

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 *Stress: What It Is & How to Deal With It* webinar recording available at TriageCancer.org/webinar-stress.

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 or their stress responses. Completing the following stress awareness worksheets is the first step in learning to cope with stress.

- Sources of Stress: <https://trriagecancer.org/StressWorksheet-Sources>
- Signs of Acute Stress: <https://trriagecancer.org/StressWorksheet-Acute>
- Signs of Chronic Stress: <https://trriagecancer.org/StressWorksheet-Chronic>
- Three Day Stress Diary: <https://trriagecancer.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.

1. **Problem Solving**

Problem solving is the first step in managing stress, after you have identified your stressors and stress responses. The goal of problem solving is to eliminate major stressors or, at the very least, to make them less stressful.

- 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.
- Identify the Real Problem:* This may not always be clear. For example, many people may say they hate their job. The real problem could be related to their bosses, co-workers, work environment, type of job they actually do, or even the commute necessary to get to work. 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.
- Brainstorm Possible Solutions:* List every possible solution no matter how serious, silly, or realistic it may be. It can be tension reducing just to imagine some of these ideas.
- Select One Solution and Implement It:* Look at your list of possible solutions and pick the solution that has the best chance of solving the problem and being workable. Try it out. Don't sabotage yourself before even trying something by saying it won't work. Nothing ventured, nothing gained!
- Evaluate Result of Solution:* Did it work? Did it have the result you expected?
- If it worked – celebrate! If it hasn't worked, go back to step D and E and keep on trying!*

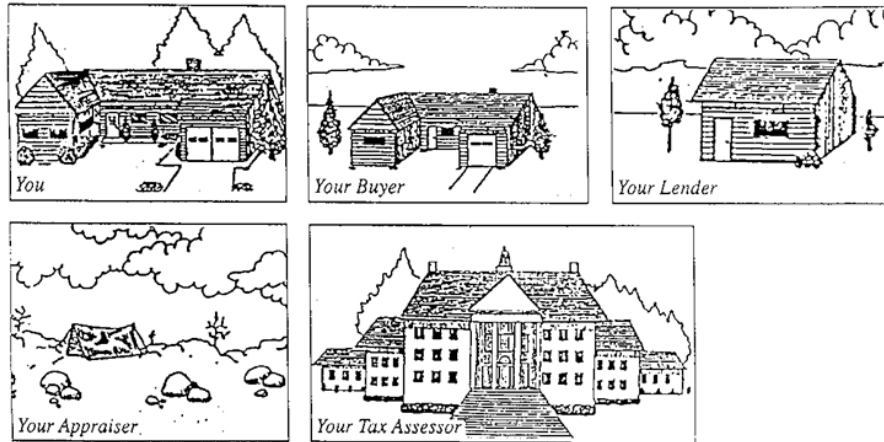
At some point, it will become clear that: 1) the problem is solved, or 2) the problem is at least less stressful, or 3) the problem can't be problem solved away.

2. Changing Attitude or Cognitive Appraisal

If a stressor cannot be eliminated or at least improved through problem solving, the next stress management technique to try is altering how you think about the stressor. Changing your attitude towards a stressor involves 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?"

How individuals can perceive or assess the same thing quite differently is demonstrated by this cartoon:

YOUR HOME AS SEEN BY:



3. Relaxation

Finally, it is helpful to know how to alter your physiological responses to stressors when they do occur. A variety of relaxation techniques can be helpful. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) with Guided Imagery (GI)**: PMR was first described in the medical literature in the 1930s. Since then it has been proven effective at managing of a whole range of emotional and physical problems, including pain. 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 focusing on relaxing the body, it is possible to achieve a simultaneous state of mental relaxation. As we redirect our attention from stressful thoughts and images, we 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 skills, and like any other skill, it requires practice. Once these skills have been mastered, they 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.

You can watch a free Recording of Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) and Guided Imagery Exercise at: <https://tragecancer.org/stressmanagement>.

For additional stress management tools, visit: <https://tragecancer.org/stressmanagement>.