Developing Positive Coping Strategies

Stress happens. If we didn’t experience a little bit of stress in our lives, we wouldn’t be motivated to do anything. Mild stress actually propels us forward so that we can take care of our daily needs. Anything above a mild level, however, begins to take a toll on our physical and mental well-being.

Stress occurs when we perceive that some life event (or series of events) is too much for us to control and manage. Too often, we develop unhealthy ways of coping with these events. It is not uncommon for stress to trigger a need for self-medication with tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs. We may also develop a tendency to eat too much or too little during these times. Dealing with stress may wear us down and cause us to sleep too much. The anxiety produced by our stress may interfere with our ability to fall asleep or stay asleep. We may find ourselves procrastinating or zoning out as a way of avoiding the cause of our stress. In some cases, we may become very aggressive and lash out at others.

The first step in taking control and changing some of these unproductive behaviors is to identify the source of your stress. It will be helpful to keep a stress diary so that you can track life events and your responses to them.

Write down what caused your stress and how you felt, both physically and emotionally, in response to it. Record how you acted in response to the stress. Lastly, indicate what you did to make yourself feel better.

Once you have an understanding of what pushes your buttons and how you respond, you can begin to evaluate whether your current coping strategies are helpful or not. Having a stiff drink every night might make you feel better temporarily, but it won’t address the source of your stress or make anything better for your long term well-being.

It helps to understand that there are problems in life that we can change and problems in life that we can’t impact. Once we acknowledge that, we can begin to develop healthier coping strategies. One way to reduce stress is to alter the stressor. This sounds simplistic, but it can be an effective strategy. For instance, if you enjoy hosting social gatherings, but you become overwhelmed and stressed by the preparations, try scaling them back. Elect to host fewer people at a time. Cater food or organize a potluck instead of trying to prepare everything yourself. Plan activities that only include light snacks and beverages.

Another way to reduce stress is to avoid the stressor altogether. If large crowds of people make you feel nervous and anxious, plan things like shopping at times when fewer people will be out.

If you cannot alter the problem, then you must find ways to make peace with this and accept that there is a change in your life. If you’ve sustained an injury that keeps you from an activity that you always enjoyed, you can choose to be bitter and sad, or you can fondly remember the good times you had and select a new activity to enjoy.

If you can’t cope by yourself, ask for help.

Even moderate stress can slow us down and impact our health. Find healthy ways to cope.
Healthy Ways to Rejuvenate Yourself

Whether we’re trying to survive the end of the semester or striving for a promotion at work, there are times when life seems more intense and forces in the universe are out to get us. We don’t have to lose ourselves in the madness, however. There are steps that we can take to find our emotional happy place.

Go for a walk. This simple activity can temporarily take us away from our problems and allow us to focus on things we may not take the time to see on a regular basis. Walking helps strengthen our bones, tone our muscles, pump oxygen through our bodies, and relax us.

Play with a pet. Our pets have a way of loving us unconditionally. They don’t care if you barely made a C on an exam or stuttered your way through a meeting you were leading. They only know that you are with them, and they love you for it.

Call a good friend. When was the last time you indulged yourself in a phone call to talk for the sake of talking? Life has gotten so fast and complicated that we hardly have time to breathe. It’s easy to lose track of time and to forget our friends because we’re all so busy with other things. Social media are great, but there’s something about a familiar voice that can help us put everything in perspective.

Write (or draw) in a journal. Having a creative outlet gives us a chance to get things outside of ourselves. Creating a symbolic image of our problems can help us decide what we want to do about them. Once outside of us, problems can be more easily examined and laid to rest.

Listen to music. It doesn’t matter what genre you choose. Music has a way of moving us to a more relaxed frame of mind or energizing us to get up and move. You can even sing along if you want to and lose yourself in the moment. Crank it up while you do chores around the house or take it with you when you walk or work out. The right music can make everything better.

Plant something. There is something delightful about seeing something that you’ve planted grow into a beautiful array of flowers or a healthy addition to dinner. Even if you plant in containers on a small scale, it’s nice to see a splash of color in the window and to catch a whiff of fragrance in the air.

Light scented candles. Smell is a very important sense for us, but often one that is underappreciated. Good smells help us relax or perk us up. If you can’t light the candles or prefer not to because of the open flame, invest in a candle warmer (about $5 at Wal-Mart). The hotplate melts the candle in its jar and lets you use the candle longer than if you burn the wick.

Read a good book. As a student, you might think that extra reading is the last thing you want to do. However, there is a difference between the deliberate reading you must do in order to master your classes and the absolutely decadent reading that involves a good novel on a rainy afternoon. Losing yourself in a steamy romance or suspenseful mystery for a few hours takes you away from the pressures of your everyday existence.

Take a long bath. For many of us, the morning routine is so rushed that we barely have time to shower before we’re out the door. Those with young children may also have forgotten what it’s like to actually be alone in the bathroom. However, slipping away and locking the door so that you can sink into a hot, steamy tub of suds can be very rewarding. Add some calming music and a nice fragrance and you almost have that vacation you can’t afford again this year.

Laugh out loud. Being grown up doesn’t have to mean being grumpy. Laugh loud. Laugh often. It’s good for the soul.
Coping with “Invisible” Illnesses

Maybe you’ve heard the whispers about why you never take the stairs. Or you’ve seen the disapproving looks from people when you park in a handicapped space even though your placard is in place. You don’t look sick, so what right do you have to talk about your pain or fatigue?

As humans, we rely on our sight to provide the bulk of what we experience in the world. We recognize when someone has a broken limb, is obviously recovery from surgery, or has oxygen to help them breathe. When we can’t see the problem, however, we tend to dismiss it, which can be very trying for those suffering from very real ailments that we just can’t see.

There is a vast array of diseases/illnesses that fall under the umbrella of Autoimmune Diseases. Basically, your body’s immune system, which normally works to protect you from infections and diseases, begins to attack healthy cells instead. There are more than 80 types of autoimmune diseases, and many have similar symptoms. The first symptoms tend to be tiredness, muscles aches, and a low-grade fever. Often, a diagnosis depends on the elimination of other possible illnesses. Doctors who don’t regularly work with patients affected by such ailments may suspect them of malingering, and the patients feel frustrated trying to make people understand that their pain and fatigue are real. Once identified, treatment often relies on relieving symptoms with varying levels of success.

Fibromyalgia is a disorder characterized by chronic pain. Imagine stepping off a curb and being caught and dragged by a passing car. This is how many sufferers describe a typical day. Although not a progressive disorder, those affected may have days that are much worse than others. Fatigue, sleep issues, and mental “fog” accompany the disorder. While there now are medications to help with the pain, it is important for the person with the disorder to learn what kinds of things trigger bad days so they can make adjustments. It is also important to help friends and family understand that the pain is very real and that there are days when the person simply cannot do certain things. For some people, the pain and fatigue are debilitating even when they may not “look” sick.

Just as fibromyalgia is marked by chronic and overwhelming pain, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is characterized by extreme exhaustion. Those affected may sleep through the night, yet wake up tired and un-refreshed. While there may be headache or muscle pain, the main symptoms involve a heavy fatigue, as if the body has been pushed beyond its endurance. It becomes more difficult for the affected person to remember things or to concentrate on tasks. Diagnosing chronic fatigue syndrome involves ruling out other possible ailments.

Lupus is a chronic disease that can damage any part of the body. It is difficult to measure how many people in the United States have lupus because the symptoms vary greatly from person to person depending on which organs may be affected. While many of the symptoms of lupus are similar to those of fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome, some individuals may also experience anemia, sensitivity to sunlight, or the classic butterfly rash across the nose and cheeks. Less common symptoms include sores in the mouth or nose, blood clots, seizures, or strokes.

A good prognosis involves working closely with your health care professional, recognizing triggers, and coming to terms with your personal limitations. Also, it is important to help loved ones, employers, and co-workers understand that you suffer from something very real even if it is “invisible.”

Educating others about your illness can help reduce your stress.

Do you have ideas for a story or recipe? Please send them to Mary Turner at mturner@occc.edu or to Alta Price at aprice@occc.edu.
Healthy Breakfast Sandwich

Nonstick cooking spray
4 eggs and 4 egg whites
1/4 cup minced chives
1/4 cup minced parsley
4 whole-wheat English muffins
4 1/2 inch thick round slices Canadian bacon
1 large beefsteak tomato, sliced into 1/2 inch thick slices

Whisk together eggs and egg whites in a medium bowl. Add chives and parsley and stir to incorporate. Spray a large, nonstick skillet with cooking spray. Ladle 1/4 egg mixture into skillet and cook omelet style, until eggs are cooked through, about 1 to 2 minutes per side. Slide omelet onto plate and repeat with remaining eggs. Cover with foil to keep warm.

In the same skillet, heat Canadian bacon until warm, about 1 to 2 minutes per side. Toast English muffin.

Fold omelet to fit English muffin, then place omelet on muffin half. Top with Canadian bacon, tomato, and other muffin half.

Who says you have to go out to get a good breakfast sandwich. Enjoy this one at home without the added fat or sodium.

Whether you're celebrating a graduation or just the end of the semester, here’s a chip-n-dip idea: chop 1 red pepper and 2 unseeded jalapenos. Combine with 1 can no salt added corn, 1/2 can diced olives, 16 ounces of softened cream cheese, and 1 packet of Hidden Valley Ranch seasoning mix. Serve with vegetable sticks or whole grain crackers.

Enjoy and have a great summer!