

From The Plain Dealer
WORKING WOMEN column

“The ABCs of Stress Management”
by TEDDE ABBOTT

A while back, I was in a minor fender-bender accident, and as the police officer filled out the report, I gave him my business card with my name and phone number. When he saw “stress management” listed he said, “We’ve got to talk!” That’s most people’s reaction when they find out what I do.

Many people say they feel stressed, and most people would probably agree that being a police officer is stressful, but it’s amazing how much stress we all have in our everyday lives. It can be a result of driving in rush hour, learning new software, or grocery shopping after a long hard day at work. Of course there’s stress in more serious situations too, such as illness or losing a job, but it can also result from positive events such as marriage, a promotion, or even winning money.

Stress is anything that makes you change, adjust or adapt. And it’s cumulative. For example, if you have a tense or difficult discussion with a spouse or co-worker, and later spill coffee on your computer, the stress of spilling the coffee doesn’t replace the stress of the discussion. It just adds another layer to your stress level that day. Physical and mental damage can result from too much stress, so it’s important to learn and to use good coping skills to relax and relieve the pressure. Here are just a few:

A. Allow time every day for relaxation.

Your success at managing stress depends on you not only learning, but practicing relaxation techniques. Regular practice is what makes it effective, so set aside time for regular, daily deep relaxation, even if it’s only five or ten minutes. And simply relaxing in front of the television or taking a warm bath doesn’t count! You can achieve a deeply relaxed state by learning one of the many effective techniques such as breathing, guided imagery, meditation, etc. Choose one that feels right for you.

Deep relaxation produces desirable physiological and biochemical responses that are exactly the opposite of those seen during stress. According to stress expert Dr. Edmund Jacobson: “An anxious mind cannot exist in a relaxed body”.

Regular deep relaxation has many healthy benefits. It can decrease anxiety, increase concentration, help you sleep better and generally make you feel better. When you consistently practice some form of deep relaxation, it has a cumulative effect. You become more aware of the difference between feeling stressed and feeling relaxed, so when tension builds, you’re more likely to notice it sooner and do something about it.

B. Breathe.

Breathing techniques are a foundation of stress reduction training. When we're stressed we tend to take shorter, shallow breaths. We may even hold our breath. This decreases the flow of oxygen to the body, making it harder to cope with stress. When you breathe properly, i.e., when you breathe into your abdomen, not just your chest, you take in more oxygen, promote calmness, and can reduce tension and stress quickly. The next time you feel tension building, stop what you're doing and take a few long, slow, deep abdominal breaths. Focus only on your breathing, and let a sense of calm wash over you.

You can also practice abdominal breathing on a regular basis, which works on keeping your stress level low. When clients tell me they don't have time to practice, I write them a "prescription" that states: "Take 3 deep breaths every hour". At some time during our day, we all find ourselves waiting in a line, at a red light, "on hold", or waiting for our computer to do something. These are perfect occasions to practice deep breathing. The more you shift your breathing to your abdomen the more relaxed you will feel on an ongoing basis.

C. Change your thoughts.

It's our perception of an event that's stressful, not the event itself, and what we think affects our body. There's a cause and effect relationship between what we think and how our body reacts. If your thoughts are tense or anxious your body responds with a stress response, a series of unhealthy changes; increased muscle tension, increased blood pressure, and increased heart rate, to name a few.

For example, if you're stressed about giving an upcoming talk, you may be thinking, "What if I look foolish; I'm afraid; I hate this..." or other scary thoughts that trigger the stress response. To counteract those thoughts and the negative reaction they set off, change your thoughts. Refute and challenge those thoughts by telling yourself: "I'm fine; I'm prepared; people want me to succeed..." or other positive, self-supportive, confidence-building statements. You will feel better and your body will respond positively

When you're feeling stressed and frazzled you can also simply close your eyes and take a mental vacation. Imagine a tranquil, relaxing scene. It could be a favorite vacation spot, somewhere that reminds you of serenity, or any place real or imagined that's peaceful and relaxing to you. This works especially well if you have previously learned to "visit" this place while deeply relaxed. The more familiar you are in your mind with your special relaxing place, the easier it is to relax quickly.

By learning and practicing a few easy skills, you can reduce stress and make positive changes in your life.