What stresses you out? I bet you have no problem making a list: family, school, work, kids, finances, health, friends, etc. It quickly becomes overwhelming! Stress not only affects us emotionally and mentally, but it can also affect us physically. It may feel like there is nothing you can do about the stress in your life, but you have more control over these things than you think. Yes, the bills aren’t going to stop, your work and social responsibilities will always be demanding, and you will always need more time to get everything done. But you are in charge! That may be hard to believe, but you are: You control your thoughts, emotions, schedule, environment, and reactions to problems. As mentioned, there are some things you cannot control, but there is much you can. Managing stress is all about taking charge of the things you can control and accepting those you cannot. Your ultimate goal should be a balanced life with time for everything—whether work or fun, relationships or alone time. To find that balance, you must identify and examine the sources of stress in your life, which you’ve started, but let’s take a closer look.

IT’S ALWAYS CRAZY AROUND HERE

It isn’t always easy to identify the sources of your stress. Your true stressors may not be obvious at first because it can be easy to overlook your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that lead to stress. For example, maybe you find yourself stressing out each time you have an assignment due for Composition. As such, you think writing papers stresses you out. However, you have no trouble writing once you find an idea, but you struggle in the last hour to get started. So maybe it’s your procrastination or lack of planning that actually stresses you out.

To identify your true stressors, ask yourself:

- Do I explain away stress as temporary (“I just have too much going on right now”) even though you can’t remember the last time you took a break from everything?
- Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life (“It’s always crazy around here”) or as part of your personality (“I thrive off of the busyness” or “I am high-strung”)?
- Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events (“My boss is a jerk”), or view it as entirely normal (“Work is supposed to be stressful—that’s why it’s called ‘work’ and not ‘fun’”)?

You must accept responsibility for the role you play in stressing yourself out, or your stress will always be out of your control. If you shrug it off because it is only happening “right now” or treat “crazy” as the accepted normal, you are relinquishing control and robbing yourself of peace of mind. Your boss may be a jerk and you may thrive off of busyness, but that does not mean stress should take over your job or that you shouldn’t have some downtime from your activities. Yes, jobs can be stressful—some jobs more than others—and we are all busy all of the time, but how you react shapes how you stress.
Once you recognize how you treat stress generally, then you can begin to examine more specific stressors. It may be helpful to keep track of your stress by journaling. By writing down what stresses you out and how you handle it will allow you to see patterns and common themes. Ask yourself:

- What caused my stress?
- How does it make me feel emotionally and physically?
- How did I react to it?
- How did I make myself feel better?

COPING WITH STRESS

How you react shapes how you stress, and we know that there are positive and negative ways of reacting to stress. Moreover, there are healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with stress. Your stress journal can help you identify how you manage and cope with stress. Do you turn to healthy or unhealthy ways of coping? Are they helpful or unproductive? Some coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress but ultimately cause more damage. If you find you are using unhealthy ways to cope, you may be compounding your problems.

Unhealthy Ways

- smoking
- abusing alcohol
- abusing medications or drugs
- eating disorders
- procrastinating
- zoning out in front of the TV or computer
- avoiding problems
- withdrawing from family, friends, and activities
- lashing out at others through violence and angry outbursts

If your methods of coping are damaging your health emotionally or physically, it is time to find healthier ways of coping. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. Since everyone responds to stress in different ways, there is no one single way of coping with it. However, there is one method you may find helpful, whether you choose to change the situation or change your reaction:

The Four A’s

OR

AVOID the stressor
ALTER the stressor

ADAPT to the stressor
ACCEPT the stressor
AVOIDING UNNECESSARY STRESS

We know that all stress cannot be avoided and that we must face our stress rather than avoid it. However, there are a number of stressors that can be eliminated from your life by:

- Learning to say “no”—Know your limits and refuse to take on more than you can handle.
- Avoiding people who stress you out—If you can’t turn a relationship into a positive one, limit the time you spend with that person or end the relationship respectfully. You may also find it helpful to remove people from your social networking profiles who create drama. Just be careful that you don’t create drama in “defriending” them!
- Taking control of your environment—if something makes you anxious or tense, circumvent it. For example, if the news makes you nervous, turn off the TV. If sitting in traffic stresses you out, try to find a longer, less-traveled route. If you hate the crowds in stores, shop online when possible.
- Avoiding hot-button issues—Avoid discussing topics that make you upset or avoid arguing with the same people of the same issue. If someone else brings it up, excuse yourself from the discussion.
- Paring down your to-do list—Analyze your schedule and responsibilities and prioritize what must get done and what must get done before others.

ALTERING THE SITUATION

If you can’t avoid a stressful situation, then change it. Decide what needs to be changed to prevent the problem from presenting itself in the future. You may need to change how you communicate or operate in order to alter a situation by:

- Expressing your feelings—Don’t bottle them up! If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way.
- Being willing to compromise—You can’t ask someone to change and not be willing to do the same. If you are both willing to give a little ground, you will be more likely to find a happy middle ground.
- Being more assertive—Deal with problems directly, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them.
- Managing your time better—Plan ahead and make sure you don’t overextend yourself.

ADAPTING TO THE STRESSOR

It may not be possible to change the situation, so you may need to change yourself. Human beings are designed to adapt. You can regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude by:

- Reframing problems—Try to view stressful situations in a more positive light.
• Looking at the big picture—Ask yourself how important this issue will be in the long run and whether it worth getting upset. If not, focus your time, energy, and resources elsewhere.

• Adjusting your standards—Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection in yourself, in others, or in situations. Set reasonable standards and learn to accept “good enough” when necessary.

• Focusing on the positive—Take time to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including good things about yourself.

**ACCEPTING WHAT YOU CANNOT CHANGE**

Some stressors cannot be changed, planned for, or avoided. You can’t prevent or change the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national crisis. The best way to cope with these types of stressors is to accept them by:

• Not trying to control the uncontrollable—Rather than railing against situations you can’t change, focus on what you can control and change.

• Looking for the upside—Try to look for opportunities for personal growth during these situations. If your own choices led to the stressful situation, reflect on them to learn from your mistakes.

• Sharing your feelings—Talk to someone you trust. Expressing what you are experiencing is cathartic even if you can’t change the situation.

• Learning to forgive—Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world with imperfect people. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

**MAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF**

You can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself in addition to having a positive attitude and taking charge of your life. If you regularly take time to have fun and relax, you will be better prepared to handle stress. Nurturing yourself is not a luxury but a necessity and includes strengthening your physical health. Don’t forget to take care of yourself by:

• Setting aside relaxation time—Include rest in your daily schedule and don’t allow other obligations to encroach upon it.

• Connecting with others—Spend time with positive people who enhance your life.

• Doing something you enjoy every day—Make time for leisure activities that you bring you joy: walking, spending time in nature, working out, journaling, playing with pets, getting a massage, reading, listening to music, watching a comedy, savoring a treat, taking a long bath, etc.

• Keeping your sense of humor—Don’t take yourself too seriously.

• Exercising regularly—Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress.

• Eating a healthy diet—Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress.

• Reducing caffeine and sugar—The temporary highs of these products lead to crashes in mood and energy. By reducing your intake, you may feel more relaxed and sleep better.

• Avoiding alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs—Self-medicating may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief will only be temporary; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind rather than avoiding stressful situations.
REFERENCES CITED


REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions. It is not necessary to retype the questions, just label them: "1.1" for Module 1, Question 1, "1.2" for Module 1, Question 2, and so on.

Reflection Question 1. In your own words, why is stress management important? Try to reflect on what you have read and on your own experiences. Avoid regurgitating what you read above.

Reflection Question 2. How do you identify stress? What are three positive ways for coping with stress that you could suggest to someone, such as your mentee, who may not be avoiding stress or is turning to unhealthy ways to cope?

Reflection Question 3. Identify a source of stress and explain how you cope or will cope with it. Include as many details about how you will manage your stress and how it will affect you overall.

Email your answers to Ashley Byrd at pass@nwacc.edu