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## Stress Management Made Simple

By Dr. Larina Kase

### Is It Anxiety or Stress?

Most people think of anxiety and stress as the same thing, but they are actually **very different**. It's important to understand the difference because the strategies to deal with each are also very different.

Stress is the feeling of being overburdened and overwhelmed. This is having a desk full of papers in front of you, 100 unread emails in your inbox, a tight deadline quickly approaching, or a coworker who is testing your patience. Stress has to do with

external things weighing down on you. It feels like something weighing you down. Physical symptoms often include muscle tension, headaches, and backaches.

Anxiety is an internal, fear-based response to difficult situations. Anxiety is the adrenaline rush that you get when you have to give an important presentation in front of a major client. It is the trembling, heart-palpating, short-of-breath feeling you get when you are singled out in front of everyone.

**The way to deal with stress is to decrease it.**

You want to find ways to relax both during your job and outside of work so you can re-calibrate and increase your coping skills. Improving your time management or assertiveness skills can help you decrease the burden of your workload.

**The way to deal with anxiety is to increase it.**

This sounds crazy, but have you ever heard or learned that the way to get over a fear is to confront it over and over? If you are afraid of public speaking at work, you want to find as many ways as possible to experience the anxiety and over time it will become easier and your confidence will grow. This is like watching a frightening movie over and over. By the tenth time it will no longer be frightening and you will look at it differently-- it may even be boring or funny.

## **The Stress Spiral**

Stress gets started and worsened by an incremental process. It typically results from numerous things building up. One event does not usually make someone extremely stressed, but the little things add up. The other aspect of stress is your support systems or other positive coping mechanisms. These are the things that prevent you from the negative effects of stress.

Experiencing stress is like being caught in a rainstorm. If you have an umbrella and a just a short walk in front of you, it isn't a big deal. If you do not have an umbrella and you have many, many steps to take, it feels horrible. Your coping mechanism is the umbrella and the distance is the number of stressors.

## **Recognize and Change Thoughts That Fuel Stress**

The way that you think greatly influences the way that you behave.

**It is not usually the situation itself that is stressful, it is the way that you interpret it.**

If you faced a horrible situation, but thought, "Hey, I can handle this. I can even grow from it!" then you would not experience stress. If, however, you thought, "I can't deal!" then you would be stressed.

Stress builds upon itself so it is important to start to become aware of your stress-increasing thoughts. I can guarantee you that you have them.

As soon as you notice a thought like "Oh no, this is going to be disastrous..." tackle it right away by challenging it and problem solving.

Ask yourself:

- How do I KNOW that it will be disastrous?
- Are there other outcomes that can occur?
- How can I handle this difficult situation?

When you don't address the thoughts as they come, they can feel overwhelming; whereas, tackling one at a time will make you feel empowered.

## Exercise to Beat Stress

Exercise serves the fantastic purpose of doing two things at once: **Decreasing stress and increasing energy**. You'll feel better and get more done.

Exercise is crucial in reducing stress for a number of reasons. First, it serves as a coping mechanism, like the umbrella in the metaphor I gave above. It gives you a sense of empowerment and control over what feels out of control. Second, physiologically, stress creates muscle tension, headaches, and the other problems that exercise combats. Thirty minutes of aerobic exercise can effectively address many of these issues.

Include a combination of cardiovascular and strength-training exercise for best stress-reduction. Strength training is great for reducing muscle tension, a hallmark feature of stress. Create a **feasible exercise plan** that you can actually do several times per week. Do not make a plan that will fail. If I say that I'll exercise every day for 90 minutes, I know it won't happen. So don't fool yourself, create a plan you can **realistically** do starting TODAY.

Consider: convenience, costs, comfort level, time, other people who you can exercise with, and location. For instance, if time is the most critical factor, get a cardio machine and free weights and work out for 30 minutes in your house.

## Take Breaks to Take Away Stress

A short break can go a long way. Since stress builds up, taking a small break can help you to recalibrate.

Think of it as boiling water. The heat is like the stress and the boiling is the stress negatively impacting you. If you turn on the heat, the water will boil in about 5 minutes.

If you turn the burner on high for a minute and then turn it back down (the short break) a few times, it will take much longer for the water to boil or for the stress to impact you. You can also think of the break as taking the pot off of the boiling water and preventing the stress from boiling over.

## **Use Support Systems Wisely**

Remember that certain times of year, like holidays or tax day, are stressful for many people, and do not burnout your supports. Relying on your support system is important to help you feel better and make better business decisions. Be careful, however, to utilize supports effectively.

If you need more objective opinions or feel like people are getting tired of hearing about your difficulties, consider going to a counselor or hiring a coach. Remember to spend **relaxing time** (not only complaining time) with your support people doing activities that you enjoy, like listening to music, walking, playing a game, going to a movie, playing a round of golf, or baking.

## **Juggling Multiple Demands and Multitasking - and Staying Sane**

Ever feel like you are juggling so many things that at any minute you will drop all of them and lose it? Constant multitasking and juggling of demands at work can lead to intense stress and pressure. You are juggling five balls at once and feel like they are about to fall down on your head. This is the feeling of waiting for the ball to drop-literally.

You have a choice of two solutions: **You could stop juggling or you can learn how to juggle better.** The right solution depends on what works for you. Try both to see.

To stop juggling, you need to commit yourself to not multitask. This probably sounds crazy to you. You're thinking, "There's no way I can get everything done without multitasking!" Why not try this approach to find out—Maybe it works better. Or maybe it works the same but you feel less stressed and overwhelmed.

Instead of juggling, think of yourself as bowling: one ball at a time. Once that ball is finished, you can move on to the next one. This helps you to feel that you can devote yourself 100% to the task at hand without constant distractions and the stress that you aren't doing a good job.

To learn how to juggle better, you need to learn the key to multitasking: **prioritizing.** The important activities get a top place in your schedule. Do these things first to be sure they get done.

As a rule, the activities to multitask are the trivial, routine, or automatic tasks to which you do not need to devote all your attention and energy. You could check your email while you are on hold on the phone. You can flip through coupon books or catalogues while listening to your voicemails.

You do not want to multitask on the crucial activities. You do not want to multitask while you are preparing an important brief for your boss. It is not a good idea to multitask while getting ready for a significant presentation. You risk making a mistake or underperforming and creating much more stress for yourself than if you did it without multitasking.

## The Stress of Difficult–To-Deal-With People

Here are the top five tips for dealing with difficult people:

**Draw in as few people as possible.** First try to address the situation with the difficult coworker or customer without bringing in other people like supervisors or bosses. You never know how the situation can be turned around to make you look like the problem. Show yourself and the other person that you have the confidence and competence to handle it yourself.

**Don't make it personal.** Recognize that the reason that the individual is being difficult and making you want to pull your hair out might have **nothing to do with you**. Try to empathize with them and recognize that *they* need to learn how to manage stress.

**Take control.** Ask yourself what you do have control over in the situation. It may be that you can control how you choose to respond. You could tell the person that you will discuss the situation in a different context (not in front of others or after they have cooled down). You may decide to be assertive and let the individual know how they are involved in creating a stressful or uncomfortable situation for you.

**Turn the situation into a challenge or a game.** Try to make the best of difficult interpersonal situations by seeing the humor in them or by creating opportunities. You may look at a customer yelling at you as an opportunity to practice your poise and assertive communication skills which can benefit you in many areas of life.

**Take an honest look at yourself.** Some people are particularly irritating to us. Whether we recognize it or not, we may be fostering their annoying behavior by the way we respond to it. Try out a different response and see what happens. It is also possible that understanding why certain people really get you going can help you learn some important things about yourself which you can use to help decrease stress in the future.

## Let Relaxing Moments Really be Relaxing

As we've discussed, stress has a tendency to build up or "snowball." Picture a snowball rolling down a hill. At the beginning it is just a small snowball, but at the bottom of the hill, it's a size of a small car. When do you think you could best deal with it? When you can throw it like a snowball or when it can plow you over like a car. That's right—You can better handle it while it's small so the best remedy for stress is **prevention or catching it before it snowballs.**

The way to reduce stress early on is by breaking the momentum of the snowball rolling down the hill by taking breaks. Allowing yourself to **relax, refuel, and regroup** throughout the day can make a huge difference in your ability to manage stress on the job.

Unfortunately many people do not allow themselves to do take short breaks. Or they sabotage their relaxing moments by doing too much, feeling guilty for relaxing, or thinking about their "to do" lists.

Force yourself to take **several mental breaks throughout the day.** Even if they are only 5 minutes each, they will make a huge difference in your stress level. Anytime you do something other than relax during your 5 minutes, start the time over again so you really get 5 minute breaks.

Figure out **what to do during your breaks that feels relaxing.** It may be listening to music, going on a brief walk, talking with a friend or coworker, enjoying a fruit salad, or anything else. Try some different activities to see what helps you feel less stressed and more focused on your work afterwards.

## **Start Now**

Remember that poor time management and procrastination lead to STRESS. So don't wait, start practicing these strategies today. The more you remember and use them, the more they will work, and the more relaxed and content you will feel!

## **About the Author**

Dr. Larina Kase is the President of Strength Weight Loss & Wellness and a self-help guru. Through coaching, books, and speaking engagements, she helps people get in control of their lives and enjoy each day. [Get a Free 8-week E-course when you sign up for our Free newsletter packed with tips.](#)