

Quick Guide to Stress Management

Stress is a normal part of life. How one copes with that stress likely has a strong impact on one's physical and emotional health. Coping with stress has two aspects: **stress awareness and stress management**.

For an overview of this topic watch the *Don't Stress the Stress* webinar recording available at <http://tragecancer.org/StressManagementWebinar>

Stress Awareness

Each individual has their own personal sources of stress (called stressors), as well as physical reactions to acute stress, and physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions to chronic stress (called stress responses). Many people are often unaware of the scope and/or intensity of their stressors as well as the pattern of their stress response. Completing the following stress awareness worksheets is the first step in learning to cope with stress.

- Sources of Stress: <http://tragecancer.org/StressWorksheet-Sources>
- Signs of Acute Stress: <http://tragecancer.org/StressWorksheet-Acute>
- Signs of Chronic Stress: <http://tragecancer.org/StressWorksheet-Chronic>
- Three Day Stress Diary: <http://tragecancer.org/StressDiary>

Once these worksheets are completed, the following stress management tools can be utilized.

Stress Management

Stress management techniques include Problem Solving, Changing Attitudes or Cognitive Appraisal, and Relaxation Techniques. While presented in this sequential order, any of the techniques can be used independently and in any order.

- **Problem Solving**

Problem solving is the first step in the management phase of coping with stress. This should be tried after the sources of stress (stressors) as well as physical reactions to acute stress and physical, psychological, and behavioral reactions to chronic stress (called stress responses) have been identified. The goal of problem solving is to eliminate major stressors or, at the very least, to make them less stressful.

1. *Relax*: Pick a time and place that is comfortable and without distraction. Focus only on the process of problem solving. This helps to clear the mind of extraneous thoughts and to lower emotional levels down to a point that is better for working through the problem.
2. *Identify the Real Problem*: This may not always be clear. For example, many people may state that they hate their jobs. The real problem could be related to the boss, co-workers, the work environment, the type of job they actually do, or even the freeway commute necessary to get to the job. It is also important to separate out feelings (e.g., anger, anxiety) which are stress responses from the source of the stress (i.e., the stressor.) Pinpoint the exact problem and proceed from there.
3. *Brainstorm for Possible Solutions*: List every possible solution no matter how serious, silly or absurd it may be. It can be tension reducing just to imagine some of these ideas.
4. *Select Once Solution and Implement It*: Look at the list and select the solution that appears to have the most likely chance of solving the problem and being workable. Try it out. It is important here not to sabotage oneself before even trying something by saying it won't work. Nothing ventured, nothing gained!

5. *Evaluate Result of Solution:* Did it work? Did it have the result you expected?

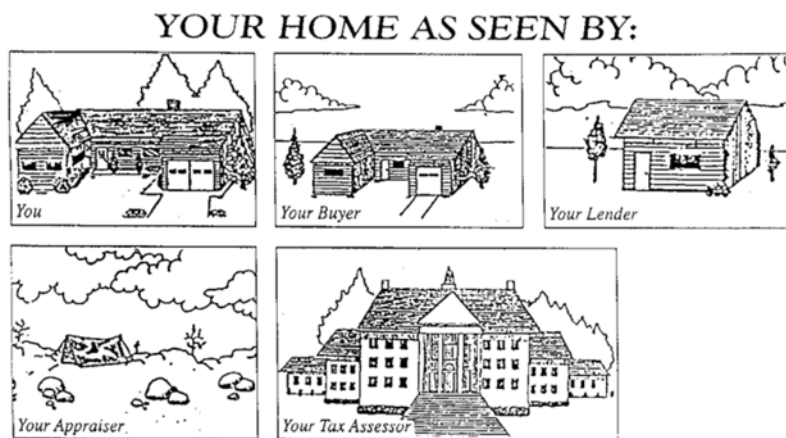
6. *If it worked – celebrate!* If it hasn't worked, go back to step 3 and 4 and keep on trying!

At some point it will become clear that: 1) the problem is solved, or 2) the problem is at least less stressful, or 3) the problem can't be problem solved away.

- **Changing Attitude or Cognitive Appraisal**

If a stressor cannot be eliminated or at least altered through problem solving, the next management technique to try is altering how you think about the stressor. Changing your attitude towards a stressor would involve asking yourself if it really is all that important. For instance, how important is it really if the house is not perfectly clean or if someone else got the office with a window? Of course, some stressors really are important and can be a threat (e.g., cancer) but many of the daily hassles that we get upset about are not all that crucial. Ask yourself: "Is this really important in the grand scheme of things, life altering, or will it really matter in 20 years?"

To understand how individuals can perceive or assess the same thing quite differently is clearly demonstrated by the cartoon.



- **Relaxation**

Finally, it is helpful to know how to alter physiological responses to stressors when they do occur. A variety of relaxation techniques are helpful for this purpose. One of these is a simple Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) with Guided Imagery (GI). PMR was first described in the medical literature in the 1930s. Since that time it has been used with good effect in the management of a whole range of emotional and physical problems including pain management. As we become stressed our muscles begin to tense (even though we may be unaware of this) in readiness for action. PMR consists of becoming progressively aware of the level of tension in each of the major muscle groups in your body by contracting those muscles and then releasing the tension. By learning to relax the body, it is possible to achieve a simultaneous state of mental relaxation. In the process, we redirect our attention from stressful thoughts and images and can become immersed in the activity of "letting go" of tension. Guided Imagery is a technique that individuals can use to achieve a positive mental imaginary state. Initially, individuals can learn the GI technique with the help of a trained health care professional. PMR and GI should be thought of as a skills, and like any other skill, it requires practice. Once these skills has been mastered it will require only a few seconds to initiate and can be used effectively to decrease physical responses and master stress. Patience and practice are the keys to learning relaxation. To learn these techniques listen to the recorded exercise below a few times. The goal is to eventually learn these techniques and to be able to initiate and perform them on your own.

Recording of Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) and Guided Imagery Exercise:
<http://triacancer.org/relaxationexercise>

For additional stress management tools, visit <http://triacancer.org/stressmanagement>.