

## Managing Emotional Symptoms of Stress

You have much more control over your emotional state than you probably realize. What and how you think can determine what and how you feel. What and how you feel color what and how you think. Getting control of your thoughts changes the way you feel and getting control of your feelings alters the way you think. The techniques described here help you manage this complex equation.

You can use some of these techniques by yourself but you may need help with others. Since many techniques involve relaxation, they tend to lower your metabolic rate and general level of physiological arousal. They may interact with any prescription medications you are taking for a seizure, cardiovascular, diabetic, or endocrine disorder. Be sure to check with your physician before using them.



### Emotional Release

You don't want to get rid of emotions, you just want to manage and get them under control. A three-step method of emotional release has helped many of our clients. The first step is to identify exactly what it is you're feeling and label it. As we said before, emotions often defy description, but try. Building a better emotional vocabulary makes it easier. Write down as many adjectives as you can for anger, anxiety, and depression. Use a thesaurus, get words from friends, family, and co workers. Sort your words in order of intensity. Learn to examine your emotional state and attach a label that describes it with some degree of accuracy.

Next, experiment with thoughts that increase the intensity of the emotion you're feeling. Then try thoughts that will reduce that intensity. Rate the intensity level of your emotions on a scale from 1 (the lowest level of intensity) to 10 (the highest level of intensity). Learn to raise and lower your level with your thoughts.

Learning to release emotions is the third step. This can happen in a number of ways, such as acting them out, talking them out, or thinking them out. Shouting, crying, or being fearful takes the edge off your feelings, allowing you to think more clearly. You can talk about how you feel with a friend, family member, or counselor. Sometimes, images and thoughts can release you from emotions.

We have a friend who cries in her hot bath when she's feeling sad. It's a good way to release your depressive symptoms. Some people act out their frustrations and anger by shouting into the wind or beating a pillow. Some clients express their fear and anxiety with pat phrases like "Oh, my God." or "Oh, oh." In releasing your emotions through talking to other people, be sure you don't act out the emotion toward them. Try to stay calm and talk to them rationally about how you feel. A word of caution, we are not advocating expressing feelings irresponsibly just to get them off your chest nor are we suggesting you wallow in your feelings indefinitely. The intensification and expression of feelings is one aspect of learning to manage strong emotions and getting them under control.

If you learn how to intensify emotions, you can also learn how to decrease or to transcend them. When you do, you will feel more in control and can choose the emotional option that fits the specific time and place.

Here are a few rules to remember about releasing feelings:

- Mean what you say, say what you mean, but don't be mean when you say it.

- Don't break things that don't belong to you.
- Don't hit other people.
- Don't hurt yourself (physically or with drugs, food, etc.).
- Use a little judgment when in public.

## Self-monitoring

Relate your thoughts to your emotions by keeping track of what you're thinking about when you feel them. Try to make connections between your thoughts and your emotional symptoms. Sort out your irrational thoughts and counter them with rational ones. Irrational thoughts can lead to irrational behavior.

## Taking Quiet Time for Yourself

Set aside quiet time for yourself every day. Do it regularly, don't wait until you're anxious, angry, or depressed. It doesn't have to be a lot of time. Even twenty to thirty minutes is enough time. Pick a place where you can be by yourself and undisturbed.

One of our clients chose his lunch hour as his quiet time and spent it in his car in the company parking lot.

## Deep Breathing

There are few self-regulatory exercises as calming as deep breathing. Deep breathing improves the efficiency of your cardiovascular system in delivering oxygen to your body including your brain.

Try the "one, two, three" deep breathing exercise we teach our clients: In a seated position, place your elbows on your knees, lean forward, and place your chin in your hands. Now, breathing through your nose, take three deep breaths and hold each one for a slow count of three. Lean back and continue to breath slowly and deeply through your nose as you let yourself calm down and relax.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

It's impossible to be relaxed and emotionally tense at the same time. They are mutually exclusive. PMR is a powerful technique not only for releasing muscle tension and becoming aware of your body, but also for releasing emotional tension. It involves tensing and relaxing muscles in a progressive series and takes about twenty minutes to complete. It is often taught as an introduction to biofeedback and self-hypnosis autogenic imagery.

## Visual Imagery

As you relax using PMR, conjure up images of emotional release. Try different images until you find one that appeals to you. Often feelings cannot be put into words. Instead they come out through our imaginations. We fantasize scenes that never happen, perhaps what we wish we could have said to the boss or what we should have done to forestall some tragedy. Sometimes the visual image is the memory of a real event that keeps recurring as a "flashback".

You can change your images to either increase or decrease the intensity of your feelings. You can use visual imagery when you are ready to let go of your anger, anxiety, or depression. One client, tired of being angry at her landlord, imagined putting her anger in a black balloon and letting it float away. It got smaller and smaller as it soared into the sky.

## **Professional Help and Assistance**

### Behavioral Medicine

A specialist in behavioral medicine is generally a psychologist or physician trained in the diagnosis and behavioral treatment of stress-related emotional and physical symptoms and complaints. Many hospitals and medical centers have departments of behavioral medicine or can refer you to a practitioner in your neighborhood.

### Psychotherapy

If these techniques don't work, your anxiety, anger, and depression may be rooted in deep-seated psychological problems and you may need psychotherapy. Psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers are

professional psychotherapists. They may come from different schools of thought ranging from doctrinaire Freudian psychoanalysis to cognitive behavioral therapy. Whatever the approach, it has to feel right to you and you have to trust your therapist. If the approach doesn't make sense, or you don't feel comfortable with the therapist, try another one. You can get referrals from your physician, state professional organizations, mental health centers, or try the Yellow Pages.

Make your first session a trial interview. Find out something about the therapist's approach, orientation, training, background, and experience with problems like yours. Ask questions about them as people.

## Counseling

In addition to therapists, professionals such as ministers, priests, and rabbis offer counseling. Counseling is generally much more short-term than psychotherapy and is limited to specific problems and issues. Counselors are more likely to offer advice and assistance in direct problem solving.

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## What You Can't, or Shouldn't, do in Your Will



Wills are wonderful, simple, inexpensive ways to address many people's estate planning needs, but they can't do it all. Here are some things you shouldn't expect to accomplish in your will.

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## Irritable Bowel Syndrome: Unspoken Ailment



Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is a disorder that interferes with the normal function of the large intestine. Most people can control their symptoms with diet, stress management, and medications. But for some people, IBS can interfere with work, social events, or travel. It usually begins around age 20. Many people let IBS persist for several years before seeing a health care provider.

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