



Skills for Stress Management

The secret in managing stress is not to just mutter good thoughts to yourself. You have to be aware of the problems you face and of the things you say or do that lead to problems. Then you have to develop methods for handling stress that you can use when facing problems. You must learn to use these repeatedly in a variety of stressful situations. You need to practice them again and again until they can be triggered automatically whenever you feel upset or stressed.

But remember that one technique may work in every situation. What worked with the salesperson last week may not work with the neighbor this week. Yet, what was learned from dealing with the salesperson should give you a clue in working with your neighbor.

Three farmers will approach the same problem in three different ways. Bob sees the problem as someone else's fault. "If he did the work right, there wouldn't be a problem."

Jane jokes about the same problem. She breaks the tension with a funny story and soon the tension eases and work resumes.

Don brings a cool logic and reason to the problem. He analyzes every angle, then plunges in and systematically solves it.

The problem is the same one and they all handled it differently, and probably solved it, in their own way. Another farmer might use all these methods, plus a few more to get the answer. That's probably the way most of us cope with stresses of life.

It is said that variety is the spice of life. And variety is the spice that improves stress management. Read through the following methods- "try them on for size." Think about how they might work with various problems you face. When a problem occurs, you have a strategy for dealing with it. After all, what have you got to lose-except stress!

Attitude Adjusters

...ideas to put stress in proper perspective.

Good Worrier

Some farmers feel they must worry. If you're one of those people, try to be a "good worrier." Instead of saying, "If only I had sold before," or, "If only I had planted beans," turn the worrying into problem solving. "If this happens again, how will I handle it," or "What can I do to prevent this kind of problem?"

Pre-Problem Planning

Stress is usually more severe if it takes you by surprise. Farming contains many sudden, unplanned events. If you can take the surprise element out of stress, you can manage it better. What are some potential crises in farming disease outbreak, dismemberment, destroyed crops, death of farm operator?

Anticipate the steps to be taken if one of those disasters happens to you. Plan now to solve problems if they were to occur.

Disaster Role Play

A farmer who was afraid that he might die of a heart attack was asked to try as hard as possible to make the heart beat faster and die of a heart attack right- *on the spot*. He was to try it each

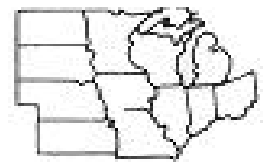
time his fear of the heart attack occurred. As he thought about it and started laughing, humor helped him put his problem and himself in perspective.

Mind Storming

This is just like brainstorming but you do it yourself. Have you ever sat at a boring meeting and wondered, "What am I doing here?" Well, instead of staying miserable, try "mind" storming. "How would I make this meeting more interesting?" Or, you might want to take a "mind" vacation to a place you enjoy- a mountain meadow, a sunny beach, a cabin by the lake.

Reframing

This is more of an attitude than a technique. It's an attempt to put everything in order. If the hay is lost in the field, the reply is, "It'll always grow back." If the tire blows on the truck, "I'm glad it happened here instead of the hill ahead." In other words, "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." -Reinhold Niebuhr.



North Central Regional
Extension Publication 192e
January 1983

Co-sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Services of Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Wisconsin; in cooperation with SEA-Extension, USDA

The Five-Minute-Letter (FML)

The FML is a letter that takes only five minutes to write. It has many purposes. In managing stress it can be used when letting off steam is more appropriate on paper than directly to the person. Use whatever paper is handy when the need to write occurs. Use pencil, pen, crayon, or whatever. Put your feelings on paper. Don't worry about spelling or complete sentences. Why are you upset? How do you feel? What did the other person do, or not do? What should happen now?

Read it through several times until you feel satisfied you've said what you wanted to say. The FML helps to express your feelings instead of keeping things bottled up. Plus, you may now be better prepared to tactfully discuss the problem with the person.

The Art of Rest and Relaxation

Relaxation . . . should be just that! Relaxation can occur in various ways and in many places. The key to successful relaxation is that it should be enjoyable and easy-not work as we often view our activities.

Following are ways to relax that can take place at any time and different places. They do not require a high amount of skill, time, or training. But they do require one thing-practice. No program will work unless it is used.

Walking-can be a form of relaxation and meditation. Start in a living room or bedroom and begin walking in your stocking feet. Try walking as slowly as you can, keeping your knees bent and close together, and take small steps. Pay attention to how you feel-your shoulders, arms, knees, thighs, calves, ankles, toes. Practice 20 minutes a day, and when you walk anywhere, concentrate on how your body feels.

Movement or active relaxation- become involved in a physical activity: gardening, washing dishes, reading a book. Notice the amount of tension needed to perform the activity. It is of two types: (1) primary or that needed to accomplish the task and (2) secondary or that which is unnecessary. As you carry on the activity, pay attention to the tension that is not needed and concentrate on stopping it. At first, this will require effort but it will gradually become automatic.

Uninterrupted quiet -Sit comfortably for 20 minutes with your eyes closed. Repeat aloud any soft word, "calm," "rose," etc. until you hear your own voice. Then repeat the word to yourself and just listen to yourself. If your mind wanders, slowly bring your thoughts back; don't rush yourself. Stay with it daily and experience what happens,

Escape for awhile -from the painful problem; to a movie, a book, game, or quick trip. "Stand there and suffer" is a form of self punishment and not a way to solve the problem. Recover and come back to deal with the difficulty when you are better prepared.

Shaking -is a quick way to relieve tensions and relax tight muscles. Imagine yourself a rag doll and with arms hanging loosely by your side, begin to shake your hands. Then move up the body and include your arms and shoulders and feel the vibrations. Both arms and shoulders should shake energetically. Then slow down the shaking gradually and feel the tingling of the body. Next, sit and do the same thing with both legs.

Drawing mental pictures -by picturing in your mind a pleasant, favorite object (a flower is a good example). Let yourself gently outline the object in your

mind, picking out special details. If your mind wanders, slowly bring it back. Practice this daily, for 10 minutes at a time, and especially at times when relaxation is needed.

Getting a Handle

Any attempt to manage stress or make a change in your life requires a plan: (1) find the problem, (2) look for barriers, (3) plan to succeed, (4) begin a plan of attack, and (5) evaluate the plan.

Find the Problem

The first step in learning to control stress is to identify those problems in everyday life that lead to stress. You also need to determine how your own thinking may cause stress and how affects you.

Once you have a handle on the stress you face you can make a realistic commitment to manage stress.

Look for Barriers

"I don't have time to manage stress" or, "I can't exercise; besides jogging is so boring." Many of the thoughts or habits you possess stand in the way to successfully managing stress. In order to make a change in your life, you must locate the barriers to success and change the negative habits or thinking to a positive commitment to change.

On a small pad of paper, record how often you feel stress and what the causes and results of that stress are in everyday life. Was negative thinking or a bad habit the cause of the stress? Gathering this information as you begin a stress management program gives good feedback on how well you are progressing toward your goal.

Plan to Succeed

After identifying the barriers to managing stress, you can start to build confidence and commitment for the effort you are undertaking. You may find that a short walk relaxes the nerves just as well as a drink, Taking the stairs instead of the elevator provides good exercise without a lot of extra effort.

Continually work to change the self defeating thinking that blocks success. Change, "I can't control the stresses I face" to "I want to learn to control my life so that I can enjoy it more." This positive outlook can give you the will power and determination to manage stress.

Begin a Plan of Attack

The next phase is to attack the problem. Decide what it is you want to accomplish and the steps you must take in order to accomplish the change. Let's say, for example, that you want to control your anger when something goes wrong. What steps are you going to take? Will it be "counting to ten", writing a five minute letter, practicing a relaxation exercise-, or another technique previously mentioned? Set a schedule for yourself and outline the steps you must take to reach your goal.

Evaluate the Plan

Evaluate your progress toward the goal periodically. Recheck your action plan. Are your goals realistic? Do you need to redefine your problem? Perhaps the problem has changed or maybe you have reached your goal and need to set a new one.

Evaluating your stress management plan at various times is essential to gaining a handle on stress.

Other publications in the Stress on the Farm series include: NCR-192a, *An Overview*; NCR-192b, *Farming and Fatigue*; NCR-192c, *Team of Experts*; NCR-192d, *Exercise for the Health of It*.

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**In cooperation with NCR
Educational Materials Project.**

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30 = 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Cooperative Extension Services of Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Robert L. Crom, director Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University Ames Iowa 50011