by making a commitment to spend more time together. A number of couples benefit from scheduling a “date night” when they make sure that they spend a few hours alone. The date night can include dinner, dancing, or just a walk in the woods. The important thing is to simply re-connect, to re-discover all those things that caused you to fall in love in the first place.

You might also find it helpful to engage in some recreational activity together. Whether it’s skiing, using nautilus equipment, or bowling, exercise can be relaxing and can help you to better manage your stress level. Exercise also allows you to see your spouse in a different light—as a partner rather than a competitor. In the end, you might find that you are both happier and healthier as a result of exercise.

Another technique that can help you to handle marital stress is to schedule a “couple’s meeting” each week. This is a time set aside for re-focusing on your priorities, to discuss any problems that have come up during the week, and to plan ahead for the coming week. At times, you might have disagreements during such meetings. But the important thing is to communicate and to do so consistently.

But what if your marital stress becomes unbearable? The important thing is to keep the lines of communication open between yourself and your spouse. But, if you still find yourself to be under a great deal of stress, consider consulting an outside party. For instance, you might try to schedule a session with your pastor in order to hash out the differences between yourself and your mate. Or you might consult a marriage therapist who is an expert at helping to resolve differences between spouses. You must recognize, however, that such sessions require a great deal of work and emotional commitment. You cannot expect to attend one session and have your stress go away. It could take months before you are able to get your marital stress under control.

Marital stress is serious business. If not dealt with effectively, it can easily lead to divorce—a divorce you might regret later on. Make a commitment to deal with marital stress as soon as it appears. That way, you can work to ensure that small problems do not lead to big ones, exacerbating your stress. By following some simple steps, you can re-charge your batteries, reduce your stress, and fall in love with your spouse all over again.

When Marital Breakup Happens

You had high hopes for your marriage. Your first meeting was ideal—at a local church picnic. Your courtship was a dream—many moonlight walks along the riverfront.

Your wedding day brought tears of joy to your eyes. But then tensions began to arise and the marriage fell apart. As a result, you are now heading to divorce court.

Getting a divorce is more than just a traumatic event—it is one of the most stressful things that can happen in your life. You have come to rely on your husband or wife as your partner, as your soul mate, as your rock. Now, you must learn to do without, and the pain can seem intolerable. The stress can make you feel as if you don't want to eat and you no longer want to take part in the activities you once enjoyed—especially those activities you did as a couple. You might wonder if you will ever feel whole and relaxed again.

The sad fact is that families are broken by divorce each day. In fact, it has become an all-too-common occurrence in our modern world. Yet, there are proven strategies you can engage in in order to reduce the amount of stress you incur as a result of your divorce. While your divorce may still be painful, you'll be able to weather it better if you follow a few simple recommendations.

One of the most stressful aspects of a divorce is the acrimony between the two parties. In order to make the process as smooth as possible, choose a lawyer you can trust. You might go to your family member, a friend, or even your doctor for a recommendation. You'll want a lawyer who specializes in family law to ensure that your case is handled well. Try to select a lawyer who is a good negotiator rather than one who tries to make his or her mark in the courtroom. That way, if difficulties arise, you'll have someone in your corner who is determined to try to reach a peaceful settlement rather than attempt to battle things out in the courtroom.

Another stressful part of any divorce proceeding is child custody issues. If at all possible, try to work out custody before you ever go to court. A custody battle can be a long, intense process and it should be avoided if at all possible. If you can simply not agree on custody issues, you'll have to prepare yourself for battle. The more prepared you are, the better able you will be to handle the stress of the custody dispute. Make a list of all the reasons your children should stay with you. Realistically assess both your faults and those of the other parent. In this way, you'll have a good understanding of the issues that are likely to come up in your custody case.

Yet another element to divorce is the financial aspect. A divorce can literally wreck your finances, so you will have to have a strategy in place to deal with the fall-out. Make a realistic budget and stick with it. Make sure you have an accounting of your personal assets and those you held with your spouse. Determine whether there is any joint property worth fighting for. Also, keep tabs on your credit report. Your spouse's reluctance to pay bills could show up as negative information on your own report.

As you go through the divorce process, consider joining a support group. This can lessen your stress considerably. Knowing that there are other people who are going through the same situation you are can be a tremendous aid in helping you to combat

stress. You'll have someone—or even a group of people—to turn to when things get rough.

There is no escaping the stress associated with divorce. However, the actions you take can enable you to significantly reduce your stress level. Also, it is important for you to keep in mind that a divorce is a transitory event. While some divorce cases last for years, there will eventually be an end to your divorce. The critical thing is for you to take each day as it comes and not to put yourself under more stress than you can handle.

The Stress of Death

You can recall clearly the day your father took you for your first bicycle ride. It was a crisp autumn day and the sun was shining on your brand new Huffy. You remember his hand gently guiding your bike along the road that ran by your apartment building. You even recall his smile as you began steering your bike on your own.

The memory lingers with you as you begin to make preparations for your father's burial. He had had a long illness—cancer—and you knew that the end would be coming soon. Yet, you now think that nothing could have prepared you for the day when he actually died. While you anticipated a period of mourning, you failed to realize that you would encounter a great deal of stress as a result of his death. You may be surprised—even shocked—by the amount of stress you feel.

We seldom associate death with stress, yet the death of a loved one is one of the most stressful events that can happen in our lives. Whether it is the death of a parent, a spouse, a child, a sibling, or a beloved friend, death makes us anxious—not only about our loss, but about our own mortality. The most stressful aspect of death may be the fear of the unknown—you may not know what to expect next, and you may wonder how you will handle the next obstacle that comes your way.

The most important thing you can do to deal with death-related stress is to recognize it for what it is. Realize that it is perfectly natural for you to feel worried and anxious during this difficult time. Try to give yourself some time to pause and reflect. Don't feel as if you have to “hurry up and get over” the death. Allowing yourself an opportunity to grieve should help to reduce your stress level—and make you a healthier person, emotionally speaking.

One thing you can do to help you deal with the stress is to do something positive to remember your loved one by. In other words, consider planting a tree, making a contribution to your loved one's favorite charity, or volunteering your time at the nursing home that cared for your loved one in his or her final days. Discovering that life still offers pleasant possibilities gives you hope—and can help you to deal with your stress more effectively.

Give considerable thought to how your loved one would want you to carry on after his or her death. Chances are great your father, mother, husband, or brother would

not want you sulking in the corner for the rest of your life. Give yourself permission to go on with life. As a result, you should feel less stress—and you should enjoy life more.

Another effective stress-reducing technique is to commit your thoughts to paper. Writing can be quite therapeutic and can help you gain perspective on your situation. The process of writing can improve your problem-solving skills, making you better able to cope with your situation. Also, give yourself time to re-read your journal entries. You might be amazed at how much you've grown, emotionally-speaking, over a short period of time.

If the stress of death becomes overwhelming, by all means seek the help of a professional. A counselor can help you to sort out your feelings and recommend coping techniques. You might find it quite liberating to talk to another individual about everything you're feeling inside. In some cases, you might also want to consult with a psychiatrist to see if there is some medication you can take that will help you deal with death-related anxiety.

All of us will experience the death of someone close to us at some time in our lives. Therefore, we can expect to deal with the stress of losing someone we love. However, it's good to know that there are positive things we can do to help us deal more effectively with the stress related to death. While, in a certain sense, we may never get over a loved one's death, we can learn to cope with the loss. We may even learn to smile again.

Easing the Stress of Cancer

It is the diagnosis that no one wants to hear. Despite years of research, the word "cancer" continues to strike fear into the hearts of men, women, and children. While the detection of cancer is no longer a death sentence, there is always the possibility that cancer will accelerate the end of one's life. With a diagnosis of cancer, one comes face-to-face with one's own mortality.

There are a number of stressful aspects to a cancer diagnosis. Primary among these is the possibility that the cancer will be fatal. As a result, cancer can cause tremendous stress to one's interpersonal relationships. Your family and friends may be on edge, worrying that you might die. You may also be short-tempered because you're not certain how many more days you might have to live. You may be frustrated and anxious and may find it difficult to sleep.

Cancer can also lead to a great deal of financial stress. There are bills for doctors, for treatments, for medication, for surgery. At times, the costs can seem staggering. While your health insurance might cover part of the expense, you yourself might have to shoulder the rest of the cost. If you were barely getting by before your diagnosis, you might find it especially difficult dealing with the financial aspect of cancer.

The process of chemotherapy itself can be highly stressful. To begin with, you will not feel as energetic as you usually are, leaving you with the stress of wondering how you

will get everything done. Also, you may feel nauseated, making it difficult for you to complete your work at the office or your work at home. Finally, losing your hair to chemotherapy can be quite a stressful experience. You have to decide how to handle your baldness—whether you will invest in a wig, a scarf, or just “go natural.” The baldness is particularly stressful for women, who tend to base a great deal of their self-image on how they look.

Realizing that cancer will put you under a great deal of stress is half the battle. Then, you must learn to deal effectively with your stress. For some cancer patients, this means engaging in relaxation exercises. For instance, you might envision that your white blood cells are eating up cancer cells. You might picture the cancer leaving your body, and your body being left healthy as a result. Or you might picture your cancer washing away to the sea. Such mind relaxation techniques can leave you with a more upbeat, enthusiastic attitude and can be highly beneficial in your recovery.

Another stress-reliever is spending some time reading inspirational works. Whether you draw your inspiration from Ronald Reagan or Mother Teresa, reading about how famous people overcame difficulties can help you as you battle your own demons. Such works can be greatly uplifting, giving you the courage and strength necessary to battle cancer heroically.

You might also be able to reduce cancer-related stress by changing your diet. A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can improve both your physical health and your mental outlook. In this way, you will be better able to handle the stresses of cancer treatment.

Yet another effective stress-reducing technique is to join a support group of cancer survivors. This can be tremendously beneficial to your overall well-being. You’ll gain strength from listening to the experiences of other men and women who are facing the same challenges you are. And the fellowship that results from group meetings can aid you in your recovery.

There is no easy way to deal with the stress of cancer. It is a debilitating disease which can sap your physical strength and deplete your emotional reserves. It can leave you feeling battle-scarred and may, at times, lead to a feeling of hopelessness. The good news is that recovery rates are better than ever before—especially when the cancer is caught early. There is a good chance that you will be able to survive cancer, and your recovery could add years to your life. If at any time you find the stress of cancer to be overwhelming, make sure that you mention it to your doctor. He or she might be able to assist you with additional coping strategies that can help you deal with this devastating illness.

The Stress of Mental Illness

It might have started with a panic attack during your algebra exam in high school. It then might have progressed into depression in college, and post-partum depression after

the birth of your first child. At times, you might have even felt so desperate that you wanted to commit suicide.

Or perhaps you have a brother who seems in the grips of full-blown paranoia. No matter how much you try, you just cannot reach him. He's convinced that the FBI is watching his every move, and no one can convince him otherwise. You want him to seek professional help, but he is reluctant to do so.

Mental illness can create tremendous stress for a family. Because the illness is so misunderstood, there is the problem of the stigma attached to it. You might be ashamed or embarrassed, either by your own mental illness or that of a close family member or friend. You may feel as if you are all alone, that no one else could possibly understand what you are going through.

Mental illness routinely creates financial stress for families. Sometimes, overspending is a sign of manic-depressive disorder. A depressed person might invest too much of the family income on a collection of guns or hunting knives. Disputes over finances can create great tensions for families, making it difficult for them to cope.

In addition, mental illness creates tensions within interpersonal relationships. You might be angry with a partner's mood swings—not understanding that it is a situation beyond his or her control. You may be frustrated with a brother who doesn't seem able to hold down a job. You may simply not understand a sister whose promiscuous lifestyle you consider to be dangerous.

The important thing to realize is that, while the stress of mental illness can seem unbearable at times, it is entirely manageable. If you are the individual suffering from mental illness, make an appointment to see a reputable therapist. He or she can help you sort out your problems and can recommend a psychiatrist who can find the medication that is right for you.

Part of the stress of mental illness can be the difficulty involved in finding a medication that works. You may find the side-effects of a particular drug difficult to deal with at first. Psychiatrists say it is best if you follow the doctor's recommendation and try to manage the side-effects as best you can. Going off your medication can have disastrous consequences—and can lead to a great deal more stress.

At times, you might find that your mental illness requires you to go into the hospital for a time. Such hospitalizations can increase your stress level. However, if you think of the hospital stays as just steps on the road to recovery, you will be able to handle the stress much more effectively.

Coping with another's mental illness can be even more stressful. Mental illness can be quite unpredictable, so it can drain your emotional reserves. It can be highly difficult dealing with a situation that changes so abruptly from one minute to the next. One of the best things you can do for yourself is to join a support group for family members of the

mentally ill. This can be tremendously cathartic. You will be able to talk to other people who are going through the same things that you are going through. You can draw comfort and strength from this network of individuals. Some members of your support group may even allow you to call them at home to discuss your problems further. There is no substitute for a listening ear, especially in the rough times.

You may also want to consider family counseling. In this way, the entire family can be involved in a loved one's recovery from mental illness. You'll be able to learn healthy coping strategies for dealing with another's illness, and you will be able to communicate in an open, supportive atmosphere.

There is little doubt that mental illness can lead to life-long stress. However, with a little bit of effort, you can learn to manage this stress effectively. And you will find that you and your family are better off as a result.

Surprised by Stress

Sometimes it seems as if life is a series of losses—the loss of a spouse, the loss of a job, the loss of a brother. You may realize that you need to take time to grieve all of these losses. But what you may not realize is that such losses can also lead to stress—a great deal of it. In order to remain emotionally healthy, you must learn to deal effectively with stress induced by traumatic life events.

Interestingly enough, stress can actually be quantified. The Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Scale assigns point values to the various stressors we can experience in life. For example, the most stressful event we can encounter is the death of a spouse, which ranks a 100 on the scale. That's followed by divorce (73), marital separation (65), jail term (63), death of a close family member (63), and personal injury or illness (53). Even happy events, such as marriage, can rank high on the stress scale.

Most of us do not go through life measuring our stress level. However, referring to the scale can be quite instructive. For instance, after consulting the scale, you might decide to delay a major decision such as the purchase of a new home until you've successfully battled the stress from your divorce. Or you may decide to wait before taking a new job until you've dealt with the stress from your wedding. This self-awareness can enable you to reduce your stress level and to maintain your equilibrium amidst great life struggles.

Therefore, one of the healthiest things you can do is to draw up a list of stress-causing life events and post it in a place where your entire family can see it. That way, you'll have a constant reminder of just what you're up against. This can also serve to encourage your family at a time of great heartache. Family members will be able to see that the event is a normal part of life—one that many other families face. As a result, they'll be able to put the event in perspective.

Another important thing to do is to verbalize your feelings about a stressful event. Talk to your mate, your parents, a friend, or your pastor. If you feel as if there's simply no one to confide in, ask your family physician for a referral for a good therapist. Talking about your feelings is an important part of the healing process, and will enable you to deal with the stress much more efficiently. Another good option is to commit your feelings to writing. Keep a journal and use it to express your innermost thoughts. You might be surprised by how therapeutic this can be. Use the journal for some problem-solving. Think of ways that you can effectively deal with the stressor in your life. It may be as simple as taking a hot bath to calm your nerves, or as challenging as reorganizing your personal files. Such problem-solving techniques can help you to realize that you can overcome the challenge in your life—that your life will not end, just because you've encountered a major setback.

Now that you're aware of the stress scale, you might also consider taking a proactive approach. For instance, if your marriage counseling doesn't seem to be working, try to prepare yourself mentally for the day your marriage will end. Also, if your mother is in ill health, think of what you want to do for her before she passes from this life. In essence, what you are doing is engaging in disaster preparedness. While it can be troubling to think of such tragedies, it can also help you to better cope with the curve balls that life sends your way.

Another important strategy is to simply "take it slow." Don't hurry when making major life decisions, particularly when you are faced with a crisis. Recognize that most things in life do not require instantaneous decisions. You have the luxury of time, so use it to your full advantage. In the end, you'll be happy that you've taken the time to think things through, rather than making rash decisions. If you're in a "calm mode," you'll also be better able to handle the stress of difficult situations.

Stress on the Job

Perhaps it's due to a boss who seems to be making unreasonable demands. Or it's the result of a co-worker who seems to routinely pass her work onto you. Or maybe you're in a profession where tension is great, such as medicine or law. While a little bit of stress on the job can be healthy, too much can be a killer—literally. It's been shown that there appears to be a direct correlation between stress and heart disease.

As a result of this, it is important that you learn to deal effectively with stress on the job. This can be difficult, because a number of stress-inducing factors may be out of your control. For instance, you have no say in who your boss is or who your customers are. You may not be able to determine when you start your day, or how much time you have for lunch. However, it is important for you to recognize that job stress is a serious health problem.

The statistics tell the story. A study conducted in 1999 discovered that we are working longer hours. In fact, the average number of hours on the job have increased eight percent in just one generation---to 47 hours a week. One out of five of us works as much as 49 hours a week. We are a nation of workaholics. This can cause a great deal of

stress, not only on the job, but on the homefront as well. A number of divorces are attributed each year to the workaholic syndrome. To put things in perspective, consider this: the average American works three months more each year than workers in Germany. The U.S. leads the industrialized world in the number of hours worked. The workplace has become so competitive in the U.S. that some employees compare it to the reality TV program known as “Survivor.”

In order to help reduce your stress on the job, you need to make a realistic assessment of your hours. Is it possible for you to cut back and still perform your duties? Are you wasting time on the job that would be better spent at home? Can you delegate some of your duties to someone else in the office? If you design a more workable work schedule, you might find your job-related stress decreasing significantly.

It is entirely possible that you will actually become ill working those extra hours. Over a four-year period, from 1996 to 2000, the proportion of employees taking sick time due to stress rose by three fold. Each day, as many as a million American workers have called in sick because they are under too much stress. This absenteeism is costing American companies money—and making workplaces less productive.

Americans are also feeling stressed out because they no longer think they're jobs are secure. Over a ten year period, the number of employees who were afraid they would become unemployed doubled. And a survey conducted in the year 2000 discovered that half of all workers worried that they could lose their jobs. The dot.com burst, corporate bankruptcies, and massive layoffs have scared the American workforce. With little job security, workers live in fear of being tossed onto the unemployment line. A number of people have come to realize that they cannot expect to retire from the company for which they are now working. Therefore, they may have little allegiance to their companies, resulting in stress for both bosses and employees.

It would be wonderful if the economy could be changed so that long-term employment at a single company was still possible, but that may be wishful thinking. As a result, workers need to try to lessen their stress—knowing that they may be in a volatile position. For many workers, this might mean making sure that they contribute to a 401-K plan so that they have money socked away for retirement. For others, it might mean starting their own businesses so that they do not have to rely on someone else for their employment. If you try to be proactive, chances are you will lessen your stress level. You have to realize that you are ultimately responsible for your own fate. If you are in the driver's seat, you will feel a sense of control which could lessen your stress level considerably.

The Stress of Pregnancy

It may be the most important moment of your life—the moment that you learn that you're pregnant, or you find out that your wife is pregnant. It is a moment of infinite possibilities. You wonder whether your child will grow up to be the next Mozart or the next Marie Curie. You go through baby name books endlessly, wondering what to call your bundle of joy. You go to the paint store, hoping to pick out just the right shade for

your child's nursery. You register at a baby merchandise store, hoping to get just what you need for your baby shower.

However, while it can be a time of unbridled joy, pregnancy may also be a period of intense stress. You may be worried about the weight gain associated with pregnancy. Or you may be wondering whether your baby will be healthy. You may be anxious about your finances, especially if they weren't good before the news of your baby's arrival. You may also be wondering how your relationship with your spouse will change as a result of the pregnancy. You may even be wondering how your relationship with your parents will be altered as a result of your new baby. You may also be worried about the experience of childbirth and the amount of pain involved.

Most importantly, you might be stressed out about the responsibilities of parenthood. You may be wondering how good a mother or a father you'll make. You may be wondering whether you'll be a good provider, a good comforter, a good disciplinarian. You might be wondering about feeding schedules and middle-of-the-night diaper changes.

All of these worries are natural. However, it is important that your worries do not cause you intolerable anxiety. There are specific steps you can take to lessen the stress of pregnancy. If you hope to make the transition to parenthood as smooth as possible, it's critical that you follow these simple relaxation techniques.

To begin with, it can be helpful to take a childbirth class. Even if you aren't contemplating natural childbirth, such classes provide a wealth of information—information that can help put your mind at ease. You'll receive information about how to have a healthy pregnancy, about proper diet for the prospective mother, about the process of childbirth, and about the care and feeding of your baby.

In addition, childbirth classes often provide you with information about relaxation techniques. These include not only breathing exercises, but imagery exercises that can help soothe your nerves. The good thing is that you'll be going through the relaxation exercises with your partner, so you can both receive the benefit of them. Many childbirth educators encourage practicing these relaxation exercises right before you go to bed at night, so you can learn how to relax your muscles right before you try to go to sleep.

It may also be a good idea to attend La Leche League meetings during your pregnancy if you intend to breast-feed. Breast-feeding can be a daunting experience for a new mother, so you'll want to get all the information you can about the process. The La Leche League meetings also put you in touch with experienced breast-feeding mothers who can help to coach you through the rough times. Some groups also provide a phone list that you can consult whenever you need advice—anytime of the day or night.

If you're experiencing a great deal of pregnancy-related stress, it is also important that you discuss it with your obstetrician. He or she might have additional recommendations for you, as far as coping techniques are concerned. He or she can also

let you know whether your stress is affecting your baby, which can be critically important in putting your mind at ease.

Pregnancy can and should be a joyous time. However, there is little doubt that there is a great deal of stress involved in the process. The more informed you are about pregnancy and childbirth, the better able you will be to cope. Seeking out other mothers and fathers during this critical time can also be important for your emotional well-being. By relying on other people for support, you can reduce your stress level significantly and truly enjoy the latter stages of your pregnancy.

Stress and the First Year of Parenthood

The first year of parenthood is a memorable time. You're getting to know your baby and becoming acclimated to your role as a parent. You learn how to feed your baby, how to clothe him or her, and even how to medicate your baby. Every few weeks, you check with your pediatrician's office to chart your baby's growth. It is, in fact, an incredible period of growth for both you and your baby.

However, there is also a great deal of stress associated with new parenthood. You often have to toss aside your pre-conceived notions as you actually experience motherhood or fatherhood. You may be stressed out by the endless diapers and mounting piles of laundry...by the constant feedings...and by your newborn's continual crying. At times, you may even wonder whether you're really cut out for parenthood.

The important thing to remember is that every new parent feels stress. It is, in fact, part of the job. And the stress will continue once your child is in school, once your child becomes a teenager, and once your child starts college. In essence, the moment your baby is born begins a lifetime of stress for you and your mate.

How can you best combat new baby-stress? Recognizing the amount of stress you're under is an important first step. Many new parents become frustrated and irritable, never realizing that they are simply reacting to stress. Given the fact that new parents often get little sleep, the stress can be easily compounded.

Once you recognize your stress, it is important to engage in some stress relief. For many parents, this will mean calling Grandma and Grandpa to take over during the rough times. Just a few hours away from your baby can help you to re-charge your batteries, enabling you to improve your coping skills. It can be particularly helpful if you and your mate arrange a date night while your baby is with the grandparents. This couple time can be extremely relaxing and beneficial for your relationship.

A simple technique you can use is to play lullabies—not just for your baby, but for yourself as well. There is something so soothing about a pleasant lullaby—it can take a great deal of the tension away. Singing with your baby can also help to cement the bond between you and can help to eliminate stress. You might even try dancing with your

baby—the best dances include both parents! Taking the time to relax with your baby can help to reduce the tension you feel.

Books can be another helpful resource. There are a number of books on the market that tell you what to expect during your baby's first year. For instance, many offer doctor's recommendations on when it is necessary to call the pediatrician, and when a home remedy will work just as well. Reading such "baby how-to" books can take a great deal of the stress out of first year parenting.

Arranging play dates for your baby can also be quite therapeutic. In some cases, you might be able to drop your baby off at a friend's house while you do your shopping, cleaning, or other chores. In other cases, arranging a play date offers you the opportunity to get together with other mothers and fathers who share similar stresses. Just talking with other parents might help to ease your worries tremendously.

Another tried-and-true formula for dealing with new baby stress is to put the baby in a stroller and start walking. Just a short walk around the block can help to clear your head, helping you to better deal with the demands of new parenthood. You might even enlist a friend to walk with you. Some mothers and fathers even buy special jogging strollers so that they can run while their babies roll along. Such exercise can be quite relaxing, especially after a hard day around the play pen.

Your new baby should be the light of your life. Therefore, you shouldn't let stress ruin your relationship. By employing some simple coping strategies, you can learn to love your new life—despite all the stresses involved. You'll wake up each day refreshed, and ready to take on the day's challenges.

Are Your Kids Stressing You Out?

Remember the first time you saw your first-born child? You might have been amazed at her eyes, or mesmerized by the perfection of his hands. You might have dutifully recorded the first smile, the first laughs, the first steps, the first dance. He or she became the most important individual in your life. When that little person came into your world, you knew that your life had changed forever.

There is nothing quite like the joy of parenthood. It can lift your spirits on the most miserable day. It gives you a reason to rise in the morning, and a good excuse for blowing bubbles, catching fireflies, or gazing at a fireworks display. When you give your child a hug at night, you know that all is right with the universe.

However, parenthood can also be quite stressful. There are so many demands on your time, so many commitments you need to fulfill. Your responsibilities can leave you feeling anxious and frustrated. If your child is sick, or is having trouble in school, or has become involved in drug or alcohol abuse, your stress level could rise to the max.

Unfortunately, there is nothing you can do to eliminate the stressors associated with parenthood. They simply come with the territory. While you can guide your child, you cannot expect to control him or her, particularly when your child reaches the teenage years. Therefore, you have to learn to somehow manage the stress of parenthood before it gets the better of you.

The most important strategy you can adopt is to keep the communication going between yourself and your child, even when it becomes difficult. Your stress level will be greatly reduced if you can talk with your child, especially when something is bothering him or her. It is important for your child to know that your love is unconditional, and that he or she can turn to you at any time of the day or night. Strengthening the bond of trust can do a great deal to eliminate your stress.

Another stress-reducing tact you can take is to set aside time to spend with your child—other than helping him or her with homework. This is particularly important if you have more than one child. You need some fun time with your child—to let him or her know that you care. Plan for an afternoon of rollerskating or an evening playing checkers. You'll find that such relaxing activities can help to alleviate your stress.

Also, it is important that you build into your day a break in the action. Have your husband or wife watch the children for ten minutes while you re-group. This is particularly important if you find yourself under so much stress that you are about to lose your temper. Give yourself a timeout—and watch your stress level drop considerably.

Mention needs to be made about the special stress that single parents feel. Theirs is a difficult lot and the pressures can be intense. That is why it is so critically important for single parents to strengthen their support systems. They need to have a parent, brother or sister, or friend they can rely on when the stress of parenting becomes overwhelming. Just having someone to talk to can be a tremendous stress-reliever. In other cases, a single parent might need someone to watch his or her children for the night so that the parent can re-group. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness—it is indicative of great emotional strength. If you find yourself falling apart, don't wait for a crisis to get some assistance. If you turn to others for support, you will find that your family unit will only grow stronger.

Parenting is perhaps the single greatest responsibility a person can hold. As a result, there is a tremendous amount of stress involved. Recognizing that fact is an important part of the parenting process. Once you are attuned to stress—and the causes of it—you are more likely to be able to manage it well. It is important also for you to recognize that stress management is an on-going process—that it doesn't happen overnight. However, with time, you can become a first-rate stress manager.

Taking the Stress Out of Back-to-School

The back-to-school blues can affect everyone from kindergarteners to college students. Perhaps your kindergartener is worried about making friends, or your college

student is anxious about making the grade. Back-to-school worries can affect both straight A students and those who are barely making it through.

First of all, it is important to determine whether your child is suffering from school-related stress. Is he or she complaining of stomach aches or headaches? Does he or she have a negative outlook about the start of school? Is he or she grumbling about heading back to class? Is your child a loner? Is he or she reluctant to purchase school supplies? If you answered “yes” to any of the preceding questions, your child could be exhibiting signs of stress related to returning to school.

However, it is entirely possible that these signs are symptoms of something else. That’s why it is so important for your son or daughter to have a check-up with a pediatrician before heading back to school. The physical examination could reveal information about your child’s health that is critical for his or her overall well-being.

If, however, the check-up indicates that your child may be reacting to stress, you’ll need to engage in some stress management techniques. The most important of these is to have a heart-to-heart talk with your child. See if your child can articulate his or her fears. If communication is a problem, you might consider having your child draw a picture of his or her school. Sometimes, you can tell a great deal from a child’s drawing. In your discussions, try to answer your child’s concerns as openly and honestly as you can. For instance, if your child has worries about a particular teacher, consider making an appointment with the teacher so that you can hash out concerns. If your child is entering school for the first time, make sure that he or she receives a tour of the school. A little bit of information can go a long way in addressing your child’s concerns.

Reassure your child that you will love him or her no matter what his or her grades are, but also apprise your child of your expectations. Make sure that you let your child know that you expect him or her to perform his or her personal best each day. This can help prime your child for success, while letting him or her know that you will always provide support.

Another helpful strategy is to take your child on a back-to-school shopping spree. Make sure that he or she is intimately involved in picking out folders and pencil cases. Such a shopping spree can help to equate school with fun. You might also consider taking your child on a trip to find a new wardrobe. Dressed for success, your child may be better able to cope with the demands of school.

If your child’s stress level is severe, you might consider taking him or her to a child psychologist. This is an individual who is trained to listen to a child and to counsel him or her. Going for counseling isn’t a sign of weakness—it is a sign of strength. You may find that your child is happier in the long run after going for some counseling sessions. You might also consider family counseling if it seems as if your entire clan is under stress. For referrals for a counselor, you might want to consult with your family physician or local mental health agency.

We sometimes fail to realize how stressful school can be to a child. There's the issue of social relationships, scholastic performance, and extra-curricular activities. A child must please the teacher, the principal, the parent, and friends. It can be a great deal to handle, especially if the child is quite young. By setting realistic expectations, offering a shoulder to cry on, and a willingness to offer some problem-solving techniques, you can help to guarantee your child's success in school—and eliminate some of the stress that he or she will experience. If the child is starting a new school, you may have to go the extra mile in convincing him or her that you will provide unconditional love. As long as you keep the door to communication open, you and your child should have a healthy and productive school year.

News Junkie Stress

Perhaps you've been watching CNN religiously for its coverage of the war in Iraq. Or maybe you spend hours glued to Fox News for its take on the U.S. Supreme Court nomination process. You might surf the Internet, hunting for news. Your radio might be turned to talk radio throughout the day. You may also read as many as five newspapers each day in order to keep abreast of the current news.

You feel as if you don't want to go a single day without knowing what's going on. You feel out of the loop if there is a news event that you are not familiar with. You know the talking heads on TV on a first-name basis, and you're familiar with all the major news anchors. Yet, at times, you feel as if you are on information overload.

The desire to be informed is certainly an attribute. In a democracy, we want citizens who are knowledgeable about major issues. Knowing about current events can help you to protect your property, to improve your health, even to protect the lives of yourself and your family. People who ignore current events altogether do so at their peril.

However, being addicted to news can cause you a great deal of stress. In addition to dealing with your own problems, you might feel as if you have to weigh in on every major issue of the day. You might find yourself depressed by somber news, adding to your state of anxiety. It can be particularly troubling hearing about a news event and feeling as if you're powerless to respond.

In order to determine whether you're putting yourself under too much stress, consider taking a little quiz to determine if you are a news junkie. Do you watch more than two hours a day of television news? Do you read more than two major papers? Have you foregone music radio for talk radio? Are you on the Internet for more than an hour a day, searching for news headlines?

If you answered "yes" to the preceding questions, you are in serious jeopardy of threatening your emotional and physical health through excessive stress. While watching television or listening to talk radio is a passive experience, it can nonetheless take a toll on our nerves. We might become edgy and feel high-strung. We might find it

increasingly difficult to concentrate because we are distracted by the news stories we see and hear about. Our stress might even manifest itself in terms of increasing irritability.

The point is, information overload can be a highly stressful experience. Therefore, if you're a diagnosed news junkie, you'll need to do what you can to lessen your stress level. There is a point at which seeking out news can become highly counter-productive. Therefore, you need to take steps to protect yourself against excessive stress.

To begin with, try to limit the amount of time you spend viewing cable news. You might have noticed that the news is updated every half-hour. Therefore, you can just watch the headlines at the top or bottom of the hour and get all the information you need about the top news stories of the day. On occasion, you might want to tune in longer in order to hear in-depth reporting of a particular issue. But try to limit your viewing time to an hour at the most.

Also, try to cut the amount of time you spend on the computer hunting down news headlines. In many cases, just knowing the headlines is enough. You don't necessarily need to know a minute-by-minute casualty count in order to form a viewpoint about your city's crime prevention programs. In addition, reading just a couple of major newspapers each day should provide you with enough information to have a good understanding of the major issues of the day.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to be informed. But taking it to the extreme can cause you unnecessary stress. So, if the news becomes overwhelming, turn off the TV, disconnect the Internet, sit back and relax. You can learn to be a reasonable news consumer without becoming over-anxious. It may take some time at first to adjust to your new viewing schedule. But once you become used to it, you may be amazed at how relaxed you feel.

Making Taxes Less Taxing

For many Americans, April 15th is the most stressful day of the year. The date when federal taxes are due can strike fear into the hearts of the most stoic taxpayers. Writing that yearly check to Uncle Sam can be quite distressing, especially if you find you owe more than you thought you would. What can be especially troubling is that the stress can stay with you, year in and year out.

But for many people, the stress begins long before the filing deadline. It may occur as early as December when the tax forms first arrive in the mail. Or it may happen when your W-2 form comes across your desk at work. It may happen when you hear about tax season on television. Even getting your yearly interest statement from your bank might be enough to put you over the edge.

You may know some people who seem completely relaxed when tax time rolls around. It seems that they have everything in order, and they have little to worry about. For such people, tax day seems to be a virtually stress-free experience. You'll find them

whistling through the hallways at work—while you're hunched over your calculator, wondering whether you can pay your tax bill.

You need to realize that you can handle the stress of tax season without going ballistic. However, this means that you must be pro-active when it comes to handling your taxes. A little bit of planning can go a long way to reducing your taxes—and your stress level.

To begin with, it could help you immeasurably if you seek the services of a financial planner. He or she can help you to take control of your finances, which can reduce your stress level considerably. Also, the financial planner can help you to employ certain strategies which will enable you to reduce your tax bill.

Next, you have to seriously consider whether it will do you any good to do your taxes yourself. While figuring out your own tax bill can give you a feeling of control, it can also increase your stress level tremendously. Therefore, you might seriously consider hiring a tax accountant to handle the stress of your taxes. While such a move will not eliminate your stress entirely, it can seriously reduce it.

Keeping folders of all the documents you need for filing your taxes can also lessen your stress. If you keep the folders current throughout the year, you will not be in a mad rush at tax time to find the papers you need to file your return. You might consider color-coding the folders for easy reference.

Also, keep the folders in a central location. While a filing cabinet might be the best solution, you might also consider a hope chest, an end table, or a desk drawer. And be sure to keep all your records for at least three years in case a question arises about your return later on.

Another strategy for reducing your stress is putting an end to procrastination. While it might be tempting to wait until the last minute to file your taxes, it only increases your stress level. If you file your taxes long before the due date, you can rest easy when April 15th rolls around. You might be amazed at how much easier it is to deal with tax season when you've done some advanced planning.

If you find yourself facing a large tax bill, chances are you will feel stress, no matter what time you file. Therefore, you might consider opening a savings account specifically earmarked for taxes. This way, you can save for tax day throughout the year. Another option is to increase your withholding on your weekly paycheck so that you don't have such a huge bill to pay at the end of the tax year.

There is no reason to become overly stressed over taxes. They are a natural part of American life, the means by which the government is able to function. If you take a few pro-active steps, you can significantly reduce tax-related stress. It may be hard at first to break old habits. However, once you do, you might be amazed at how relaxed you feel when April 15th rolls around.

Stress at the Mall

It's a malady that tends to strike around holiday time—although it can theoretically happen at any time of the year. You find yourself in a sea of people making its way through your local shopping mall. The crush of the crowd makes you feel claustrophobic. You run from store to store, vying against other shoppers for your turn at the racks. It seems as if no store has exactly what you're looking for.

You hear the strains of carols playing over and over again on store speakers. The lines at the cash registers appear to stretch for blocks. When you finally find something to buy, you get behind someone who has to make a complicated exchange. You wonder if you'll get home in time to wrap your gift before the office Christmas party.

You might not realize it, but even in the best of times, going to the mall can be a stressful experience. You can feel as if you're undergoing sensory overload as you take in all the sights and sounds around you. There are so many racks to explore...so many clothes to sift through. Because of the variety of stores offered in modern malls, you might wonder where to begin with your shopping. Should you head to the shoe store first—or to the music store? Which store is offering the best sales? It has been said that offering an individual too many choices can be just as—if not more—stressful than only offering a few.

Then, there's the stress inherent in dealing with other people. You have other customers to contend with—customers who can be rude and irritating. You might encounter clerks who don't know their jobs well, or don't care if their work is done right. You might even run into managers who seem to care little about the customer's perspective.

You can deal with mall-related stress in any number of ways. To begin with, you can purposely avoid the mall during high-traffic times. You might even consider steering clear of the mall altogether during holiday time. Instead, you might consider shopping online, or through catalogues, or by going to specialty shops. The less you encounter the mall during high-stress times, the more relaxed your holiday shopping is likely to be.

Another important tactic to consider is to write down exactly what you need at the mall and keep to the list. In other words, you should resist the urge to impulse buy. Otherwise, you might find yourself saddled with shopping bags filled with merchandise you don't need and will never use. You could also incur a tremendous amount of unnecessary debt through “binge buying.”

Also consider limiting the number of stores you visit at the mall. You shouldn't feel as if you need to visit as many stores as is humanly possible on each trip. If your shopping is completed after browsing through a single store, simply leave the mall. Otherwise, it's likely you'll be wasting precious time and money.

Don't be caught off guard by sales. Some shoppers seem to believe that, just because there's a sale going on, they need to buy. The fact is, there will always be sales. In order to save money, simply consult your local newspaper in order to scope out the ads of stores having sales in a given week. That way, you can plan out your shopping adventures ahead of time. Otherwise, you can find yourself running from sale to sale and store to store and becoming stressed out in the process.

Going to a mall can be therapeutic. Store promotions can be fun and can help to take your mind off your problems. You might enjoy an afternoon makeover or spending a few minutes testing out easy chairs. And mall shopping can be a necessary part of life. However, you have to recognize when you've hit your limit. Too much shopping can tax your nerves and can leave you feeling uneasy. What's more, you can be left with huge bills at the end of the month because of your shopping indulgences. As with most things, mall shopping is best done in moderation. If you shop only when you need to, chances are you will be removing an important stressor from your life.

The Stress of Paying With Plastic

You might have gotten your first credit card offer when you were still in college. It was exciting—the idea that you could be entrusted with a credit card account. You could suddenly buy things you never dreamed possible. Your standard of living seemed to grow considerably. This was especially important during your college years, when money was so tight.

You may have run up your credit card balances when you had your first child. You had to buy so many things—a bassinet, crib, stroller—and a credit card seemed a good way to pay for it. You might have realized that it was wrong to overcharge, but you felt as if you had no other option. Suddenly, you found yourself facing a mountain of credit card debt.

Millions of us use credit cards each day to pay for both major ticket items and minor goods. Credit cards are a multi-billion dollar industry, and the industry seems to be growing all the time. Yet, there can be a tremendous amount of stress associated with paying with plastic. This stress can also be difficult to alleviate, since credit card use can be so addictive.

There can be the stress involved in paying off your monthly balances. The balances might grow so great, in fact, that you may have trouble paying them off entirely. There can be the stress involved in trying to manage multiple credit cards. Also, you might find yourself stressed out by even minimum monthly payments. If you have to balance other major bills, such as a mortgage and car payments, the financial stress can seem overwhelming.

How do you deal with such stress? There are a number of strategies you can use. To begin with, you can try cutting up your credit cards. This will eliminate the temptation to

overspend altogether. When your balances are no longer rising, you might find it easier to deal with credit card debt.

However, you may view credit cards as a natural part of life. Therefore, you might not want to eliminate them from your wallet. In such a case, you must learn to somehow deal with credit card debt. There are a couple of different ways to do this. For instance, you might call the credit card company and try to re-negotiate your interest rate. This may require you to talk with a supervisor, but it can be well worth the effort. Cutting your interest rate can significantly lower your payments.

Another technique you can use is to put yourself on a credit card budget. Figure out, realistically, how much credit card debt you can handle each month. Once you figure out your limit, do not go over it under any circumstances. Otherwise, you could find yourself paying significant monthly payments.

Also, try, if at all possible, to pay your credit card bills on time. This means eliminating late fees, which can prove to be a significant expense. By paying your bills on time, you will improve your credit rating and you'll find yourself dealing with less stress.

In some cases, the best way to deal with credit card stress is to discuss your problems with a credit counselor. He or she may be able to work out a more manageable payment plan for you. With the counselor's help, you should also learn techniques for better managing your money. Best of all, such counseling is free, so it will not cause you additional financial stress. You may find yourself to be tremendously relieved after talking with a credit counselor about your problems.

You should not be embarrassed by the fact that you are undergoing major credit card stress. It can literally happen to anyone, particularly since credit cards are so widely available. The important thing to remember is that credit card stress, while difficult, is completely manageable. By invoking proven money management strategies, you can learn to deal effectively with your stress. You may even find that using credit cards becomes an enjoyable experience, since you are doing it so rarely. Also, be sure to talk with members of your family about the stress you are undergoing. They may be able to help ease your stress level—and they may curb their own spending habits as a result.

Supermarket Stress

If you dread going to the supermarket, you're not alone. A number of people consider grocery shopping to be a tremendously stressful experience. It can tax your mind, drain your resources, and cause your blood pressure to rise. It is certainly not surprising, when you consider all of the elements that are involved in a trip to the local supermarket.

To begin with, negotiating the parking lot can be quite stressful. You have to deal with a parade of cars going in all directions. You have to steer clear of shopping carts

and strollers. Pedestrians might jump out in front of your car when you least expect it. The hazards increase if it is snowing or drizzling outside.

Once you arrive at the supermarket, you might have difficulty finding a cart—which can get your shopping trip off to a rough start. You might be shocked at the prices that you find plastered on the products that you need. You might also find that the daily special has run out...there is no one manning the meat counter...the line for the deli wraps around most of the store...the store manager is on edge...and the machines at the self-checkout are broken. All of these incidents can lead to further stress.

How can you reduce your stress level at the supermarket? For one thing, you can make it a point to shop at off times. Shopping early in the morning or late in the evening can help you to avoid the crowds. You're likely to find the store to be quite peaceful at that time of day and your shopping experience should be more pleasant as a result.

As an alternative, you might consider setting aside a block of time when you can shop leisurely. This might enable you to test samples, to sip a cappuccino as you make your rounds through the aisle, and to browse shelves you might have overlooked in the past. If you put some work into making supermarket shopping a fun time, you might be surprised at the result.

Another way that you can better manage your time at the supermarket is by clipping coupons. This will mean that you will no longer have to spend time circling the supermarket searching for specials. Also, clipping coupons gives you a sense of control about your spending. This can make the entire shopping experience more enjoyable. In addition, you might be pleasantly surprised at the amount of money you save by using coupons.

While you cannot entirely control what happens to you at the supermarket, you can control your reactions to various events. For instance, if you run into a clerk or a cashier that is being unhelpful, resist the urge to lose your cool. Instead, deal with the disgruntled employee in a calm, rational manner. You should notice that your stress level decreases a great deal, once you have control of your emotions.

If the situation with a supermarket employee becomes intolerable, be sure to consult the store's manager. He or she is paid to listen to your concerns and to try to make the peace. If you don't get satisfaction after talking with the manager, consider contacting the company's corporate headquarters. While taking such a step might seem stressful, it will actually reduce your stress over the long run. If you register a complaint, the store might actually change its procedures, and you could find your future shopping trips to be less stressful as a result.

You'll need to also keep calm when dealing with other customers. People in grocery stores are often in a hurry, and so they may appear to be rude. A forgiving attitude can help you to keep your stress level under control even in the most trying

circumstances. Try not to take slights personally. Recognize that shoppers are human and they may act badly from time to time.

You can't avoid going to the supermarket, even if it is a stressful experience. Therefore, you must learn to deal with the stress as best you can. Visiting the supermarket during off-peak times, trying to save money as much as possible, and keeping your temper under control can go a long way to cutting your stress.

The Dollars and Cents of Financial Stress

You've checked your bank account and found you have only \$42 left in your savings account. You've received at least three phone calls this morning from creditors who are wondering why your payments are late. Your car payment is due in three days and you're not sure how you'll pay the bill. Last month, your landlord threatened to evict you when your rent check did not arrive on the first of the month.

If this scenario sounds familiar, you may be experiencing finance-induced stress. From time to time, all of us suffer from it, to one degree or another. Financial stress is simply a fact of modern life. No matter how hard we work, no matter how diligent we are at trying to save our money, we may find that we have great difficulty paying all of our bills. This can be particularly true if we've been hit with a major traumatic event, such as the death of a spouse, a divorce, or a serious illness.

Financial stress can be felt in a number of ways. For example, you might have difficulty sleeping at night because you are worrying about your finances. You might find yourself short-tempered and, as a result, you might be experiencing conflict with your spouse. You may find yourself yelling at your children for minor infractions, or you may even be hit with panic attacks at work.

The fact is, financial stress can cause you tremendous physical and psychological discomfort. It can lead to anxiety, depression, high blood pressure—even stroke. As a result, financial stress is actually a serious, though often unrecognized, health concern. In essence, your financial problems may be making you sick.

But how do you address what can seem to be an insurmountable problem? To begin with, it is important that you go to your doctor and have a complete physical. State your symptoms, and note that you believe that financial stress may be the cause. Your doctor might then refer you to a psychiatrist for anti-anxiety medication, or to a therapist who can help you work through your problems.

Next, consider consulting a certified financial planner. He or she can help you to realize your short-term and long-term financial goals. Don't be embarrassed to let the planner know the extent of your financial problems. Remember that the only way to really attack finance-induced stress is to meet the difficulty head-on. Trying to dodge the problem...pretending that things are not as bad as they are...will only exacerbate your troubles in the end.

Your financial planner will probably want you to come up with a workable budget. It is important to be realistic when crunching numbers. It does little good for you to come up with a budget that looks fine on paper, but that doesn't work in the real world. Make sure that you budget for all the essentials—food, shelter, clothing, medical care. And also try to budget for long-term priorities, such as college savings or retirement. Also, don't forget to allot at least a small portion of your budget to recreation and entertainment. You'll need a few diversions in order to be a less stressed individual.

In the beginning, you might want to track every single expenditure that you make. This can be difficult, especially if you're not used to that kind of record-keeping. But it can be quite instructive. You might not realize, for instance, just how much money you're spending each month on lattes, or how much you're devoting to the daily lottery drawing. By doing the record-keeping, you might discover ways that you can trim your budget without really feeling the pinch.

It is also highly important that you save a portion of your money in order to pay for the unexpected. From time to time, all of us are hit with bills that seem to come out of the blue. Your savings will act as a kind of insurance policy against disaster. With some money in the bank—even if it is a small amount in the beginning—you'll be better able to weather the financial storms that come your way. And you might find those middle-of-the-night worries disappearing, knowing that you are doing all you can to get your finances under control.

Ending Vacation Stress

It's the time that you've been waiting for all year long. You have an uninterrupted two weeks away from work. While it should be a time of non-stop relaxation, the idea of your vacation is already beginning to stress you out. You wonder if you'll return from your trip more frustrated and agitated than when you left.

At this point, you're stressed out about the cost of the trip...whether your plane will arrive in time for you to take your cruise...if you'll have enough clothes for your journey...how to keep your children in line during the trip...and whether you will actually enjoy yourself. Instead of being a soothing trip away from it all, your vacation is quickly becoming a major stress event.

It doesn't have to be this way. You can enjoy a vacation that carries with it a minimum amount of stress. However, it will not happen without some concerted effort on your part. In essence, you must work to have fun—and the sooner you realize that, the less stress you'll encounter.

A relatively stress-free vacation requires a great deal of advanced planning. To begin with, you should develop a budget for your vacation, based upon how much money you've saved. Resist the temptation to charge it all on your credit card. Otherwise, you'll have to endure a great deal of financial stress once you return from your trip. Once

you've established a budget, be sure to stick to it. Overspending will simply exacerbate your stress.

Next, you should seriously consider booking your vacation through a travel agent. The agent can do a great deal of the planning for you. An experienced agent will also know the pitfalls you'll want to avoid. He or she is in the business of making vacationers happy, so the agent will have extra incentive to make sure that your vacation goes well.

As you plan your trip with your travel agent, there are some key questions you should ask yourself. For instance, would you enjoy an adventure-related vacation, such as riding the rapids or going to a dude ranch? Or are you more interested in shopping and sightseeing? Is your idea of a relaxing time a flight through the clouds or a cruise along the waves? The more information your agent has about your personal preferences, the better able he or she will be to plan a vacation that's relaxing for you.

Determine in advance exactly how much time you'll need off in order to ensure that your vacation is a success. If you allot too little time, you could find yourself begging your boss for additional time as your vacation comes to an end, causing both you (and your boss) additional stress. Also, don't allot so much time that you'll become restless. You'll want a vacation that gives you a respite from your daily duties, but that does not leave you feeling completely out of touch.

Be sure to find out from the travel agent just what kind of weather you're likely to encounter on your trip. One of the most stressful aspects of a vacation can be finding that you are unprepared for the weather. Find out exactly what kind of temperatures you can expect, whether there is likely to be wind, and how likely it is that it will rain. In this way, you can prepare yourself for the type of conditions you're likely to encounter.

Be generous with your packing—but not overly generous. In other words, make sure that you pack everything you're likely to need, but don't pack non-essentials. You'll want to make sure that you have enough clothes to last your entire journey, since it might be hard for you to find laundry facilities along the way. But you don't want to be so weighted down that you can't move your suitcase. Also, be sure to leave room in your suitcase for the souvenirs you'll want to buy for your friends and family members.

A vacation should be the most relaxing event of the year. That's why it's important that you try to make it as stress-free as possible. By maintaining a sensible budget, doing some extensive planning, and asking for help if you need it, you should be in a position to reduce your stress level considerably. Bon voyage!

Bringing an End to the Meal-Time Rush

For years, mothers have referred to the period of time between 4 and 7 p.m. as the hardest part of the day. The reason? That's the time when children begin getting antsy, waiting for dinner to arrive. Because they're hungry, their nerves tend to be on edge,

resulting in more fussiness. It creates more work for the mother, as she must figure out a way to entertain the brood, while cooking dinner at the same time.

Even if you don't have children, meal time can be major stress time. Your mate might become irritable while awaiting dinner, and you might be grumpy as well. Hunger can be a powerful motivator, but it can also be the cause of major stress. Sometimes, you might find it difficult to concentrate as your stomach is growling.

While cooking can be relaxing for some, it is a stressful enterprise for others. There's the pressure involved in making the recipe turn out right, each time. If dinner proves disastrous, your entire night can be ruined. It can be difficult to recover, once you've failed at preparing your evening meal.

Although there might always be some stress associated with cooking dinner, it doesn't have to be an overwhelmingly stressful event. There are techniques you can use in order to better manage your stress, making dinnertime a pleasant event for the entire family. If you put these techniques into practice, chances are your mealtime preparations will proceed much more smoothly.

To begin with, you need to make sure that you have a relaxing atmosphere to work in. This can mean turning on the radio or putting on your favorite CD. Having music in the background—particularly soothing music—can make it easier for you to do your work in the kitchen. If you have little ones, consider tiding them over with a healthy snack. Also, you can occupy their time with a special video or game. Another technique is to encourage them to join in the preparations. They might be able to stir the soup or set the table. Getting them involved in the action can help to alleviate their boredom, and can provide you with some extra set of hands besides!

You might also consider making a few major meals on the weekend, when your time is more plentiful, and freezing them for use during the week. A good stew or casserole might last you for most of the week, decreasing your mealtime stress considerably.

Some families have joined together in an effort to battle meal-time stress. They've formed cooking clubs, enabling them to share the burden of preparing meals. For instance, one family might be responsible for meals for a group of families during a given week. The next week, it's another family's turn. If you're not used to preparing food for a large amount of people, this sort of system might not work. However, if you like the idea of sharing the responsibility for meals—and the camaraderie that might result—such a cooking club may be the perfect fit for you.

In some cases, you might have to lower your personal expectations in order to reduce your meal-time stress. For instance, you might have to forget about cooking the nightly meal from scratch, and use prepared mixes from the grocery store instead. Such convenience foods can save you a great deal of time and stress. You can even enhance convenience foods by adding some of your own ingredients.

Also, don't be embarrassed about ordering take-out or having a pizza delivered every once in a while. By having someone else do the cooking, you can reduce your stress level immeasurably. While you might not be able to afford to make takeout a habit, having it every once in a while will probably not break your budget—and will help to maintain your sanity at meal time.

At times, meal-time stress might be unavoidable. However, with a little bit of planning, you can reduce the pressures you feel at dinner time. If you're finding the stress overwhelming, be sure to confide in a family member. He or she might have other coping strategies to recommend to you. Also, having a cup of your favorite beverage—such as tea or cocoa—right before meal time can help to relax you, enabling you to better manage the stress. Try to make yourself comfortable, so that you can truly enjoy the dinner that results.

Ending Holiday Stress

You might remember the day Santa Claus brought you your first bicycle. It had green handlebars and seemed to shine under the Christmas tree lights. It was hard to believe that the present of your dreams had actually arrived. You knew you'd always remember it as the best Christmas ever.

Fast forward a few years. It's Christmas week, and you're a basket case. You don't think you'll ever be able to finish all the shopping, the wrapping, and the decorating in time for the big day. You also have visits to make, cards to send, and donations to mail out. You are dealing with full-fledged Christmas stress, and it shows no signs of abating.

The stress of the holiday season can be trying in the best of circumstances. But if you're dealing with other major stressors, such as the recent death of a loved one, holiday stress can seem unbearable. You might be so tense that you cannot enjoy any holiday-related activities. You might snap at your children or your spouse, and you might find yourself unable to focus at work.

There are many causes of holiday stress. To begin with, you might be striving to fulfill unrealistic expectations. You might have a perfect postcard view of the holidays—a vision that no human being could expect to realize. Your impressions of holidays might have been formed by the movies, where families gather around a tree and sing Christmas carols in perfect harmony.

Another common cause of holiday stress is having too many people on your Christmas list. You might expect yourself to buy for not only members of your immediate family, but also for teachers, friends, distant relatives, and co-workers. You don't want to leave anyone out, so you create a list that even Santa Claus would find difficult to fill.

You might also be suffering from the stressed-out host syndrome. You might have been elected to hold Christmas festivities at your house, and you're panicked. You're striving to decorate the house, trim the tree, grocery shop, bake cookies, and prepare fudge. You don't know when you'll have time to string the lights in front of your house, or to mount the Christmas cards on the fireplace.

Family members might be contributing to your stress. Your children might be demanding the latest video games, even though your budget will never accommodate them. Your mate might be demanding that you increase your share of the holiday chores. Your parents might be demanding to stay a week or more at your house, creating further tension for your household.

The fact is, you can enjoy the holidays while reducing your stress level considerably. This begins with engaging in some pre-holiday planning. Write a list of your goals for the holidays. What do you really want to accomplish this year? What can you realistically do on your own, and what will you need help with? Putting your aims in writing can help to give you some peace of mind.

It's also important that you set your own agenda for the holidays. Don't let other people dictate the agenda for you. In this way, you can ensure that your needs are met, before you attempt to fulfill the needs of others. Chances are, your goals are not to buy presents for everyone you've ever met or to get out every decoration you've ever owned. Rather, your goal is probably to have a safe, festive holiday where you, your family and friends can enjoy the festivities. Realizing what your true goal is, and mapping out a way to get there, can help to reduce your stress.

There is no denying that holidays make additional demands on your time. However, through appropriate time-management techniques, you can work to ensure that you are not overwhelmed by responsibilities. If you have a difficult task to face, consider enlisting the aid of family and friends. Sharing the load can reduce your stress level remarkably. Also, you have to strike the idea that you must have the perfect holiday. Instead, strive to create a holiday that's good enough...good enough to make you smile...good enough to bring joy to your loved ones. Also, spend at least part of your holiday preparations doing some good for someone in need. You'll find the experience rewarding—and it should help you to better cope with holiday demands.

Driving Away Stress

It's the morning rush hour, and your blood has reached the boiling point. You have exactly five minutes to get to work and you discover a major traffic tie-up along the freeway. You see the orange pylons and suddenly realize that you are stuck in a construction zone. The stress of being late for work seems overwhelming.

Or, perhaps it's 5:30 p.m. and you're rushing to pick your four-year-old up from day care. A car suddenly veers in front of you and you have to slam on the brakes. You

barely avoid an accident. Again, your stress level is rising and you're finding it difficult to cope.

In today's world, driving is a major cause of stress. Many of us spend countless hours stuck in traffic jams. There seem to be more cars on the road than ever before. In many American cities, traffic problems are a major public safety issue. And, at times, it might seem as if drivers are less courteous than they've ever been.

Another source of stress is the care and maintenance of your vehicle. You have to worry about paying insurance costs, inspection fees, rising gas prices, and basic maintenance bills. The financial stress involved in keeping a car on the road can seem tremendous. Also, you might be saddled with a car that has constant break-downs. If you feel as if your car is not secure, it can be quite a stressful experience.

For parents, chauffeuring children can be quite a stressful time. You might have to referee fights between children as you drive. Or you might have to find innovative ways to keep children occupied during long commutes. Keeping children well-fed in the car can also be quite stressful. In desperation, you might pull into a drive-thru, where the wait seems intolerable.

Driving stress is a fact of modern life. There will always be potholes, discourteous drivers, cranky passengers. You will inevitably encounter traffic jams on your way to work, to the store, or to school. There will always be times when you grip the wheel, wondering whether you'll be able to make it.

While you cannot eliminate the stress of the road, there are ways to curtail it. For instance, you might consider investing in some restful CDs. Classical music can be quite soothing on a difficult driving day. Or you might like to listen to a CD of nature sounds as you are trying to negotiate your way through traffic. If you don't have a CD player, cassette tapes are another possibility. Also, if you cannot afford to purchase tapes or CDs at a record store, consider purchasing them at a yard sale or church bazaar. You can even borrow tapes and CDs from your local library. You'll find that you're better able to handle the stress of driving with some pleasant sounds emanating from your car stereo.

Another thing you might consider is changing your route. If you inevitably end up in traffic jams on the freeway, consider using residential streets instead. While you might find that your commute time is longer, you might also discover that your stress is reduced considerably when your route is changed.

Another technique that many drivers use is to start out five to ten minutes earlier than they need to. That way, you don't have to operate under such a time crunch. Those five or ten minutes can make quite a difference to your daily commute. In addition, you might enjoy having those extra minutes to yourself once you arrive at school or at work.

Driving is a necessary daily chore for most of us. The trick is to make it as enjoyable as possible in order to lessen our stress levels. Investing in a comfortable seat

cushion or a relaxing back rest can do wonders for our frame of mind. Singing or whistling in the car can be another effective stress-reducer. Playing games with your children—such as trying to spot out-of-state license plates—can be yet another effective stress-reducing technique. Chances are you will not be able to reduce your stress level overnight. Many of us have become quite used to stress on the road. However, by trying to make our trips as pleasant as possible, we can go a long way to lessening driving-induced stress.

Making the Grade in Handling Stress

Just three months ago, you were standing on stage, receiving your high school diploma. The thrill of completing your high school education seems like a distant memory, now that you are completing your first month at college. While you were excited about starting classes, you never anticipated the amount of stress you would encounter. At times, you might feel as if you will be buried alive by stress.

You should know that the feeling of being stressed out is nothing unusual for a college student. To begin with, it might be your first time away from home. You miss your parents, your brothers and sisters, your friends. You miss the comfort of the family dwelling, the commemoration of birthdays and other special events. You might even miss the extra-curricular activities you enjoyed at your high school.

There is the stress of trying to do well in academically challenging college classes. You might feel overwhelmed by the amount of reading you have to do. You might not have developed strong study skills in high school, leading to greater stress at college. You may even find it difficult finding a place to study—especially if you're not used to spending long periods of time in the library.

You might also be dealing with the stress of having to live with roommates for the first time. Your roommates might not share your values, your interests, or even your sleeping patterns. If you have more than one roommate, you might feel outnumbered. If you were an only child, you might not be used to the stress involved in sharing a bathroom or a common study area.

Also, you might be dealing with the stress of your first serious relationship. You might not know how to handle conflict effectively. And you might be wondering whether you have become too serious too soon with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Also, finding the time to spend together can be a real challenge, given all the other demands on your time.

You might also be stressed out by the part-time job you have to work in order to support your studies. Your duties might be demanding, and the hours you have to put in may be interfering with your sleep. You might also be dealing with the stress of having to get along with difficult co-workers.

There is no way to eliminate all the stress involved in attending college. This time of your life will be inherently stressful, no matter how you try to streamline your schedule. However, there are some effective techniques you can use to reduce your stress level so that the pressures do not seem so overwhelming.

To begin with, you need to develop effective time management techniques. This means creating a schedule and sticking with it. Be sure to build some relaxation time into your schedule. That way, you can ensure that you are getting an appropriate amount of rest and exercise.

One thing that can add to your stress level is weight gain. College is famous for the “Freshman 15,” or adding 15 pounds to one’s frame during the first year of classes. In order to combat this, try to eliminate unhealthy snacks such as potato chips and cookies. Try to limit your diet to lean meats and fish, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Try whenever possible to avoid eating at parties. And don’t overindulge in alcohol, which can add an appreciable amount of weight. In this way, you can try to protect yourself against excessive weight gain.

College is one of the most memorable periods in anyone’s life. The knowledge you gain can be incredible. You can forge friendships which will last a lifetime. You might find your mate, or develop a life-long hobby. And yet, college is a time fraught with tension. You have to please your professors, your roommates, your friends, and employers. You have to take on adult responsibilities for the first time, such as paying your bills. Each day is filled with a myriad of stresses. However, by building in appropriate coping techniques into your daily schedule, you can develop the skills you need to handle stress effectively. In the end, you might earn a grade of A for your stress management ability.

Keeping Your Cool: Managing Your Reactions to Stress

The television is blaring...the phone is ringing...and someone has just arrived at the door. You are under stress—big-time. As a result, you may feel a loss of control. If it’s a particularly bad day, you might even feel as if there is no way out. You feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to deal with the stress you’re under.

What you may not realize is that it is entirely within your power to manage stress in a healthier way. You may not have control over what happens in your life—but you can control your reaction to various stressors. All it takes is a little advanced planning on your part.

Of course, a knee-jerk reaction to stress is to try to remove the stress entirely from your life. But this is not always possible and, in some cases, it may not be the best approach. Instead, you might consider limiting your contact with a certain stressor. In other words, if you’re really feeling overwhelmed, can you take a break from the action? Just a few minutes outside can help clear your head, enabling you to better handle stress in the long run. Another effective strategy is to consider delayed gratification. For

instance, say you enjoy a frappuccino in the morning, but you hate the commute to get to the coffee shop. Perhaps you can make the frappuccino a one-day-a-week treat instead of an everyday affair.

Another habit that can make stress more difficult than it needs to be is all-or-nothing thinking. For instance, if you're having trouble studying for a test, do you assume that you are going to fail? If you have a disagreement with your spouse, do you think that he or she will eventually leave you? If your mother is ill, do you begin worrying that she will die soon? Such disaster-oriented thinking can make a difficult situation even more trying, even more stressful. By adopting a more realistic approach to problems, you can limit your emotional reaction to stress.

Perfectionism may also be at the root of your stress. If you think that you have to be perfect in the office and at home, you can never really relax. In other words, you are putting yourself under unnecessary stress. If you begin to focus on performing tasks well rather than perfectly, you can establish more realistic expectations for your life. This new-and-improved thinking can enable you to face challenges with more confidence.

Another mode of thinking that can lead to greater stress is a winner-take-all philosophy. If you feel as if you always have to win, you set yourself up for cut-throat competition. This can be extremely destructive, especially to your interpersonal relationships. It is much better to adopt an "everybody wins" philosophy. According to this viewpoint, the critical thing is to perform those tasks that will do the most good. Following this philosophy, you are far more likely to be able to take stress in stride.

Losing your temper can also cause you unnecessary stress. If you are feeling as if you are about to explode, think of something calming, such as an ocean or a tree. Don't give into the temptation to self-destruct. Getting angry will not solve your problem and could, in fact, create additional problems. If you feel as if your blood is about to boil, stay cool, take a step back, and re-assess your options. With a clear head, you may be able to find the solution to your problem relatively quickly. Your stress level should also drop.

It should be said that it is not easy to control your reactions to stress. It takes a great deal of time, patience, and emotional effort. If you tend to react quickly to stress, you might have to teach yourself to slow your reactions. You will have to learn to make controlling your reactions to stress a habit. It is well worth the work involved. Otherwise, you could find yourself battling a stress-related illness. When all else fails, remember this slogan: Take a breath and take a break. While you might lose some time in the short run, you could benefit a great deal over the long haul. And your friends and family might notice a distinct change in your emotional reaction to stress.

Managing Your Stress by Managing Your Time

Are you one of those people who wishes you had a 30-hour day? Do you long for having enough time to homeschool your children, cook gourmet meals, tend a garden,

care for a large, five-bedroom house, play the piano, and sit by the fire reading a good book? The fact of the matter is many Americans today are operating under a time crunch. We simply don't have enough hours in the day to accomplish all that we want to.

The situation creates an enormous amount of stress. We may feel as if we are constantly operating under a deadline. We may feel fatigued and frustrated, and we may wonder if we are missing out on much of life because we spend so much time "doing" and not enough time "thinking." We're stressed at work, stressed at home, and stressed at our son's soccer match.

The irony is, the more we do, the more behind we seem to get. We are constantly on the run, yet we may feel as if we are accomplishing very little. As a result, our pessimism grows. We may become short-tempered, especially with those we love. We may feel as if we are constantly running on empty.

The good news is there is hope, even in the midst of what might seem a hopeless situation. We can get control of our lives and control of our time. It may take a little bit of effort and time, but it will be well worth it in the long run. The first step we need to take is prioritization.

Many people feel as if they lack time to do the important things in life simply because they do not take the time to prioritize. Write down a list of your goals for the week, for the year, and for the next five years. When you do your initial brainstorming, you can list the goals in any order you like. Then go through the goals and rank them in order of importance. After that task is completed, figure out just how much time you would need to accomplish each goal. You may find that just five minutes here or there can make all the difference in the world in achieving the items on your priority list.

Next, learn to multi-task effectively. That time you spend waiting in the line at the drive-thru window could be spent balancing your checkbook. Or the time you spend paused at the cash register could be used to read a book or a magazine. In general, you should not think of lines as time-wasters. Rather, consider them opportunities to accomplish some small, yet important, tasks.

In order to be effective as a worker, spouse, and parent, you'll need some alone time. Get an appointment book and actually schedule a block of time just for yourself. Your alone time could be spent praying, re-evaluating your priorities, charting your progress, or just fixing yourself a nice dessert. Just be sure that you have some alone time each day. Otherwise, you'll be shortchanging yourself, and you'll feel more stressed as a result.

Don't be afraid to say no. You cannot be a cub scout leader, girl scout leader, fundraising chair, and prima ballerina all at one time. You'll need to pick and choose your assignments, both your professional assignments and your personal ones. If you simplify your life, you might be surprised at how much time you'll gain—and how much better you will feel. Sometimes, it takes some backbone to say no. You might

disappoint someone. But, in the end, you'll be much better off, knowing that you have not overcommitted yourself.

You should consider your time to be as precious as the President's. There are a number of duties which make demands on your time, those you love and those you don't care for. By employing some innovative scheduling techniques, you can set aside the time for those things that are truly important to you. You'll be less stressed, more relaxed, and better able to cope with the challenges you encounter on a daily basis. As you become less stressed out, you might find that your children, spouse, and friends follow your lead. And your world will become more harmonious as a result.

The Right Rx for Stress

It might happen each time you go in for a routine medical visit. Your anxiety begins during the drive over to the doctor's office. It intensifies as you sit in the waiting room. You find you can concentrate on neither the television nor the magazine in front of you. When you're ushered into an examination room, you've just about reached the panic stage. And you haven't even seen the doctor yet.

Or your anxiety could be based on legitimate fears. For instance, if you've been diagnosed with cancer or a heart condition, each medical visit carries a great deal of uncertainty. Your doctor could, in fact, deliver the tragic news that your condition is inoperable. It is no wonder that you find your heart racing when you step into the doctor's office.

Perhaps you have a fear of the dentist's chair. It first hit you when you were a child and had to have your first filling. The fears have only intensified since. Now, even a routine cleaning is an occasion for a great deal of stress. You even feel as if you're under heavy stress when you dial the phone to make your appointment.

Dealing with doctors and dentists can be stressful for any one of us. A lot of us fear what we don't understand, and much of medical language can sound like gibberish. The equipment itself can be frightening if we're not accustomed to it. And there's always a fear that a treatment will seem worse than the disease.

There are a number of techniques that you can use to deal with the stress associated with medical care. To begin with, your best defense is a good offense. Ask as many questions as you need to of your doctor or dentist. Will the procedure be painful? How long will it last? Will the procedure have side-effects? Will your insurance cover the cost? The more informed you are, the better able you will be to handle the stress.

Another thing you might consider is doing your own research, trying to sort out some information for yourself. Don't think that you have to pore over medical books. Reading health-related articles in magazines can help improve your knowledge and understanding, making you a better-informed patient. You might also search out health-related websites so that you can bone up on a particular area of medical practice.

Also, while you're waiting for your physician or dentist, consider engaging in some relaxation exercises. Imagine yourself running through a field of flowers with a toddler, or skating expertly at the rink at Rockefeller Center. Picture yourself in a low-stress situation, in a location you love. Through this technique, you'll calm down your mind and your body so that you can deal effectively with the stress that comes your way.

If you have friends who work in the health care industry, you might discuss your fears with them. They can be an important source of information, giving you insights into the medical profession that you might not otherwise have. Draw upon their experience in order to soothe your fears. You might be surprised at how much you can learn simply through casual conversations. Most health care workers will be more than willing to share their experiences with you.

If your fear of the dentist or doctor has turned into a full-fledged phobia, you'll want to consult a professional therapist. He or she can delve into the root causes of your fears and can help you to develop effective coping strategies. In some cases, the psychologist might recommend that you see a psychiatrist so that you can obtain the medication you need to calm your nerves. Millions of people have been helped through such medication. While such medication can result in weight gain or drowsiness, its overall effect can be quite positive.

It is entirely possible to visit a doctor or dentist without becoming overly stressed. The key is to be prepared. Be prepared to ask questions of your health care professional. Be prepared to encounter equipment or techniques that might make you feel uncomfortable. Be prepared for medication that might have unpleasant side-effects. The more prepared you are, the better you'll feel, and the better equipped you'll be to handle stress during your examination.

When Your Stress Level is Sorely Tested

It might have begun with your first spelling test in second grade. Your stomach became queasy as you tried to recall all the right letters. You might have felt your heart pounding and your knuckles turned white. Your head might have hurt as you tried in vain to concentrate. When you received a "D" on the test, your stress level only intensified. You automatically viewed yourself as a failure.

By the time it came to the SATs, you had been through years of test-taking. Yet, when the moment of truth arrived, you found yourself biting the eraser on your pencil incessantly. You found your eyes couldn't quite focus, and your attention span seemed non-existent. As a result of such reactions, you find yourself taking the SATs again and again, without appreciably improving your score.

There can be little doubt that taking a test is a highly stressful experience, no matter what your age. A test can determine whether you advance to the next grade...whether you'll graduate from high school...whether you'll get into college. Because education is

so critical to professional and financial advancement, a test can be either the door to prosperity...or the roadblock to success.

You have to realize that you'll always be undergoing some stress when you take a test. However, there are ways that you can minimize the amount of stress you feel. For instance, you might take a course in how to prepare for tests. This is especially important for taking the SATs and ACTs. There are certain strategies you can use—such as answering the easiest questions first, learning to pace yourself, not panicking at the first question you don't know the answer to. These strategies can help you no matter what kind of a test you are taking.

Another technique that has proven effective with many students is to take practice tests in anticipation of your exam. While the questions you face on your actual exam will not be the same as the sample questions, they should prove to be similar. In this way, you can prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for your exam.

Yet another important strategy to use is to make sure that you get plenty of rest the night before a test. Fatigue can sap your strength, causing you to lose your concentration. If you are tired, you are also likely to become frustrated as you go about your test. The more frustrated you are, the worse your score is likely to be. Making sure that you get a good night's sleep the night before can improve your outlook immeasurably, giving you the positive attitude you need in order to succeed.

Likewise, it is important that you get appropriate nutrition. Sugary snacks can actually deplete your energy, making it harder for you to concentrate. They can also add significantly to your stress level. By eating a sensible diet of fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and whole grains, you can prepare yourself physically for the challenge of test-taking.

Another successful strategy can be to employ a tutor to assist you with your studying. A tutor helps you to focus and can help to improve your study habits. The tutor can also instill a certain measure of discipline in your preparations. With your tutor's support, you should feel more confident and better able to handle the stress of test-taking.

In a similar vein, consider trying to find a mentor. A mentor can act as a coach, helping to build your self-esteem. You can learn a great deal from a mentor's career. He or she can share the strategies used in order to climb the ladder of success. You might find your stress level decreasing significantly with a mentor on your side.

Test-taking is a skill which can be learned. Knowing this fact should help to ease your stress. With time and patience, you can learn to take tests as a pro. Recognize, however, that at times you might not be able to perform as you would wish. While you might encounter setbacks along the way, you have to realize that it takes dedication to reach your ultimate goal. With a good preparation plan in place, you can master the art of taking tests—and your anxiety should slowly disappear.

Key Solutions for Managing Stress Better

Stress is not all bad. In fact, a certain amount of stress can make life interesting and engaging. We cannot escape every deadline or every commitment, so, rather than trying to eliminate stress entirely, we need to attempt to control stress as best we can. Interestingly enough, if we don't have enough stress, we may end up feeling tired and hopeless.

It would be wonderful if we could come up with a mathematical formula for stress—the amount of stress an individual could conceivably accept without going into overdrive. However, optimal stress levels vary from person to person and from situation to situation. In fact, a situation that might make your skin crawl might be invigorating for another person. Likewise, a person who thrives on constant change would be stressed out in a job that is mundane, while an individual that hates change would be stressed out in a position that is constantly in a state of flux.

Experts believe that many illnesses are directly tied to stress. If you find yourself becoming constantly ill, or you feel nervous much of the time, you need to develop strategies for coping. It should be noted, however, that stress management is a practiced art—you can't expect to master it in a single day. However, if you keep at it, chances are you will learn ways to deal effectively with stress.

One of the first things you should do is to learn what your primary stressors are. Is it cooking dinner? Preparing for a presentation? Driving to work? While you cannot necessarily eliminate these chores, you can make them more manageable. For instance, if cooking dinner stresses you out, consider ordering takeout once a week in order to take a break from your normal routine. If preparing presentations is a problem, learn to divide up the project so that you're only focusing on a section at a time. If your morning commute leaves you frazzled, try leaving for work fifteen minutes earlier. The idea here is to recognize your stressors and come up with ideas for limiting their impact.

You should then try if at all possible to lessen your emotional reactions to stressors. You may notice that stressors cause you to think negatively, focusing on the worst aspects of a situation. Instead, consider a stressor an opportunity for improving your life. Try to determine whether you are overreacting to certain situations. It is entirely possible that every stressor you encounter is not urgent—that you can take your time to assess the situation and therefore reduce your stress level. Also, think of yourself as being in control of your emotions. While you may not be able to do anything about a certain situation, you can control your reactions to it.

Pay close attention to your physical reactions to stress. For instance, adopt deep breathing techniques in order to decrease your heart rate. If your physical reactions to stress are severe, you should consult your doctor to see if you should be on medication. However, a simple reaction to stress is to simply take a break from the action. This way, you can get some valuable “alone time” to think through a situation and see if you can find the light at the end of the tunnel.

Another effective way to fight stress is to strengthen your body. You should engage in aerobic activity at least three times a week. You should also make sure you're eating nutritious food. Try to avoid stimulants such as sugar and caffeine, and make sure that you get enough sleep each night. These simple strategies can help you to cope when situations seem overwhelming.

You have to recognize that stress is an inevitable part of life. You cannot go through life coasting from one situation to the next and not expect to encounter some stress. However, with effective management techniques, you can turn stressful situations into opportunities for growth. The more strategies you invoke to deal with stressors, the happier and healthier you will be. But remember to start slowly and build up your emotional reserves. A gradual approach works best when it comes to stress management—otherwise, you could actually become stressed out by the pressure of it all.

Prayer: The Silent Stress-Reliever

You may have first learned to pray at your mother's knee. You decided that, in times of trouble, prayer could open up a pathway to enlightenment and peace. You might have said a prayer before a big test, before showing your parents your report card, or before the final football game of the season.

There appears to be a link between prayer and healing. Medical studies have even concluded that patients who have other people to pray for them tend to fare better than those without such prayer support. Whether it's a single prayer or a flood of prayers, it has been said that prayer can move mountains—and that is particularly true when the mountain is debilitating illness.

Because of the connection between prayer and healing, it is no surprise that a number of doctors recommend prayer and meditation as stress relievers. Prayer forces an individual to take time out, to spend some quiet time alone with one's thoughts. Prayer also requires that a person look outward toward a Superior Being for strength and support. Prayer can enable an individual to re-gain focus and concentration so that he or she can better work through problems and therefore experience less stress.

Prayer has been shown to be a positive energy force. It makes an individual feel wanted and loved by a Higher Power. It can help to motivate a person to seek solutions rather than to simply complain about his or her problems. Prayer can enable an individual to see difficulties in a new light, which can contribute to stress reduction.

It is important to point out that prayer for stress relief can come in a variety of forms. For instance, there is spoken prayer, where an individual recites words to his or her Creator. This may be the most basic form of prayer. Whether it's an Our Father, a prayer to the Holy Spirit, or a quick ejaculation such as "Lord, help me," prayer opens a window to communication to the Almighty and therefore leads to feelings of comfort.

Another type of prayer is meditation. This can be a particularly effective stress-reliever. Meditation forces an individual to contemplate something other than his or her own problems, whether it's nature, a verse of Scripture, a scene from the life of God, or some other source. The reflection can lead to quiet contemplation which can slow one's heart beat, lower one's blood pressure, and even lead to feelings of euphoria.

A number of 12-step recovery programs have prayer as their foundation. The appeal to a Higher Power helps an individual to put his or her problems into perspective. Prayer recognizes that the individual is not alone—that there is a greater Being guiding his or her life. Prayer, in essence, can help individuals to cope when other methods—particularly drug or alcohol use—have failed.

Surveys show that the vast majority of Americans believe in God, so prayer is not a foreign concept to them. However, many Americans haven't prayed in years. They may be afraid of condemnation from God or from other people. They may simply not know the words they should use. They may even feel so unworthy that they cannot summon up the courage to pray.

However, one advantage to prayer is that it can be picked up quickly. If you find it difficult to pray, consider picking up a book on prayer from a bookstore or from a religious group. You might even consider joining a prayer group or Bible study group in order to enrich your prayer life. If you're still having trouble, you might consult with a pastor to find some effective prayer strategies.

The stresses of work and home can seem overwhelming at times. As a result, a number of people find that they must take time out to pray in order to better handle the many challenges they face. Prayer is like anything else—the more you do it, the more comfortable you become doing it. Even if you don't have a specific faith tradition, prayer can be a powerful weapon in your arsenal against stress. If you start and end your day with prayer, you may be amazed at how your stress level seems to plummet.

Reading: The Pleasurable Escape

It can take us to exotic lands, with powdery white beaches and clear azure skies. It can take us back in time—even to prehistoric days—or forward to the Big Brother world of the 25th century. It can fill our eyes with tears or make us laugh aloud. Reading opens a window to the world, giving us a vision of things we never dreamed possible. But, though you might not realize it, reading can also reduce your stress level.

For one thing, reading can help with problem-solving, which, in and of itself, can relieve stress. Say you are overweight, and that is contributing to your stress. It seems that the more weight you gain, the more stressed out you become, and the more you eat. By reading books about good nutrition, you can learn to plan meals that are low-cal and low-fat. As a result, your weight problem might disappear—and your stress level will be greatly improved.

Reading can also be relaxing. When you curl up with a good book, you put the rest of the world at bay. You take time out to travel to distant worlds, to learn about different time periods, and to expose yourself to out-of-this-world philosophies. You are essentially taking a vacation of the mind—but one that can be relatively cost-free, especially if you live near a library.

Reading can be a source of great hope, which can also help to relieve your stress. Through biographies, you can read about famous people and learn how they overcame their struggles. These stories of triumph might inspire you to seek ways to overcome the challenges in your own life. Inspirational books can send your spirit soaring, enabling you to accomplish things you never dreamed possible.

Of course, there are instances when reading can raise your stress level. For instance, if you are studying for a test, or reading about tragedies in your local newspaper, you might find your stress level skyrocketing. That is why it is important to be choosy when it comes to your reading material. If you're feeling stressed, pick up a book that will relax you—perhaps a travel book, a cookbook, or a book of poetry. Resist the urge to read something that could simply make you feel more troubled.

Self-help books are particularly effective in helping to reduce stress. They allow you to explore your feelings and the triggers that lead to stress. And they recommend such techniques as listening to soothing music, playing a musical instrument, playing cards, or engaging in deep breathing in order to deal with stressful situations.

Or you might buy a book to learn about a hobby that can further reduce your stress. Perhaps it's needlepoint, woodworking, or crochet. It may be origami, calligraphy, or stenciling. You can learn how to refinish furniture, paint, renovate your kitchen, or redecorate your bathroom. You can either build upon a skill you already have, or learn a new one from scratch.

It has been shown that reading novels can relieve depression, so it should come as no surprise that such an activity can also reduce your stress. When you read a novel, you travel to a distant place, metaphorically speaking. This allows you to use your imagination freely as you try to picture characters and settings. It's a wonderful escape from the pressures of everyday living, and can allow you to return to your life feeling more refreshed.

Reading also forces you to concentrate—concentration which might be otherwise lost due to stress. As a result, you learn to exercise your mind—an exercise that can bear much fruit. Thanks to your reading, you may notice you find it easier to remember things which can, in turn, reduce your stress level.

If you find that you don't like to read, you might start with graphic novels. These comic book-like creations might appeal to you because of their interesting pictures. Or you might simply start with glossy magazines. In the long run, it doesn't matter so much what you read as how much you read. Read in the grocery line, at the bank, or while

pedaling your stationary bike. You'll quickly find that the more you read, the more you will want to read, and the less stress you will feel.

Music: Sound Stress Reduction

Music--It is the soundtrack to our lives. You might have driven your first car while the Go-Gos blared on the radio. You may remember singing "Memory" at your high school graduation, or you might have had the organist play "Ode to Joy" at your wedding. You may remember the first time you heard Bruce Springsteen, or the last time you heard Madonna. Whether your musical tastes are contemporary or classical, chances are you do have a favorite form of music. And you also probably have a favorite artist or band.

But, in addition to being enjoyable, music can serve an important function as a stress reliever. It is no surprise that dentists routinely play music in their offices, or that surgeons play it during operations. Bus drivers play music to reduce stress, as do baseball players during their warm-ups.

Musicologists say that music can have a soothing effect, an effect that might have begun when we first heard music while still in our mother's womb. As a result, music may, in fact, remind us of our mothers, from whom we draw strength and comfort. It has been shown in studies that music where the flute predominates, such as Celtic or Native American music, is often the most comforting. In fact, research indicates that any music performed in person helps to synchronize the right and left brain hemispheres. Music can be especially beneficial to the individuals performing it. It provides a sense of accomplishment which can, in turn, reduce stress.

Music increases the body's serotonin levels, which are associated with good feelings. Also, music tends to enhance deep breathing, making a person feel more relaxed. Also, background music at work has been shown to cut stress levels. In addition to causing heart rates to decline, music boosts the body's temperature.

One preferable way to relax is to lie down with a set of headphones and allow the music to wash over you. In this way, you'll be intimately involved in the music—you'll feel as if you are part of the music. It is easy to forget the cares of the world when you can escape into music. You should select music that has a slow beat—preferably slower than 72 beats a minute, the standard heart rate. You should focus your attention to the silence that is usually built into musical selections in order to maximize your relaxation. Another popular technique is to use a Walkman while doing your morning walk. This way, you combine the stress-busting effects of music with those of exercise. This provides a one-two punch which is guaranteed to reduce your stress level.

You might also try tuning into nature sounds. Sit in your backyard, close your eyes, and concentrate on the sounds you hear. You'll be listening to the music of crickets and songbirds, leaves rustling in the wind and wind chimes swaying in the breeze. You can also purchase a CD which offers the sounds of the ocean or the woods. You'll be

amazed at how quickly you'll be carried away with the sounds. Just ten minutes sitting quietly and listening can put you in an entirely different frame of mind. You'll find you're better able to cope with the demands of the day if you've spent some time listening to music—whether it's man-made or made by nature.

It is highly important that you listen to music that appeals to you. If you never liked the Beach Boys, chances are that playing a "Best of the Beach Boys" CD will not calm you down. Furthermore, if you like classical music, but can't stand Beethoven, limit your listening to Mozart instead. The important thing is that you feel comfortable with your musical selections.

It is hard to imagine a world without music, yet most of us do not take full advantage of the art form. It can be unbelievably effective in reducing stress and improving relaxation. It is no wonder that women have been known to select their favorite music to give birth by. Music elevates our mood; it makes us feel happy and alive. Depending on the amount of stress you're under, you may end up playing music just in the morning, in the afternoon, or all day. Just remember that music time should be relaxation time.

Exercise: The Ultimate Stress-Reliever

Perhaps it's the result of having a new job, a new mate, or a new baby. You are overwhelmed with a feeling of excitement. Yet, you feel inadequate as well. As a result, you are under a tremendous amount of stress. At times, you might feel as if there's no relief in sight—as if you're on a treadmill which shows no signs of stopping anytime soon.

However, the secret to effectively dealing with the stress may be to get your body onto an actual treadmill. Exercise can be the key to stress relief. It's an obvious antidote to fatigue. It can make you feel more energetic, improving your strength and resiliency. It has been shown that individuals who are more physically fit often experience fewer health troubles. In addition, exercisers are less likely to suffer from psychological problems such as depression, binge eating, or insomnia.

Without exercise, you are increasing the likelihood that you will be afflicted with colds, flu, or other medical problems. Aerobic exercise in particular can improve your cardiovascular system and decrease your anxiety level. Some studies have shown that, during aerobic exercise, a chemical is produced in the brain which helps to heal the body from stress-related conditions. You should exercise at least three days a week for 30 minutes at a time in order to improve not only your health but your mental outlook.

If you find it difficult to become motivated to exercise, there are a number of steps you can take. To begin with, you can join an exercise club. Knowing that you'll have to pay dues to a gym may make it more likely that you will actually end up exercising. You might also consider enlisting the aid of a personal trainer. A trainer can provide powerful motivation, pushing you to complete exercises you never thought possible. Another idea

is to join an exercise class. There, you'll meet other people who are in a similar position. The camaraderie that develops between exercisers can help to reduce your stress level.

In general, exercise should make you feel less anxious. Your muscles become less tense and you will be less shaky after a round of exercise. It has also been shown that exercise leads to an hour and a half to two hours of relaxation response. This has also been referred to as the endorphin response. As a result, your mood will improve, enabling you to deal more effectively with stress.

Exercise can also improve your self-image. You'll experience greater self-worth, which will, in turn, reduce your stress level. A confident person is an individual who knows how to handle stress without becoming flustered. As a result of exercise, you may also end up eating better. Your improved menu may also prove to be a stress reliever. For instance, if you give up caffeinated drinks, you might become less jittery.

In addition to your sessions in the gym, you should be looking for additional opportunities to exercise. This could mean taking the stairs instead of the elevator, walking to work instead of driving, or playing touch football in the backyard with your children. The point is to get moving—and keep moving—at every available opportunity.

Exercise quickens the blood flow to your mind, offering the brain additional sugars and oxygen which can be important if you are concentrating. Exercise can also clear out waste products from the brain which can result in unclear thinking. You will also feel a greater sense of well-being as a result of exercise.

As has been shown here, exercise is beneficial for both the body and the mind. As a result, it can relax you when other techniques fail. By engaging in exercise, you free up your mind, enabling you to concentrate better and work more efficiently. Chances are you will not only feel better, you will look better as well. With your brain under control, you should experience less stress. Granted, exercise takes time and requires discipline, but it is well worth the exertion. The good feelings you get from a powerful exercise session can actually last for days. You may find that you actually look forward to working out because of the tremendous benefits it brings with it.

Dieting Your Way to Stress Management

You may notice that you reach for the potato chips when a television program becomes particularly frightening. Or you grab the crackers at work when you learn that you'll have to handle a new project. You may also nibble on candy bars when you're having difficulty controlling your children. These eating patterns are all a reaction to stress.

Stress plays an important part in our daily diet. In fact, a great deal of overeating has been attributed to stress. However, it is also true that your diet can have an impact on stress. There are certain foods that tend to worsen our stress levels. A number of these foods fall into the category of stimulants.

Of course, the best-known stimulant is caffeine. You'll find it not only in coffee, but in soft drinks, tea, and chocolate. Your heart beat races, as does your mind, when you are served a significant amount of caffeine. Caffeine consumption may even be connected to high blood pressure. However, you might not want to cut out caffeine entirely all at once. A gradual reduction will help lessen your withdrawal symptoms.

Consuming alcohol can also increase your stress level. It leads to the production of adrenaline, which can cause you to have difficulty sleeping. You might also experience a feeling of tension as a result of your alcohol intake. In addition, alcohol makes it more difficult for the body to get rid of toxins. Smoking is also quite dangerous, increasing hypertension and leading to heart disease.

Chances are you will experience a great deal of stress after eating sugar. This is because this sweet substance can exhaust the adrenal glands, leading to depression and irritability. While some people tend to reach for sugar cookies when they are feeling stressed, the irony is that sugar-filled snacks can actually make you feel even more stressed out.

Salt and fat are two substances that can increase your stress level. Salt, for instance, raises the blood pressure, causing an individual to feel as if his or her emotions are out of control. As a result, you should not eat high-salt foods such as ham or sausage. Meanwhile, consuming fat can put strain on the cardiovascular system, leading to more stress. In general, you should avoid highly processed food, which tends to be sparse in nutritional value.

If you want to get your stress level under control, consider a diet that is rich in whole foods, fruits, and vegetables. These are natural stress-busters, filled with nutrients that will help you to feel good over the long run. Also, these foods are far less likely to result in weight gain—another significant cause of stress. Some dieticians recommend eating a diet that is 65 to 70 percent raw in order to ensure that you receive the maximum amount of nutrients—nutrients which could be otherwise lost during the cooking process.

How do you know if your diet is stressing you out? Pay close attention to the warning signs. For instance, do you get headaches right after eating? Are you experiencing neck or back pain? Do you feel irritable after dinner? Do you feel anxious for no reason? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you could be dealing with food-induced stress. As you attempt to combat that stress, you should also make sure that you get at least seven hours of sleep each night in order to ensure that you are well-rested. Being tired can contribute significantly to your stress level.

There is no question that eating right can reduce your stress. Indulging in caffeine-filled drinks or fatty foods can simply make you hyper, unable to relax or to concentrate. However, if you eat meals that are rich in vitamins and minerals, you could find your stress level significantly reduced. Plan your meals ahead of time to ensure that you receive the maximum nutrition. Be sure to eat slowly and deliberately—feeling rushed at mealtime can contribute to your stress level. The good news is diet is a stressor you can

easily control. By following a few common sense techniques, you can ensure that you are eating a diet which will greatly reduce your stress.

Imagining Your Way to Stress Reduction

It might have begun with a picture in your mind's eye of a sea shore at dusk. You pictured the large blue waves rolling over the shoreline...the pristine sand in the foreground...the sun gently setting in the west. You might have imagined sea gulls gently flying past and children building sand castles along the shore. This was the image you might have taken with you as you began your labor for childbirth. It might have been one of a number of relaxation techniques you learned in your childbirth preparation classes.

Or perhaps you envisioned white blood cells swallowing up the cancer cells in your system. You imagined the cancer cells slowly disappearing from view, with healthy cells taking their place in your body. You even imagined your doctor saying, "You're cancer-free" with a big grin on his face.

Guided imagery is used in a variety of different settings. Its primary purpose is to allow you to imagine relaxing images in order to calm your mind and refresh your body. If you envision a peaceful scene, and couple that vision with controlled breathing, you can achieve deep relaxation. Nearly anyone can learn to exercise his or her imagination this way. It costs nothing, and it can benefit you greatly in terms of lowering your stress level.

One of the most popular relaxation exercises is the peaceful scene. You imagine a place of comfort, the kind of place you would go to if you were in trouble and needed solace. For many people, this is a beach or a forest. You then imagine what the experience will mean for your senses—what you will see, what you will hear, what you will feel, and perhaps what you will smell. You become a part of the scene, drinking in the tranquility. Whenever you're stressed out, you can return to this scene and a feeling of relaxation should occur.

Another well-known imagery exercise is the feather. Imagine a feather drifting along a mountain...by a river...and over a field. Picture yourself as that feather. Notice how light and airy you feel as a feather. Imagine that you don't have a care in the world, you have nowhere you have to be, no appointments to make. You're just a feather enjoying your place in the sun.

Or picture yourself as a drop of water in the ocean. Gently sway back and forth as the water moves peacefully along the shore. Let nothing worry you. Your only goal in life is to be happy.

But what if you try imagery and it doesn't seem to work? The trick may be practice. The more you imagine your quiet place, the easier it should be to get there. You may have to try it for a week before you can determine if it is actually impossible for you. Also, it is vitally important that you maintain deep breathing throughout the

exercise. It is no surprise that pregnant women often practice relaxation exercises every week.

Where should you practice this imagery? The good news is, you can do it practically anywhere. However, you should choose a place where you're comfortable, such as your bed, an easy chair, or a chaise lounge. At times, it may be easier to do the exercise if you're outside rather than inside, although it would also be appropriate by the fireplace. Try engaging in imagery for five minutes before you go to sleep or five minutes after you wake up. Imagery is a skill like any other; you must do it consistently in order for it to be effective.

Initially, you might be skeptical about imagery. You might have a difficult time with your imagination and you might be uncomfortable at first. In order to be successful with imagery you need to be committed. Continue your imagery, even when you feel like quitting. In this way, you should be able to get past any trepidation you might have. In time, the imagery will become entirely natural to you. Whenever you encounter a stressful situation, you can simply move back to your peaceful place...imagine yourself as a wave of the ocean...or picture yourself as a feather. While it may seem corny, it is a highly effective method for reducing your stress level.

Biofeedback: An Instrument of Relaxation

In the 1970s, in some restaurants, you could find biofeedback machines. They offered you all sorts of information about your body. Today, biofeedback is still considered a legitimate way to attain relaxation. It's a technique that uses monitoring equipment in order to help control stress.

Biofeedback is rooted in the idea that the autonomic nervous system can be trained. For instance, equipment can determine heart rates, muscle tension, and blood pressure while individuals try to change their breathing, thinking, or posture. By working with the machines, individuals can conceivably learn the best methods for relaxation. However, the equipment can only be monitored by someone with specific training in biofeedback.

According to Dr. Leonard Holmes, feedback can come in a variety of forms: a line on a computer screen, a tone of a certain pitch, or a blinking light. A typical type of biofeedback is the EMG, which indicates the tension in your muscles. It is important to note that biofeedback is not active treatment. It is up to you to decide what you can do in order to lower your heartbeat and reduce your stress level. If you suffer from migraines or neck pain, biofeedback can also help you to relax your muscles so that you don't experience as much—or possibly any—pain.

In order to determine whether biofeedback would be effective in your particular case, a stress profile might be used. Monitoring device will determine your heart rate, blood pressure, and temperature. You are then exposed to stress, such as a history quiz. As a result, the biofeedback professional will have some idea how your body reacts to stressful situations.

Interestingly enough, insurance companies have been known to cover biofeedback treatment. For instance, biofeedback may be covered for headaches. However, other companies view biofeedback as entirely experimental. When biofeedback first came onto the scene, some practitioners believed that it would enable us to have nearly complete control over our bodies. However, that is not the case. In many situations, our bodies are basically operating under “automatic pilot.” However, it is true that biofeedback can be helpful to some individuals, particularly those who are looking for a means for relaxation.

Biofeedback is used in a number of cases today. For instance, it has been used to treat headaches, stomach problems, high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms, epilepsy, and paralysis. A number of different kinds of health professionals use biofeedback, including physical therapists, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, and dentists. Once the biofeedback machine detects certain physiological reactions, patients usually engage in various relaxation exercises. Also, you as a patient may learn about the triggers that cause certain physiological problems. You can also learn how to deal more effectively with stressful issues that appear in your life.

It is important, however, to note that biofeedback is not a quick fix. It cannot in itself cure any illness. It is simply a tool that you can use to take control of your health and well-being. With biofeedback, individuals can be empowered to seek solutions to common health problems. Unlike other treatment programs, biofeedback requires of great deal from the patient in order to be successful.

Would you personally benefit from biofeedback? That depends on your willingness to experiment and your own comfort level. If you believe that biofeedback could be beneficial, you should discuss it with your doctor. He or she might want to determine first whether traditional treatment would be better in your particular case. In most cases, you will need to have a complete physical exam before you engage in biofeedback. You may even have to undergo a neurological test.

If you’re considering biofeedback, you should ask your family physician for a referral to a biofeedback expert. You’ll want to make sure that you are dealing with a trained professional. Keep an open mind during the treatment. If it makes you uncomfortable, you might be better off looking at other treatment options. While it first began in the 1960s, biofeedback remains an experimental technology. Therefore, don’t be disappointed if it doesn’t seem to work in your particular case. However, there is little harm in trying it. In fact, it could make you more attuned to your body and better able to manage the stress in your life.

Cooking Up Stress Relief

Perhaps it shows through your fidgeting, your nail-biting, or your sleepless nights. You feel as if you are under a great deal of stress, and you are searching for relief. While there are many stress reduction strategies you could use, perhaps one of the best is one of the easiest: cooking.

Cooking is an art as well as a science. It takes a great deal of patience and persistence to become an excellent cook, and some of your experiments will inevitably end up in the wastebasket or down the garbage disposal. Yet, there is something incredibly relaxing about sautéing onions, grilling chicken, or barbecuing pork. You can become mesmerized by the scent of your culinary sensations. The process of stirring, chopping, or slicing can be highly therapeutic. You can feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of a good meal which can further reduce your stress level.

If you plan to take up cooking as a serious hobby, it is best if you begin by purchasing a good cookbook. There are even cookbooks that promise you stress-free entertaining. Selecting the cookbook can be a relaxing experience in and of itself. Usually, cookbooks are loaded with interesting, eye-catching pictures. You can also pore over delicious recipes, imagining how to prepare them in your kitchen.

Next, you might want to invest in some sensible cooking supplies. This will help to alleviate your stress when the time to cook arrives. Make sure that you have aprons, a grater, a good set of knives, a colander, an array of sauce pans and skillets, and a collection of interesting plates to set your creations on. The better prepared you are, the less stress you will experience in the kitchen.

Then, it's time to head to the grocery store. It's best if you have prepared a list in advance based upon the recipes you hope to make. This will save you time, stress, and possibly money at the supermarket. Make sure that you schedule enough time to go through the grocery store—you don't want to be rushed. In addition to the items needed for your recipes, it's a good idea to pick up some staples. For instance, you should always have flour, sugar, milk, eggs, and a collection of spices on hand.

In order to minimize your stress level, it's best if you can start by preparing meals for yourself or for close family members. After you become proficient, you might want to graduate to dinner parties, but don't expect to produce a seven-course meal during your first few attempts at gourmet cooking. Select menu items that appeal to you; chances are they will appeal to your family as well.

Another possible stress-reducer is a cooking class. Such classes are often offered at local community centers, YWCAs, or community colleges. Don't take the course for credit—take it for fun. The idea is to have a relaxing time by the stove. You'll enjoy camaraderie with other students and you might even socialize with them after class. Taking a course can expand your horizons, helping you to become a well-rounded person.

It is true that cooking can be stressful. After all, if you have five children to feed, you're low on food, and you have a baby who's crying, meal time can be stress time. However, if you permit yourself plenty of time to cook, you choose recipes that you enjoy, and you look at it as a hobby rather than drudgery, cooking can be quite relaxing and can actually help lower your blood pressure.

One thing you'll want to watch when cooking is portion control. If you make too much pasta, you might be tempted to overeat, causing health problems on down the road. Also, it can be important to cook meals that are heart-healthy and that are not loaded with sugar and calories. Otherwise, you could face the stress of battling a weight problem. However, if you make sure that you cook plenty of vegetable dishes, you limit the number of desserts you prepare, and you keep close track of your carbohydrate intake, cooking can be a pleasant, stress-reducing experience. The more practiced you become at gourmet cooking, the more you will look forward to it, and the less stressed you will feel.

Stressed Out? A Good Night's Sleep Can Cure What Ails You

Your child brings home a report card filled with low marks. Your dog just bit your neighbor, and the sink in the kitchen no longer works. You feel you're under major stress. As a result, you find yourself tossing and turning at night, unable to get a good night's sleep. This is truly unfortunate, because sleep can re-charge a person's batteries, enabling him or her to better tackle the stressors that come along the road.

Stress-induced insomnia can take a variety of forms. For instance, you may have difficulty falling asleep in the first place. Or you may wake up hours earlier than you should. You may find yourself waking up several times during the middle of the night. Or you may even find that you feel tired when you wake up in the morning because you didn't get good quality sleep.

One important point to remember is that you are not alone. Just about everyone suffers from lack of sleep at some point in life. That said, dealing with insomnia can be exhausting. You might feel run down during the day and have difficulty concentrating. You may turn to coffee in order to keep awake during the daylight hours, which can lead to a feeling of restlessness. You may even try taking a nap in the mid-morning or late afternoon, only to find that you have difficulty sleeping again at night.

While old age, depression, and substance abuse can all lead to insomnia, it might be said that the number one cause is stress. If your insomnia persists for a week, you should contact your doctor. He or she may prescribe medication to enable you to get to sleep more quickly. But you should be aware that there are other techniques you can use to deal with stress-related insomnia.

To begin with, try to determine the root cause of your stress. This might be your job, your home life, or even some of your recreational activities. Next, determine whether you are overscheduled. By eliminating some of your commitments, you might be able to seriously reduce your stress level. Then, do some problem-solving. How can you make a stressful situation better? It could involve engaging in positive thinking, changing your attitude about the situation, or coming up with solutions to resolve the situation.

There are also some concrete steps you can take to improve your sleep. For instance, make sure that your bedroom is conducive to sleep. This means finding the most comfortable bedding available, decorating your room with soft, subtle colors, and eliminating clutter or other signs of work in progress.

In addition, condition yourself to associate your bed with sleep. This means resisting the temptation to do work in bed, or study for your classes while lying down. You should even try to avoid watching TV programs in bed. The idea here is to eliminate stimulants from your sleeping area which could prevent you from falling asleep. If you like to read in bed, make sure that you read only fun, pleasurable books, not significant tomes that could keep you up at night.

One other helpful tip is to set up a regular routine prior to going to bed. It may involve taking a bath or shower to relax you or drinking some milk right before settling down to sleep. Also, try to get up at the same time every morning so that you are following an established schedule. In addition, make sure that you do not engage in drinking beverages with caffeine or alcoholic drinks after dinner.

Insomnia is one of the most dangerous side-effects of stress. It can rob you of your energy, strength, and endurance. It can make the simplest tasks difficult to handle during the course of the day. And it can even lead to major depression. If you find yourself having trouble getting to sleep at night, take immediate action. Don't wait for your body to feel the stress of night after night of sleeplessness. The more proactive you are, the greater the likelihood that you'll be able to combat insomnia, as well as the stress that goes with it. Refreshed and renewed, you'll be able to take on the challenges that come your way, once you've gotten enough sleep.

Nature: The Great Stress-Reliever

We live in an age when stress seems to be around every corner, at every office. The demands of modern life require us to be constantly "plugged in" through e-mail, cell phones, pagers, and Blackberry devices. You might feel as if your senses are constantly being bombarded, both at work and at home. As a result, stress might have led you to the breaking point.

But there is a great universal stress reliever—one that is close to everyone. Nature offers bountiful opportunities for relieving stress. It might seem old-fashioned to "commune with nature," but it can be incredibly cathartic, decreasing your stress level immeasurably.

First, you must be willing to take the time to drink in nature and all its beauty. Often, we feel overwhelmed by commitments—so overwhelmed, in fact, that we become guilty if we take time out for ourselves. However, if we are to successfully combat stress, we absolutely must reserve time for stress-relief, and nature can be one of the best stress relievers available.

Each season offers its own unique brand of stress relief. In the autumn, we can be soothed by the multi-colored leaves on the trees, the crunch of leaves under our feet, and lovely azure October skies. By experiencing the beauty of nature, we can become more relaxed and better able to take on life's challenges.

In the winter, we can take brisk walks through the snow, watching the flakes delicately float down to earth. We can be energized by the brisk winds and frigid temperatures. We can also gain a certain amount of confidence in battling the elements, helping to relieve our stress level.

In spring, we can enjoy the true riches of nature. We can experience the scent of flowers just beginning to bloom...the loveliness of plants that have survived winter's scourge...and listen to the birds chirping in the trees. Gazing at trees just beginning to bud can be incredibly soothing after a stressful day on the job.

Meanwhile, in the summer, we can experience nature at its most vibrant. We can enjoy the scent of the grass after the lawn has just been mowed...and watch the trees gently waving in the summer breeze. We can revel in the sun's rays, or enjoy the refreshment of a summer shower. Just a few minutes in the outdoors can reduce our stress level dramatically.

There are also a number of nature-related activities we can engage in in order to relax. For instance, hiking offers a tremendous opportunity to see the splendor of nature up close and personal. Skiing allows us to enjoy winter's beauty, while a game of Frisbee can be a tremendous lift on a summer afternoon. Because nature offers such a feast for the senses, enjoying the outdoors can bring a sense of calm and tranquility to our lives that few other things can.

Some people have found a relaxing nature-related hobby in gardening. Planting flowers, trimming bushes, and weeding can help to relax both the mind and the body. Others have found that yard work can help to reduce stress. Such activities as mowing the lawn, raking leaves, or shoveling snow can help to remove us from sources of stress, giving us a much-needed break.

You may be so inspired by nature that you write poetry about the things you see and hear. Such writing can be tremendously cathartic, especially when undertaken outdoors. Lying in a chaise lounge under a tree, composing sonnets about flowers, can get your creative juices flowing—and lower your stress level in the process.

You might be surprised how therapeutic nature can be. It can re-awaken your senses, allowing you to see things you might have missed before. It can demonstrate to you the beauty of creation and give you a renewed vitality for life. It can provide you with a welcome sanctuary from the world of blaring stereos and non-stop TV chatter. Even if you don't consider yourself a nature lover, brief periods outdoors can give you a new sense of purpose. With such a positive outlook, your ability to handle stress will be

enhanced. In essence, spending a few moments outdoors is like taking a mini-vacation from the rigors of your daily life.

Sensory Perceptions

It may begin with an eyestrain-related headache brought on by hours staring at a computer screen. Or you might experience pain after spending an hour or more with a telephone receiver cradled in your neck. After nearly eight hours standing up, your feet might be throbbing. Your pains, however, appear to be exacerbated by stress.

Stress can manifest itself in a number of physical ways. Headaches, earaches, abdominal pain, a tingling in our arms and legs, and nausea can all be signs of stress. In other words, the pressures that we are under can make us physically ill. As a result, it's not surprising that we would seek a physical relief from stress.

One of the best ways to deal with stress is to indulge your senses. Our senses are like our personal radar detectors, letting us know when we are nearing something that is inherently good. Therefore, it is important that we surround ourselves with things that will appeal to our senses.

First, indulge your eyes. This can be done in any number of ways. For instance, you might make sure that you arise early enough to see the sun rise on a summer day. The joy and peace you feel gazing at the magnificent colors can greatly reduce the amount of stress you feel during the course of your day. You might also watch a videotape that features an excursion to some exotic locale. Drinking in the palm trees and the ocean waves can calm your nerves considerably. You might also consider a trip to your local zoo. There, you can witness first-hand the magnificence of various animal species, from the striped zebras to the dotted leopards.

Next, consider making a "sound escape." Retreat to your backyard, sit in the grass, close your eyes, and listen. It's best to do this early in the morning or late at night, when there is not a great deal of activity around. You may hear the songs of robins...the hum of the cicadas...or the purr of a kitten. Such nature sounds are incredibly soothing and can provide you with a great escape from your normal routine. You might even consider keeping a CD in your home of nature sounds that you can play when you feel as if you're at the breaking point.

Aromatherapy is a favorite relaxation technique nowadays. This involves treating your nose to exquisite scents. Scented candles, incense, or scented oils can help to "calm down" your living space, creating a soothing atmosphere. Some plug-in air fresheners can also be quite effective in re-awakening your sense of smell. Or you might consider cooking with ingredients that have incredible scents and allowing the aroma to overpower your kitchen. There is nothing quite so comforting as the smell of fresh bread baking or tomato-basil sauce simmering on the stove.

When trying to de-stress, don't forget to indulge your sense of taste. While you won't want to eat so much that you become overweight, enjoying a few taste sensations can be good for both stomach and soul. Consider adding some fresh mint to your iced tea, or a lime wedge to your cola drink. A sliver of chocolate or a taste of vanilla has also been known to help soothe frayed nerves. Don't be afraid to experiment with different tastes until you settle upon those that are true stress-relievers.

Many people combat stress by engaging their sense of touch. It is no surprise that mothers-to-be often take up knitting—the sensation of tugging at the yarn can be quite relaxing at a stressful time. You might also consider taking up crocheting, needlepoint, or pottery-making. Such activities have the added bonus of allowing you to show off your artistic flair. And you can fill your home with the beautiful art objects you are able to create. You'll feel a sense of pride that will lift your spirits—and will make you better able to deal with stressful situations.

Each day, stress tries our senses. It can blur our vision, disrupt our hearing, and dull our sense of taste. The obvious antidote to this is to introduce things into our lives that engage our senses in a positive way, that brighten our day. Such things can seem minor, but they can make a huge difference in how we are able to handle stress.

Pets Help Keep Stress at Bay

You might be going through a rough time, such as the death of a loved one or a divorce. The stress, at times, seems difficult to tolerate. You want to find a way to deal with the stress effectively, but you're uncertain of what your options might be. Then, on your daily walk, you spot a dog, and you wonder if this is the stress-reliever you've been looking for.

Psychologists tell us that pets can be quite beneficial to our mental health. They can provide unconditional love in a time of uncertainty. They can help to distract us from the problems of the day, giving us a new reason to go on living. And it can be quite therapeutic caring for an animal.

One obvious advantage to owning a pet is companionship. A dog or cat will always be at your heel, no matter what kind of tumultuous events you face in your life. Animals tend to be content with very little, so you don't have to spend a great deal of time trying to please your pet.

Just petting an animal's fur can be a good means of reducing stress. The feel of the fur can awaken in you memories of simpler times, when your stress level was much lower. It's possible that having a pet around could even reduce your heart rate or your blood pressure.

If you owned a pet when you were young, you should not be too stressed out about caring for an animal. As long as you provide the basics—food, water, shelter, play time, and regular trips to the veterinarian, your animal should be happy and healthy. If you

decide to buy a dog, your regular walks with your canine companion can be quite therapeutic. There is something so relaxing about walking a dog, especially on a crisp autumn day. You might find that the walks help you to “clear your head,” making it easier for you to cope with your problems.

When looking for a pet, you want your search to be as stress-free as possible. Talk to friends and neighbors and see if they know of anyone who’s selling or giving away a pet. You might also consult your local newspaper for ads for pets for sale. You might also consider rescuing a pet from a pound. It can be quite rewarding, knowing that you helped to save a life.

If you don’t want to have to spend so much time caring for a pet, you might consider a cat, a canary, or even a goldfish. Any pet can brighten your home, helping you to keep stress at bay. You might find that your outlook brightens as soon as you bring a pet into your home.

Say you’ve never owned a pet before. You might initially be concerned about how well you will fare as a pet-owner. In such a case, it’s helpful to educate yourself. Check out books from your local library on pet care, or see if your local humane society offers informational packets. The better educated you are, the more prepared you will be to be a pet owner.

If you live in an apartment that does not permit pets, you might consider pet-sitting at someone else’s home. This can be a welcome break from your normal routine, helping to alleviate your stress. You might also consider volunteering to walk a friend’s or relative’s dog. You’ll experience the fulfillment of volunteering your time—and you’ll make a new animal friend in the process.

In time, you might find that your pet becomes a part of your family—a treasured companion in good times and bad. You’ll learn to recognize your pets’ likes and dislikes, and you’ll probably forge a strong bond. In time, you might decide to add another dog or another cat to the family. Holiday time and other celebrations can become more festive with a pet in the house. In addition, you should find that your stress level decreases a great deal, having a pet around to keep you company. Just having a creature there to entertain you can be quite therapeutic. You may be amazed at the changes you’ll undergo, as you become accustomed to being a pet owner.

Lessening Worry Through Therapy

Unfortunately, many of us feel as if we are on the verge of burnout. We feel as if we have to worry about our children, our jobs, and our relationships. At times, we may feel as if we are spinning out of control. It is as if we are engaging in a high wire act without a net. We become frustrated and angry with ourselves because we don’t think we’re achieving our potential. We can literally become lost in a sea of worry.

At one time, seeking therapy for such feelings of anxiety would have been considered socially unacceptable. A few decades ago, many people considered therapy to be an indulgence. Mental health counseling had an incredible stigma attached to it. However, today we see celebrities including Brooke Shields, Anne Heche, Marie Osmond, and Jane Pauley who speak openly about seeking counseling for their problems. Cognitive Behavior Therapy is no longer considered the domain of the crazy and the weak.

Therapy can come in a variety of forms. It can involve face-to-face counseling, self-help books, CDs, and online forums. It has been said that there are as many as 100 therapy programs on the market today. These programs share some common traits. First, they assess how the individual is thinking and identify any disruptions in thought patterns. It is important to get these thoughts out into the open in order to deal with them effectively.

Second, the programs attempt to figure out an individual's basic beliefs and whether these beliefs are founded on reliable principles. Say, for instance, you become anxious about flying. Through talk therapy, it is determined that this fear can be traced back to your concerns about your grandmother, who once had an unpleasant flying experience en route to Oklahoma. You might have been worried about your grandmother's safety and that, in turn, has led to an irrational fear of flying.

The next step is to gather evidence in order to combat negative thinking. For instance, you might look for a statistic indicating how many crashes a given airline has during a year. When you discover how infrequently accidents occur, your belief that flying is dangerous may be thrown out the window. The one sure-fire way to fight negative thinking is to counteract it with reliable facts.

Another technique you can use to combat anxiety is to develop coping mechanisms. In other words, in order to not let your worry get the best of you, you might try prayer and meditation, exercise, dancing, reading a good book, or soaking in a hot tub. You should keep a list of relaxation techniques handy so that you can turn to them any time you are feeling particularly stressed out.

You will have to get into the habit of relaxation. This can be quite difficult, especially for those with high-stress jobs. You may even consider taking a class in relaxation techniques. Once you utilize these techniques, you are likely to find yourself better able to concentrate...better able to manage your feelings...and better able to cope.

Literally millions of people have been assisted through cognitive behavioral therapy. While herbal remedies and prescription medications can alleviate symptoms, they do not address the root causes of anxiety. Until we begin to think positively, we cannot hope to attack the crux of our anxious feelings.

How do you find the therapist that's right for you? To begin with, consult some of your trusted friends. Chances are someone in their families has been to a counselor within the past six months. You'll want someone who is easy to talk to, with whom you can share your innermost thoughts and feelings. If you try a therapist and you feel uncomfortable, by all means switch to someone else. Sometimes, finding the right counselor is a matter of trial and error.

Going through therapy can be a tough experience. You may have to delve into areas that you find to be uncomfortable. But it can be highly rewarding in the end. You may find that you gain greater insight into your thought patterns, that you are better able to communicate effectively, and that you are feeling much less anxious. There is no reason to apologize for undergoing therapy. Seeking help is actually a sign of strength.

Keys to Coping: A Blueprint for Stress Management

You sit with your hands clutched to the steering wheel, your stress level rising by the minute. You have exactly ten minutes before you have to get to the day care center, and there's an accident blocking traffic. After you pick up Jolene, you'll have to go to the supermarket, the dry cleaner, and the library. Then it's time to rush home for dinner, bathe Jolene, put her to bed, then collapse onto your bed.

You may find that your days are highly stressful—and your nights might be as well. The good news is that there are techniques you can use in order to bring your stress level under control. One of these is rehearsing your behavior. Say, for instance, you are preparing for a job interview. You can role play, with your spouse playing the part of the interviewer and you portraying the interviewee. In this way, you can practice your answers to likely questions. Knowing what to expect in advance can help you to control your stress level.

Another effective technique is to reframe debate. For instance, suppose you have had a disagreement with your co-worker. You're worried that you will never be able to enjoy camaraderie with your co-worker again. As a result, your stress level has hit the roof. You'll be much better off if you see the disagreement as a challenge you must simply work your way through. Look at the debate as a discussion between two intelligent people. Try your best to see the other person's perspective. In this way, you'll be engaging in problem-solving rather than complaining, and your stress may be reduced because of it.

Yet another stress management technique you can use is learning to control your anger. It is often not a particular situation, but your reaction to it, that causes your stress level to climb. When you find yourself becoming angry, redirect your energy. Think of something relaxing, such as a forest or a seashore. Let the waves or the trees carry your anger away. The old adage, "Don't go to bed angry," is a motto you should live by. The less anger you experience, the less stressed out you will feel.

You might also try to stop your negative thinking. Whenever a negative thought comes to mind, say “Stop!” to yourself. Or imagine putting a stop sign in front of your negative thought. The idea here is to put an end to negative thinking—to, in effect, put it on the shelf so that you don’t have to worry about it. You’ll be surprised how relaxed you feel, once you stop engaging in negative thinking.

Another stress reliever is to find ways to boost your self-esteem. Being hard on yourself can produce a great deal of stress. Once you recognize that you are a person worthy of love, you will be better able to cope with the stressors that come your way. Exercise is one route you can take in order to feel better about yourself. It’s a proven fact that individuals who exercise have better outlooks on life.

You may also want to set goals for yourself. Perhaps you’ve always wanted to knit. Now is your golden opportunity. Or maybe you’d like to run a marathon by the end of the year. The important thing is to set realistic goals and to commit to them. Once you reach your goal, you will likely feel on top of the world. As you make progress toward your goal, you could find your stress level subsiding.

Stress relief is an on-going process. You can’t expect to reduce your stress-level permanently in one day. But, by taking the steps listed above, you might find yourself better able to deal with stress on a daily basis. Remember that you may not be in complete control of what happens to you on any given day, but you can control your reaction to it. By focusing on the positive, putting an end to negative thinking, and setting goals for yourself, you should find your stress level declining. With less stress to worry about, you’ll find that life is more enjoyable. Even that daily commute to the day care center might become more tolerable.

Relaxing Muscles Can Be the Key to Reducing Stress

Perhaps you’re an airline pilot who’s just spent hours in the cockpit. It seems like every muscle in your body is tense and you need relief. Or perhaps you’re a stay-at-home mom who’s spent the better part of your day cleaning your house. You feel as if your nerves are shot and you desperately want to feel better.

In both instances, the key to relieving stress may be progressive muscle relaxation. It’s a technique that began in the 1930s, but still has relevance today. With this technique, muscle groups are flexed and then relaxed in short order. The foundation of this technique is the concept that physical relaxation leads to mental repose. While the method does involve activating the muscles, you don’t have to be a weightlifter to try it. That’s because it requires no special training. In fact, virtually anyone can master the technique.

In general, you’ll want to practice the method ten to 20 minutes a day. But don’t blame yourself if you don’t master it on the first try. It’s best to take a gradual approach, improving your muscle flexing capabilities over time. You’ll need to rehearse the technique again and again in order to obtain maximum benefit. You’ll also need to be

patient because you might not be able to pick it up in a single afternoon. But, in the long run, it will be well worth the effort.

Progressive muscle relaxation is referred to as a deep relaxation technique. This means that it can not only reduce stress, but also help alleviate chronic pain and sleeplessness. Doctors often use the technique in an effort to treat migraines and cancer. Usually, the relaxation technique begins with the feet and the legs, then gradually moves up the body to the chest, neck, and face. However, some physicians may try to relax muscle groups in a different order.

After some time, the amount of muscle tension attempted is increased in order to maximize the work of the muscles. You can engage in this exercise while seated, or you can do it lying in bed. Make sure, however, that you attempt it only in a place that is quiet and tranquil. Otherwise, you might find it difficult to complete the exercise. To begin with, tighten the muscles for about eight seconds and then release. Relax for about 30 seconds, then move onto another set of muscles. You might use progressive muscle relaxation in conjunction with imagery. In other words, you might imagine that you are like a wave of the ocean unleashing your power by flexing your muscles.

Through progressive muscle relaxation, you can learn to interpret your body's cues. In this way, you can identify signs of tension within your body and determine ways to correct it. As a result, you should feel much less stress and may even feel as if you have more energy. Because progressive muscle relaxation has been around for decades, it is proven effective. Therefore, it is not a fad, but a legitimate relaxation technique.

Your initial relaxation session should last about an hour. You will engage in such activities as making a fist, bending your arms, raising your eyebrows, clenching your teeth, pulling up your shoulders, tightening your abdominal muscles, and lifting your heels. In time, such exercises will become second-nature to you. However, you should not try to speed up your exercises—the point is to remain relaxed, not to quicken your pace. The exercises may be a perfect activity on a Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon—whenever you're ready to relax.

Progressive muscle relaxation is for anyone. Whether you work at a construction site or a classroom, in a music hall or in a meat market, you can benefit from the relaxation exercises. Granted, it may be hard for you to relax at first, especially if you are a Type A personality. But, chances are, you'll quickly master the technique and learn to enjoy your exercises. In time, such relaxation exercises should become a natural part of life. You'll feel healthier, more energetic, and less stressed. Chances are your attitude will brighten, since the weight of the world has been taken from your shoulders. You'll find that time relaxing is truly time well-spent.

When Stress Becomes Unbearable

A soldier, just back from the war in Iraq, is haunted by nightmares of bodies on the battlefield. A woman keeps replaying in her mind the day that she was brutally raped. A

man has flashbacks of the time that he was beaten by his step-father. These incidents are the result of stress—a special kind of stress. It is a stress so overpowering, so overwhelming that it is known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

The important thing to remember about post-traumatic stress disorder is that it is far more common than one might think. First brought to the public's attention following the Vietnam War, post-traumatic stress disorder afflicts everyone from earthquake victims to survivors of kidnapping. Often, PTSD, as it is known, occurs when an individual's life has been threatened, or the life of someone close to him or her has been jeopardized. More than five million people are believed to be affected by the disorder.

There are a number of tell-tale signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. For instance, an individual might experience continual flashbacks or nightmares. He or she may experience feelings of irritability or frustration. He or she might have an exaggerated startle response, such as jumping when hearing a noise in an otherwise quiet room. He or she may lose interest in work, relationships, or other things that used to be enjoyed. The symptoms may become especially pronounced when the anniversary of the traumatic event rolls around.

Although stories of soldiers with PTSD are well-known, women are actually more susceptible to the disorder. Also, there is evidence that there may be a genetic predisposition for PTSD. PTSD can lead to major depression, alcoholism, or drug abuse. If a specific person was responsible for the trauma—say a husband, boyfriend, or neighbor—the after-effects may be particularly bad.

It is interesting to note that a specific sound or smell can trigger a flashback for an individual suffering from PTSD. This is part of the reason that the disorder is so troubling. In essence, the individual has difficulty escaping the memory of what happened to him or her. The recurring nightmares and flashbacks are signs that the individual has not been able to process the memory appropriately.

An individual afflicted with PTSD may feel a sense of hopelessness. Since his or her ordeal seems to be repeating itself, he or she may find it difficult to come to terms with the event. This is why PTSD is such a debilitating condition. However, it is important to recognize the fact that there is hope for those struggling with this disorder. Through talk therapy and medication, an individual can learn how to properly process the traumatic memory. The nightmares and flashbacks eventually disappear, as the individual receives a new leash on life.

It should be pointed out that there is no instant fix or cure for PTSD. It can haunt people for months, if not years. It is a mental condition that is still shrouded in a great deal of secrecy. There are also many misunderstandings about the disorder. It may cause someone to miss work, or to lose his or her job entirely. It can wreck marriages and other close relationships. A great deal of additional research needs to be done in order to adequately address the problem of PTSD.

In the meantime, there are specific steps you can take to lessen the likelihood that you will suffer from the disorder. If you have become the victim of a traumatic event, seek help immediately. Discuss the incident with your family doctor and ask him or her for a referral to a therapist and psychiatrist. Don't wait until your symptoms are out of control before you seek help. While this type of stress is not curable, it is entirely treatable. The important thing for you to remember is that you are not alone, that there are a number of mental health experts who stand ready to help you. Also, try to think of yourself as a survivor rather than as a victim. You may find you are better able to cope with the stress that way. Also, recognize the fact that the incident, though traumatic, has passed. Once you realize that you are unlikely again to go through such a horror, you may be able to put the incident into the proper perspective.

If You're Feeling Stressed, Volunteer

At times, it can seem as if you're on a constant treadmill at work. There are deadlines to meet, people to consult, relationships to cultivate. You may feel as if you're under consistent stress, but you don't know how to manage it effectively. You could always quit your job, but your next position might be just as stressful.

Stress can take a tremendous toll on both body and spirit. It can leave you feeling fatigued, making it hard for you to concentrate. You may be more susceptible to illness as a result of your stress, resulting in increased absenteeism from work. You may be more prone to getting into accidents, and you may feel as if you're on edge much of the time.

There are a number of strategies you can employ to deal with stress. But perhaps one of the most rewarding is to engage in volunteer work. There is something so comforting about donating your time to helping someone else. The mere act can elevate your spirits, helping you to better cope with the stressors in your life. You are giving a tremendous gift—the gift of your time and talent. And you find your reward in the smiles on the faces of the people (or animals) you've assisted.

If you're considering volunteering, you don't want the search for volunteer opportunities to be stressful. Therefore, you'll want to make the process as simple as possible. A good resource can be your local newspaper. Often, the Sunday paper lists organizations that are looking for volunteers. The newspaper usually provides complete contact information, so you won't have to hunt around for a phone number.

Deciding which organization to volunteer for can be a challenge. There are so many causes worthy of our attention. For instance, there are groups that assist people in times of disaster...groups that lobby for research to find cures for debilitating diseases...homeless shelters...soup kitchens...and pet shelters. You might also consider volunteering at a school, where teaching assistants and mentors are always appreciated.

In order to decide where to put your talents to use, you might ask yourself some questions. For instance, how much time can you realistically devote to volunteer work?

Are you limited to doing your volunteering in the evenings or on weekends? How much of your own money can you spend in connection with your volunteer work? What causes are the most important to you? The answers to these questions could help you to choose the volunteer opportunity that's right for you.

Next, you'll want to tour the volunteer facility. You want to get a sense of whether you will enjoy the work. If you find that the other volunteers are difficult to work with, it could simply produce more stress in your life. Usually, an initial tour will help to give you a good idea of what it would be like to actually volunteer at the facility. Also, be sure to find out if the organization offers training to its volunteers. This could be quite important, especially if you have only a nodding acquaintance with the work of the organization.

Volunteering does require commitment, and you might be wondering if that commitment will add additional stress to your life. Actually, the opposite will probably be true. If you find yourself being energized by your volunteer work, you'll be able to put your problems in better perspective. Knowing the difficulties that other people face can make your troubles seem quite negligible in comparison. However, you will want to make sure that you don't overcommit. Devote only a limited amount of time to your volunteer work, and resist the urge to do more. Otherwise, you could find yourself exhausted by the end of the week and unable to perform well on your job.

Volunteering can be one of the great joys in life. It is a privilege to serve other people, to make a difference in another person's life. Through your volunteer work, you'll be able to meet people you might otherwise not have the opportunity to encounter. You can forge friendships which can last a lifetime. You'll be contributing greatly to your neighborhood and your society, and your little corner of the world should be brighter because of it.

Conclusion

As we have seen, stress can have an effect on every aspect of our lives. It can cause illnesses of both the body and the mind, sapping our strength and energy. It can come about through a variety of life experiences. Indeed, there is no human being who is untouched by stress. Taken to an extreme, stress can result in anxiety, requiring highly specialized medical treatment. In order to function effectively in life, we need to come up with ways to deal efficiently with stress.

Fortunately, there are numerous ways to combat stress. Everything from relaxation techniques to reading, from exercise to prayer, can help to lessen our stress level. It's possible that you'll have to try a number of techniques before you find the one that's right for you. However, the good news is that stress relief is available to anyone willing to seek it.

