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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.

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.



Leave Certain Kinds of Property

You can't use your will to leave:

- Property you hold in joint tenancy with someone else (or in "tenancy by the entirety" or "community property with right of survivorship" with your spouse). At your death, your share will automatically belong to the surviving co-owner. A will provision leaving your share would have no effect unless all co-owners died simultaneously.
- Property you've transferred to a living trust.
- Proceeds of a life insurance policy for which you've named a beneficiary.
- Money in a pension plan, individual retirement account (IRA), 401(k) plan, or other retirement plan for which you've named a beneficiary on forms provided by the account administrator.
- Stocks or bonds held in beneficiary (transfer-on-death or TOD) form. If you want to change the beneficiary, contact the brokerage company.
- Money in a payable-on-death bank account. If you want to name a different beneficiary, just fill out a simple form at the bank.

Leave Funeral Instructions

Wills are typically not read -- or even found -- until days or weeks after a death. That's too late to be of help to the people who must make immediate decisions about the disposition of a body and funeral or memorial services. Instead, make a separate document spelling out your wishes and tell your executor where to find it when the time comes.

Reduce Estate Taxes

If you expect your estate to owe federal estate taxes, you may want to take steps now to reduce the tax liability. A will won't help you avoid taxes. Many kinds of trusts can reduce or postpone the tax bill.

Avoid Probate

Property left through a will usually must spend several months or a year tied up in probate court before it can be distributed to the people who inherit it.

- *property that is left through a will does not avoid probate; it goes through probate*
- *a will helps you avoid intestate succession (under intestate succession, state law determines who gets your property, and although this also occurs in probate court, it is a subcategory of the probate process)*
- *the following tools can be used to avoid probate or simplify the probate process: living trusts, joint tenancy, small estate affidavits, pay on death bank accounts, transfer on death deeds, and others.*

Put Certain Conditions on Gifts

There are also a few legal limitations on what you can do in a will. For example, you cannot leave a gift that is contingent on the marriage, divorce, or change of religion of a recipient. You can, however, try to influence lesser matters. For example, you could leave money "to Jeremy, if and when he goes to college." Making such conditional gifts, however, usually opens a can of worms -- who will enforce the will's conditions, and for how long?

Leave Money for an Illegal Purpose

This one doesn't come up often, but you can't earmark money for something illegal, such as encouraging minors to smoke.

Arrange to Care for a Beneficiary With Special Needs

If you want to provide long-term care for someone, a will isn't the place. Far better to set up a trust that's tailored to the beneficiary's needs. A special needs trust can provide extra income for a loved one with disabilities, without jeopardizing government benefits.

Leave Money to Pets

Pets can't own property, so don't try to leave property directly to your pets in your will. Instead, leave your pet to someone who has agreed to provide a good home -- and leave that person some money to help out with pet-related expenses. Some states allow you to set up trusts for animals, but that's probably not necessary if you have confidence in the person you've named to care for your pets after your death.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome: Unspoken Ailment



Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is not a disease; it is a disorder that interferes with the normal function of the large intestine (colon). In the past it has been called colitis, mucous colitis, spastic colon, or spastic bowel. It does not permanently damage the colon, and does not lead to bleeding or a serious disease such as cancer. 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.

The ailment is twice as common among women as men, but this could partly be because women are more open about health problems. It usually begins around age 20. Many people let IBS persist for several years before seeing a health care provider.

Triggers for IBS

The cause of IBS is not known. People with IBS seem to have a colon that is more sensitive and reactive than usual. IBS tends to occur more often among people with stressful and emotionally distressing lives however, stress is probably only one of a number of factors that triggers IBS symptoms. Others include:

- Infectious disorders such as gastritis and intestinal infections during a stressful period.
- Hormonal influences. Increased estrogen seems to influence the activity of the bowels; on average, women's symptoms worsen around menstruation.
- Food intolerance to dairy products and artificial sweeteners often exacerbates symptoms.

Symptoms

The symptoms that define IBS vary from person to person but include abdominal pain that is relieved by a bowel movement; diarrhea or constipation -- sometimes both; a sense of urgency to pass stool; incomplete passage of stool; and gas or bloating.

The symptoms are usually episodic, generally occurring from a few times a week to once a month, though IBS might go away for years and suddenly return. What distinguishes it from other gastrointestinal upsets is the frequency and severity of symptoms. Bleeding, fever, weight loss, and persistent severe pain are not symptoms of IBS. If you have these symptoms you should see your health care provider.

Anyone with the symptoms of IBS should tell his or her health care provider.

Treatments for IBS

A number of drugs are available to treat the symptoms of IBS, but there is no single cure. Fiber supplements or occasional laxatives for constipation may help. However, talk to your health care provider before trying these. Some drugs decrease diarrhea, some control colon muscle spasms, while others affect the hormones that are released by the bowel.

Stress management techniques are important parts of treatment. Relaxation training, counseling, regular exercise and adequate sleep can help reduce the response to stress that triggers colon spasms.

Dietary changes may help relieve symptoms. By keeping a list of the foods that seem to increase symptoms you can learn what foods to avoid. Increasing fiber will help relieve constipation but will not help diarrhea or pain. Getting enough liquids, especially if you have diarrhea, is important. Carbonated beverages may cause increased gas, as can eating too quickly or chewing gum. Smaller meals or smaller portions may also help.

Antidepressants can help those with psychological distress, and also can independently ease pain. People sometimes use herbal teas such as chamomile and ginger.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advises health care providers, patients, families and caregivers of adults and children that they should closely monitor all patients beginning therapy with antidepressants and when doses are either increased or decreased, for worsening depression and suicidal thinking. The FDA also advises that these patients be observed for certain behaviors associated with these drugs, such as anxiety, agitation, panic attacks, insomnia, irritability, hostility, impulsivity, severe restlessness, hypomania and mania, and that physicians be particularly vigilant in patients who may have bipolar disorder.

The FDA issued a warning in September 2004 that antidepressants cause some children and teenagers to become suicidal. Children and teens who take antidepressants are twice as likely as those given placebos to become suicidal. Still, the overall risk for suicide is low. If 100 patients are given the drugs, two or three more will become suicidal than would have had they been given placebos.