

Stress Management and the Challenge of Balance

If you think you don't have satisfactory balance in your life, you're not alone. One of the most stressful parts of life is balancing work and family. Stress is often the unhealthy result of those efforts.

Stress is your body's signal that an area of your life needs attention. Don't ignore the stress signal when you receive it. Often, this alert means it's time to rest, acknowledge a limitation, make a decision or meet a need.

Ignored consistently, stress can escalate to distress. Permanent distress leads to burnout and exhaustion, as well as increased vulnerability to physical and emotional issues such as anxiety, heart attacks and ulcers.

Developing a balanced lifestyle and being more attentive to personal needs is a far more positive approach to managing stress than ignoring it. Yet many women neglect their needs trying to meet those of others, both at home and at work. The key to successfully managing stress is balance.

A balanced life can include work, friends, family, play, love and time for self and spiritual enrichment. The likely result of such balance is not exhaustion but rather a greater sense of well-being.

Managing stress and balancing multiple responsibilities can be quite an undertaking. Understanding the nature, causes and symptoms of stress can help you recognize a problem before taking steps to remedy the situation. There are a number of preventive and coping strategies to help to that end, some of which address the pileup effect of daily hassle and can help manage long-term distress.

Identifying a stressor

A stressor is any demand on your mind or body. It can have external causes, such as the irritability of your boss, or internal causes, such as a distorted belief that tells you caring for your needs is selfish.

Stressors can also be pleasant or unpleasant. Although losing a job is stressful, so is moving on to a better one. Getting a divorce or getting married to the person you love both place additional demands on your mind and body. Everyone is different. What one person considers stressful may barely affect another.

To better manage your stressors, first learn to recognize your body's signals and identify the causes of your distress.

Use the daily stress record to make note of stressful events and your body's response to them. If your first attempt to manage the stressor does not work, don't give up. Finding a permanent solution to a highly stressful situation may take some time and effort:

- Can you physically change the situation to make it less stressful?
- If the stressor can't be changed, can you pay less attention to it?
- Can you lessen the stressor's negative impact by approaching the situation in a different, more positive way?
- If the stressor can't be changed, can you change other stressors to avoid pileup?

Admit that there are some situations you can't change. Stop wasting emotional energy on them, and dedicate your time and effort to finding solutions to situations you can control.

Points to remember about stress

- You can respond positively or negatively to life events that have the potential to cause stress.
- Many stressors are rooted in your daily habits and the ways that you think about what has happened.
- Rigid standards and expecting perfection often lead to stress.
- Unmanaged stress can contribute to diseases such as ulcers, heart attacks and depression. Other diseases can be caused by habits used to cope with stress, such as smoking, drinking or drug use.
- There is a spillover effect between work and home environments. Distress or satisfaction in one area affects how an individual feels about the other.
- A low level of personal control combined with a high level of demand can cause severe stress.
- Stress can result from major life events, such as a divorce, or minor occurrences, like the accumulation of daily hassles.

Pay attention to how you currently react to life's events. Stress can have a cumulative effect without you realizing it. The pileup effects of everyday hassles can become very harmful to your mental and physical health if you aren't managing them effectively.

Women's employment outside the home might cause distress, depending on the circumstances. If a working mother receives adequate support with household chores

Daily stress record

| Event | When it occurred | Stress signal(s) |
|-------|------------------|------------------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |

Stress signals

Fatigue
 Headaches
 Anxiety
 Sleeplessness
 Anger
 Irritability
 Lack of appetite
 Overeating
 High blood pressure
 Muscle tension
 Indigestion
 Inability to concentrate
 Depression
 Decreased sexual interest
 Burnout

Sometimes a short-term response is enough. Try doing something you enjoy, such as taking a short walk, reading a favorite book or listening to music. However, it's time to find a long-term solution when the stressor is recurring. Consider a stressful situation you are currently facing, think it through and write down your ideas. Writing what you think and feel can clarify the situation and give you a new point of view.

Thinking through a stressor

Stressor: _____

What I can change about it: _____

What I cannot change about it: _____

People who can help: _____

First step I can take: _____

My action plan includes the following steps:

and child care, then outside employment can contribute positively to a woman's well-being.

Setting priorities

Thoughtful planning can help you gain a greater sense of control over your life. Set short- and long-term goals and develop realistic strategies to achieve them. Consider the various aspects of your life:

- What is really important in my life?
- Who are the important people in my life?
- What do I want to achieve for my family and myself?
- How will I prioritize the things that are most important?

Stress reduction

There are a number of ways to reduce stress and set more reasonable standards for yourself and others. Some will apply more directly to your circumstances than others. Work on making one or two changes at a time.

- Focus on what's really important to you and your family, and develop a list of priorities. Try having regularly scheduled meetings to talk about family matters.
- Practice saying no to added demands on your personal time.
- Involve family members in household responsibilities, and seek outside help if necessary.

- Learn to value yourself and what you do; don't wait for the approval of others.
- Live in the present; don't dwell on the past or worry too much about the future.
- Try to be more flexible and forget about being perfect; you only need to do your best and continue to grow.
- Work fun and relaxation into your daily and long-term plans.
- Plan ahead to allow sufficient time for making important decisions and developing alternative plans.
- Focus on your accomplishments rather than your shortcomings.
- Discard negative beliefs, and learn to talk to yourself in positive ways.
- Invest in your health. Eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly and get enough sleep.
- Learn to listen well, and communicate your needs and preferences clearly.
- Have a sense of humor and laugh often. Avoid taking everything too seriously.
- Learn to negotiate. When faced with conflict, seek solutions that maintain positive feelings.
- Establish networks of cooperation, support and friendship at work and in your community. Learn to delegate responsibilities.
- Learn to accept disappointments, and move on.
- Let go of anger in physically healthy ways. Exercise is one of the best tension relievers.

- Do one thing at a time. Break demanding projects into manageable steps, and avoid procrastination. Remember to celebrate your small successes.
- Reduce tension by becoming more organized. At work and at home, adopt methods for keeping track of commitments, due dates and events.
- Develop problem-solving skills and explore a variety of alternatives.
- Work with others to establish more family-friendly policies in the community and the workplace.
- Take advantage of the various human resources in your community.

- U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, Region VII, 800-252-4706
- Career Planning and Placement, University of Missouri, 573-882-0697

A parting word

It is rewarding to find someone whom you like, but it is essential to like yourself.

It is quickening to recognize that someone is good, but it is indispensable to view yourself as acceptable.

It is a delight to discover people who are worthy of respect, admiration and love, but it is vital to believe in yourself deserving of these things.

You are the only one who you will never leave or lose, and therefore you must learn to take care of yourself.

— Jo Coudert

Community resources

Search online or check your phone book for numbers not listed below.

- Public library
- County MU Extension office
- Local hospitals
- Support groups in your area
- Health care providers
- Division of social and family services
- Counselors in your religious community
- Marriage and family therapists
- Human resource managers at place of employment
- ParentLink, 800-552-8522
- Parental Stress Helpline, 800-367-2543
- The Missouri Women's Council (employment and training), 573-751-0810

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