

SECTION 6: PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO IMPROVING COPING SKILLS

Below is an elaboration of some of the coping skills suggested in Section 5 for the prevention and management of stress. It is intended to be read at your leisure. Experiment and find out what works best for you, then use the techniques consistently.

Building a positive self-concept

*Feel good about yourself;
you are the one person who
needs to feel that way.*

—CPB



Self-concept is an organized collection of beliefs and feelings about oneself which changes over time. A healthy self-concept is a realistic but appreciative one and differs to some extent in different interpersonal situations. Your self-concept is acquired primarily through social interactions that begin with your immediate family and continue with the other people with whom you come into contact throughout life. The crucial elements of self-concept include a sense of individuality, self-acceptance, self-appreciation, self-worth, self-love, self-respect and self-esteem.

Self-esteem refers to how one evaluates oneself in positive and negative terms. Self-esteem is comparative to the point of maintaining a realistic base for one's thoughts and actions and increasing one's wealth of knowledge. It is competitive only to the extent that one strives to improve those aspects of the self that one has singled out for change and to achieve those goals which one has set for oneself. Such evaluations are based in part on the opinions of others and in part on how we perceive specific experiences. Interestingly, negative self-perceptions lead to more predictable behavior than positive ones.

Persons with good self-esteem realize that they are special and unique and that they do not need to be someone else. At the same time, they accept that they are not perfect and that in certain areas others will perform or behave better than they and that there are things about them that might need to be changed. Overall, persons with good self-esteem feel good about who they are and they tend to be friendlier, more expressive, more active, more trusting and less troubled by inner turmoil than persons with poor self-esteem.

Persons with good self-esteem can make mistakes, fail or receive criticism without concluding that they are worthless. They do not hinge their esteem on people or things, as they realize that these can disappear. On the other hand, persons who lack self-esteem often do things to win the approval of others, rather than for self-satisfaction or because of personal convictions.

Persons with good self-esteem tend to cope better with stressful situations because they view such situations as challenges rather than stressors. They also find it easier to commit themselves to families, interpersonal relationships and organizations, as they believe that they have something to offer. They also accept that we all need help and encouragement at various times in our lives.

Persons with good self-esteem are secure in their own sense of worth, and they do not need to boast, since boasting reflects a need to win the approval of others. Persons who find it necessary to control or to be unkind to others are usually lacking in poor self-esteem as well.

Building self-esteem begins with self-evaluation and self-acceptance. Following are some important initial steps in coming to terms with your individuality.

1. Identify your strengths and your weaknesses. Accept those weaknesses which can't be changed and change those which you want to change. Acknowledge your strengths and use them wisely.
2. Accept your right to life and your equality with others and cultivate a sense of belonging. Love and be kind to yourself. Respect the rights of others and do not use other persons or allow yourself to be used.
3. Know right from wrong and negative from positive. Develop your own rules for living.
4. Know what you want out of life. Make your own decisions and have faith in them—take control of your life.
5. Do not allow yourself to be pressured by others but do not close your mind to alternative views either—they may be useful.
6. Always think through the consequences of your actions carefully and never lose sight of reality. When you have made your decision, communicate it assertively to those who need to know and take full responsibility for the consequences of your actions.
7. Always praise yourself for a job well done and acknowledge when you have made a mistake—for to err is human.
8. Remember that ups and downs are part of any normal life. Do not allow negative comments to get you down, instead respect the right of others to have opinions which differ from yours.
9. Be honest with yourself and accept that the truth will not always be pleasant to face, neither does it always have to be spoken. Learn the art of forgiving yourself and of forgiving others.
10. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and wallowing in self-pity—that gets you nowhere.

11. Boost the self-esteem of others and assist those in need of and willing to accept assistance—these can be real self-esteem boosters for you in return.

Clear thinking

Stop blaming other persons for your shortcomings, it serves only to delay the solution of the real problem.

—CPB



PAHO/WHO

Thinking is a very complex process; it refers to the ideational components of mental activity which include processes used to imagine, appraise, evaluate, forecast, plan, create and motivate. Ordinary thought is far from logical and quite often we jump to conclusions based on inadequate or inaccurate evidence.

How we perceive a given situation will affect how we approach and cope with it. Our perceptions are in turn governed by our beliefs and our attitudes, which may be influenced by the positive and negative suggestions of others. Positive, rational thoughts can herald the dawn of new opportunity and achievement while unfounded negative and irrational thoughts can damage self-confidence, paralyze mental skills and decrease performance. Nonetheless, justified concerns and cautions are always necessary if we are to make informed decisions.

In this day and age, it is often very difficult to think positively as the world repeatedly attempts to flood us with negativity, fear, despair, guilt and sorrow. Despite the difficulties, one needs to replace unfounded negative or irrational thoughts with realistic positive affirmations and in turn cultivate a positive attitude to life and its challenges. The first step at achieving this goal is being aware of one's thoughts—you cannot replace thoughts of which you are not aware.

Below is a list of the most common negative thoughts that we tend to have and examples of the negative self-talk or self-defeating behavior which such thoughts may give rise to:

- (1) ***Over-reacting to situations***, i.e., attaching much greater significance to an event than is indicated. An example would be the case of a female believing that because a male asked her for a dance at a party that he is in love with her.
- (2) ***Dwelling on the negative aspects of a situation***. Suppose that you attend a party and notice that there is a small stain on your clothing. The more you think about it, the more uncomfortable you become, until eventually you are too upset to enjoy the party any longer.

- (3) ***Assuming that things will always go wrong no matter what the available evidence suggests.*** Examples are believing that no matter how well prepared you are for an examination that you will still fail, or that you could not survive if your partner were to break off their relationship with you.
- (4) ***Not accepting that things will sometimes go wrong despite our efforts.*** An example of this negative self-talk is: "The world is just not kind to me—would you believe that after all the effort which I put into my last project, it still failed?"
- (5) ***Believing that our worth as human beings depends on our achievements and our attainment of perfection.*** For example, "If my life were worthwhile, I would not make mistakes."
- (6) ***Believing that everyone must love us and approve of almost everything that we do.*** "My head of department does not like me and this makes me feel like less than a person."
- (7) ***Treating feelings as if they were fact.*** "I feel like such a failure that I must be a failure."
- (8) ***Preoccupation with the faults of others without making allowances for their fallibility.*** "I cannot stand her, she is always making mistakes and just the sight of her makes me angry."
- (9) ***Rejecting or trivializing the positive.*** "Thanks for your compliment, but what I did was not really very significant, anyone could have done that."
- (10) ***Believing that it is wrong to think highly of oneself.*** "Self praise is no praise."
- (11) ***Believing that one has no control over one's feelings with respect to various situations.*** "I can't help feeling sad in light of what has happened."
- (12) ***Constantly worrying about a feared event.*** For example, perpetual worry about one's admission to hospital for elective surgery.
- (13) ***Believing that it is easier to avoid one's difficulties and responsibilities than to face them.*** "I just need to get away from all this; once I do, life will be so much easier."
- (14) ***Believing that denial of a given situation will cause it to disappear.*** "I am not pregnant, my period is just a few weeks late and it will come soon."
- (15) ***Blaming other persons for our actions.*** "She forces me to hit her."
- (16) ***Seeing ourselves as more involved in negative events than we are.*** "It is my fault that my schizophrenic daughter did not complete her law degree."

- (17) *Labelling ourselves and others.* "I am a born loser."
- (18) *Using our past experiences as an excuse for our present behavior and contending that because of such experiences our behavior cannot be changed.* "I grew up in a house where all my relatives drank alcohol daily so I cannot stop drinking it now."
- (19) *Believing that pleasure can only be derived from relaxation and recreation.* "Hard-work could never be pleasurable."
- (20) *Hinging one's worth and happiness on external occurrences.* "I can't be happy or feel worthwhile unless I complete my masters degree in two years with a grade A."
- (21) *Believing that for life to be enjoyable it must be easy.* "I can't enjoy life if I am faced with so many problems."
- (22) *Constantly hiding one's feelings.* "I cannot allow other persons to know the way that I really feel."

Goal-directed behavior

*If you don't know where
you're going, it is easy not to
know when you've arrived.*

—CPB



PAHO/WHO

One of the most common sources of stress for a number of persons is a feeling that life is just passing by. This can be a very unnerving feeling. To avoid this dilemma one needs to set realistic goals for oneself after careful evaluation of the tasks at hand and the resources which are available. Unrealistic goals undermine performance. Care has to be taken that a quest for excellence does not kill the very effort.

Goals need to be well-defined, otherwise their attainment may go without recognition and they must be constantly re-evaluated, to ensure that they are still appropriate. Overall, self-determined goals lead to better performance and goal attainment enhances self-confidence and future performance.

Goals may be either short-term, medium-term or long-term but it has been found that the setting of sequential short-term goals lead to better overall performance than setting a single distant goal. This may be so because the reinforcement of successive small steps is much more motivating than the reinforcement of a single large step which may take some time to reach.

When you are making plans for the future, identify short-term, medium-term and long-term goals, write them down and prioritize them. Make sure to spread out stressful tasks so that they don't all occur together. Pay close attention to punctuality, reliability and quality of performance.

Decide how to go about achieving each identified goal and allocate available resources wisely. Always be under-committed. Set a reasonable completion date for each goal but allow a little more time than you think it should take and decide how you will measure the successful completion of the goal.

Chart on a calendar when you will be scheduled to work on each goal, knowing that something planned on the calendar frees the mind from worrying about it and helps you to focus on one thing at a time. Work at whatever pace is comfortable for you. Periodically, review your plans and make changes as necessary. At the beginning of each week, it is wise to plan events for each day of the upcoming week.

If a task seems overwhelming, try breaking it up into smaller tasks that can be dealt with more gradually. When starting a new task, forget about perfectionism or about failing—just proceed step by step as everyone else does. Be creative and flexible but do not jump from task to task.

Be self-reliant and resourceful but delegate as much as necessary—have faith in others. Be ambitious and seize new opportunities but live within your means and strive for contentment. Motivate yourself. Be optimistic, disciplined and always persevere. Try to anticipate change and prepare for it well in advance.

Wise resource management

Maybe if you made better use of what is available to you and stopped longing for what is not, life would be so much more rewarding.

—CPB



PAHO/WHO

Resource management involves knowing how to use our resources, e.g., time and money, to achieve our goals, to organize tasks so that they can be accomplished in a manner that is pleasing to ourselves and at the same time meets our obligations to others. The key to such management is accurate evaluation, planning and prioritization.

An important aspect of skillful resource management is having reserve supplies, e.g., food, water, money and other essentials in case an emergency situation arises.

The Value of Time

*To better appreciate the value of ONE YEAR,
speak to an unemployed, elderly person
whose pension has been delayed by ONE YEAR;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE MONTH,
speak to a person convicted of murder
whose appeal verdict is now overdue by ONE MONTH;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE WEEK,
speak to the manager of a major industry
whose staff has been on strike for ONE WEEK;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE DAY,
speak to a mother whose child's date
for major surgery was postponed for ONE DAY;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE HOUR,
speak to a student who arrived late
for an examination by ONE HOUR;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE MINUTE,
speak to an asthmatic being rushed to hospital
when the ambulance was delayed for ONE MINUTE;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE SECOND,
speak to a bomb-blast survivor whose escape from
the building preceded the bomb's explosion by ONE SECOND;*

*To better appreciate the value of a SPLIT SECOND,
speak to an athlete who lost the 100 metre
Olympic gold medal by a SPLIT SECOND.*

*Time is a priceless resource which waits on no one,
It can neither be borrowed, bought nor stored,
So maybe the time has come for you
To stop letting your share drift aimlessly pass you.*

—Cyrilene P. Bryce

Effective communication

Utterances which are fuelled by rage are best left unsaid.



The way we communicate can make our interactions with other persons either stressful or satisfying. Effective communicators are polite and they express their thoughts, feelings and desires in appropriate, direct and honest ways. Above all, they are good listeners and observers. They seek to improve relationships, preserve mutual respect, and protect both their own interests, and the interests of others without undue guilt, fear or stress. Their communication gives them feelings of satisfaction, control and self-esteem. Be aware however, that one's assertiveness may draw great hostility from others.

In any situation, we can communicate with aggression, assertion or non-assertion.

Aggressive people dominate others through angry demands, threats, insults, shouting and even name-calling. Such persons have no respect for the rights and dignity of others and although they often get what they want done in the short-term, in the long-term most persons lose respect for them.

Assertive people face issues with direct, honest and appropriate communication. They consider the best interests of both themselves and others, tend to feel better about themselves and tend to be part of healthier interpersonal relationships.

Non-assertive people avoid the issue. As a result, they seldom get what they really want and consequently tend to harbor anger and resentment toward those who seem to take advantage of them. After a while, this anger tends to be self-directed. Also, relationships with others tend not to grow since people generally prefer friends who will take a stand and who will say what they feel.

Remember, it is your right to choose when to assert yourself and when not to. For example, when people whom we care about act unkindly towards us, we may choose to respond with understanding and sensitivity rather than asserting our rights.

The use of appropriate body language enhances the effectiveness of our communication. An erect posture brings respect. Facing the speaker and turning your shoulders towards them conveys interest. Relaxed gestures indicate confidence. Steady, relaxed eye contact that looks away occasionally indicates sincerity. Your facial expressions should be consistent with the message, e.g., do not smile when you are angry. Your voice should be neither timid nor intimidating.

To listen carefully you must use both your eyes and your ears. Very often persons say one thing but mean something quite different. Unless they are very skilled at keeping their emotions hidden we can usually discern what they are really trying to say by observing their body language. During a conversation, a good listener does not allow their attention to wax and wane, make hasty judgements, listen selectively or interrupt the speaker unnecessarily.

Improve and practice your language skills to allow yourself to clearly state what you feel and want. Develop interests so that you will feel in a position to meaningfully contribute to conversations. Ask open-ended questions. Since most people enjoy expressing their thoughts and feelings, such questions tend to promote interesting conversation. Exercise your right to ask for what you want but always bear in mind that your wants may not always be granted.

Although one should speak as the challenge arises, this is not always indicated. If you are overwhelmed with anger, calm down before speaking. If someone offends you in public, take the person aside and speak to them privately. If you can't think of an appropriate response then, deal with the issue when you can.

Over time, relationships grow closer and discrete self-disclosure is always useful. This fosters a sense of trust. Sincere expressions of appreciation are some of the greatest joys in life, for both the giver and the receiver. Reassure those who are close to you that you care and understand. Do not just assume that people know that you value them. Be generous with your compliments and affection. Expect some lags in conversation; these are natural, particularly as people spend more time together.

Express anger when necessary. Try to be as factual and non-judgmental as possible. Permit others the right to disagree with you but do not allow the issue at hand to be sidetracked, trivialized or dismissed. You need to bring up the topic as many times as necessary until it is understood. If you have clearly highlighted a concern to someone and the implications are understood by both of you but the behavior persists, then you may need to escalate the consequences. For example, if a store-assistant refuses to exchange a recently purchased item which is faulty, then you may need to speak to the store manager and if that fails then you may have to take legal action.

If you frequently respond to unpleasant situations with anger, try releasing your anger harmlessly through some form of physical activity, e.g., a walk, exercise, housework or gardening, so that you can deal with challenges more calmly.

Do not succumb to unreasonable demands—either ask that the unreasonable request be changed, suggest a compromise, delay until you have reviewed the situation, or just say "no".

When people are aggressive towards you:

1. Turn away;

2. Disarm the aggression by setting clear guidelines for the conversation to continue, e.g., “I’ll listen to you, but please calm down first”, or just listen attentively;
3. Put an end to needless criticism by apologizing, promising to correct your error, indicating that enough has been said and/or enquiring why the person continues to try to hurt you; and
4. Seek clarification when aggression appears to be disguised.

Effective anger management and conflict intervention

The hostility which you perceive from others may be the hostility which you are sending them.

—CPB



PAHO/WHO

Anger management

Anger is a normal response to internal and external events that cause us significant displeasure. It seems to be a pervasive emotion and like all emotions is accompanied by a physiological response. Unresolved anger is a common source of stress for many people.

Anger provokes aggressive feelings and behaviors where aggression (emotional, verbal or physical) refers to the intentional infliction of harm on others. Males tend to be more spontaneously aggressive than females but when provoked males and females do not differ appreciably in the levels of aggression they exhibit. In addition, males demonstrate higher levels of physical aggression than females but females tend to demonstrate higher levels of verbal and indirect aggression than males. Both cultural and biological factors are responsible for these differences.

Anger may vary in intensity from mild irritation to intense rage. People who are easily angered tend to have a low frustration tolerance. The effects of anger may be either positive or negative depending on the circumstances and how it is expressed, but generally speaking, anger can be very destructive when it is intense, chronic or expressed inappropriately.

Anger has an important role to play in our lives and the major problem is not whether or not we experience anger but how we manage it. For example, we cannot lash out at every person or object that irritates or annoys us; neither can we pretend that things are rosy when they are not. Unfortunately, a number of persons were socialized to believe that it is wrong to feel angry and consequently they internalize their feelings of anger (with its ill effects) without ever having mastered the art of managing such feelings.

Persons use a variety of conscious and subconscious processes to deal with their feelings of anger. Such processes fall broadly into three main categories—internalization, ventilation and control. These three approaches are not equivalent since effective anger management is not just about controlling one's outward behaviors in response to feelings of anger, but it involves reduction in the emotional and physiological arousal which such feelings cause. Towards this end, gaining control over one's anger is far superior to its mere internalization or ventilation.

Internalization of anger, which may be achieved through repression, suppression or sublimation, can lead to residual feelings of anger that may result in stress reactions or be expressed pathologically at a later date in the form of guilt, regret, bitterness, irritability, hatred or aggression. Anger ventilation, which may be achieved through aggressive behavior, assertive confrontation or catharsis, allows for the open expression of the anger and a decrease in inner tension but it does not address the source of the anger or its possible persistence. Gaining control over feelings of anger deals not only with how it is expressed but also with the resultant arousal and the source of the anger. This can be achieved by avoidance of anger provoking situations or by the use of techniques singly or in combination which minimize or dissipate feelings of anger.

Conflict interventions

Conflict refers to the clashing of opposing views, issues, interests, principles or values. The intensity of a given conflict can vary from minor disagreements or misunderstandings to overt efforts to destroy the opposing party.

Conflicts may be intrapersonal or interpersonal. There are three types of intrapersonal conflicts: approach-approach conflicts, avoidance-avoidance conflicts and approach-avoidance conflicts. Interpersonal conflicts which may involve individuals or groups of individuals can be broadly categorized as consensus conflicts (when one person's opinions, ideas, views or beliefs are incompatible with those of another and those involved seek to reach an agreement) or conflicts related to the sharing of scarce resources.

Some conflict situations are destructive and result in negative consequences, while others are constructive and serve as the basis for change and progress. Destructive conflicts tend to have a low probability of having a successful intervention and they are primarily personality- or emotion-based. Constructive conflicts are issue-based and stand a much higher probability of yielding a positive outcome if appropriate interventions are taken. Issue-based conflicts can, however, easily degenerate into personality- or emotion-based ones.

People who are involved in the same dispute may hold very different perceptions of it. For this reason, it is often useful to distinguish between objective conflict and perceived conflict. In real conflict, the right parties are opposed and the right issues have been cited. In displaced conflict, the right parties are opposed but the wrong issues are being cited. In induced conflicts, the wrong parties are opposed but potentially valid issues have been cited. In false conflicts, there is no plausible basis for the existence of a conflict situation but the parties opposed to each other perceive that there is. Finally, latent conflicts refer to conflicts that should be occurring but are not.

When faced with a conflict situation, individuals often adopt one of five possible stands regarding the conflict: *avoidance* (withdraw from the situation), *competition* (get as much for one's self as possible), *compromise* (split everything equally), *accommodation* (let the opposing party take what they want) or *collaboration* (maximize everyone's gains). These reactions are in turn related to two underlying dimensions: concerns about one's own outcome versus concerns about the outcome of others.

As highlighted earlier, conflict is not always undesirable since it can be the forerunner of beneficial change; consequently it may sometimes be deemed necessary to *stimulate conflict*. More commonly, *conflict prevention* is the desired goal. Once a conflict situation exists there are four broad approaches to *conflict intervention*: conflict management, conflict transformation, conflict settlement and conflict resolution. The outcomes of such interventions may be *functional* in that they result in tangible benefits for those involved or *dysfunctional* in that they result in tangible losses.

Conflict management seeks to minimize the escalation of a conflict situation without necessarily dealing with the real source of the problem. This type of intervention acknowledges that conflict may be a long-term process.

Conflict settlement puts an end to or significantly de-escalates a conflict situation by whatever means is deemed necessary—including the use of force. Once again, this mode of conflict intervention does not deal with the real source of the problem.

Conflict transformation refers to a fundamental change in attitude and/or mode of expression of the individuals affected by a conflict situation. While such a change may be relatively minor or subtle it goes beyond the immediate situation to alter the way in which the parties see themselves, the world and/or each other over the long-term. The result may be escalation or de-escalation of the conflict situation depending on how successful the intervention was. Approaches which may be used to transform conflict situations include transformative mediation, peace building, constructive confrontation, analytical problem solving, dialogue (which differs from debate in that its goal is mutual understanding and respect and not the scoring of points or persuasion) and collaborative learning.

Conflict resolution refers to a peaceful and mutually acceptable way of ending or significantly de-escalating a conflict situation. This type of conflict intervention deals not only with the cause of hostilities but it also addresses the underlying sources of the problem. The principles of resolving any type of conflict are the same: defining the conflict, creation of a cordial atmosphere for exploring the conflict, clarification of the relevant issues and misconceptions, negotiation, agreement and reconciliation.

Use of adaptive social skills

Be humble, for a fool vested with power is like a deadly plague roaming freely.

—CPB



PAHO/WHO

Healthy relationships with friends and family are very important in helping us to cope with stress. Research has shown that the impact of life events in precipitating episodes of major depression is reduced among persons who have intimate, confiding relationships with friends or relatives. Particularly helpful for persons under stress is the perception that persons in their social network will be readily available to assist them if necessary.

Social support serves as a direct buffer against the upsets of living in a very complex world. Not only is social support very helpful during a period of stress, but it is also helpful in times of relative calm.

There is conclusive evidence that persons with high and low levels of social support differ with respect to the social skills needed to attract and maintain the interest of others. Below is an outline of adaptive social skills.

Maintain good personal hygiene and grooming at all times - one of the first things that strike people about you is your appearance.

Develop good interpersonal skills - such skills will enhance your chances at successful relationship building. Here are some helpful tips to remember:

1. Cultivate and radiate a positive attitude.
2. Perform your role efficiently and with flexibility.
3. Communicate effectively.
4. Give sincere compliments freely and accept those given to you gracefully.
5. Enjoy the gifts of friendship, belonging and companionship and meet new people whenever the opportunity arises. Be warm, loyal and learn to trust others.
6. Learn to respond to the feelings and needs of others, to empathize with their sufferings and to truly share in their joys. Make sacrifices for the benefit of others. Be caring and charitable.
7. Participate whole-heartedly in activities in which you are not the leader, but in the same light develop your leadership skills as well.

Participate in recreational activities for leisure and develop an ability to experience pleasure. Get involved in a variety of social activities and hobbies and expose yourself to as many art forms as possible. Enjoy nature.

Be of good social conduct and maintain self-control. Social conduct entails the appraisal and understanding of a given social situation and the ability to choose the behavior which is appropriate to that particular social situation.

Attempt to "read" subtle social situations to avoid embarrassment and conflict. For example, one should know if or when to initiate a conversation with another person. Sensitivity to social norms and respect for authority figures is the key to success in this area.

Adopt a problem-solving approach to challenges. In attempting to solve any problem, one should ideally:

1. Adopt a problem-solving attitude;
2. Identify the problem;
3. Think of alternative solutions;
4. Evaluate the possible pros and cons of the solutions to the problem which are identified and choose the one which is most suitable;
5. Plan and implement the solution;
6. Evaluate the efficiency of the effort—if it is ineffective, choose another alternative and start again.

Acquire any other knowledge or skills which may be necessary for one's success in life.

Maintaining good physical and mental health

Persons in good physical and mental health have been repeatedly shown by research to better cope with life's challenges. This is achieved through diet, exercise, relaxation, recreation, an appreciation for the arts and nature, and compliance with medication and follow-up. Below are practical ways to maintain good physical and mental health.

Increase your knowledge base about health-related issues.

Only use mind-altering substances which are clinically indicated and remember that a number of foods, drinks and preparations are potential sources of caffeine (e.g., cocoa, chocolates, chocolate cake, soft drinks, over-the-counter analgesics, cold preparations, stimulants and appetite suppressants).

Get adequate rest and sleep and set aside leisure time for yourself.

Be humorous —whenever possible enjoy a good laugh and above all, learn to laugh at yourself. It appears that laughter releases peptides in the brain, such as endorphins, which may help to account for the after-laughter feelings of well-being.

Religion offers a secure sense of stability for those so inclined.

Everyone needs someone to talk to. If friends or family are not available or seem unable to help when you need them, you may need to consider professional counselling.

Change your environment as much as possible when it is stressful to you—never see yourself as a helpless victim of circumstance. The steps to changing your environment are usually not difficult—identify the problem, think of alternatives, evaluate the alternatives and finally select and implement the best alternative.

Exercise is an effective treatment for stress. Laboratory studies indicate that exercise alters the way the body handles stress and it improves one's sense of well-being. Weight has also been found to be lost more efficiently through exercise and diet than by diet alone. Never believe that you are too old to begin exercising. Below are some tips for exercising:

- Although all exercise is useful, aerobic exercise such as brisk walking, jogging, cycling, skipping, swimming, aerobic dance, etc., should form the basis of any fitness program since this type of exercise maintains an elevated heart rate.
- Exercise should provide a pleasant challenge and not result in fatigue or exhaustion—make it enjoyable.
- Try to exercise 3-5 times a week for at least 20 minutes on each occasion.
- Dress appropriately while exercising.
- Warm up first, then build up gradually.

Always seek professional advice before embarking on an exercise program.

Eat a balanced and varied diet. Below are some dieting tips:

- Primarily vegetarian diets with an abundance of fiber and fresh foods are healthier.
- Eat more complex carbohydrates.
- Eat less salt, sugar, cholesterol and saturated fat.
- Eat smaller, more frequent meals.
- Drink lots of water throughout the day.
- Do not skip breakfast—this allows your blood sugar to fall which triggers a stress response.

Relaxation is the opposite of stress and refers to the calming of the mind and the body to result in a reduced state of arousal which allows for a rested, refreshed and restored feeling. There are five levels of relaxation: muscular, autonomic, emotional, cognitive and spiritual. Relaxation does not result in decreased alertness or decreased productivity; in fact, relaxed persons tend to react more quickly to and recover more quickly from stressors. They also tend to be more efficient. Since sedatives impair the function of the nervous system and result in decreased responsiveness to one's surroundings they are sedating but not really relaxing— *relaxation calms the body and the mind without clouding the senses.*

Not all sources of leisure or recreation are relaxing, e.g., watching a game of cricket on television is not necessarily relaxing because of the associated emotional involvement and arousal. And although essential, not even sleep is pure relaxation since during sleep we alternate between periods of deep rest and dreams, where some dreams can be emotionally very charged and produce intense arousal. Possible relaxation techniques include:

1. Breathing control
2. Calming down
3. Progressive muscular relaxation
4. Massage
5. Meditation
6. Yoga
7. Imagery
8. Hypnosis
9. Autogenic relaxation
10. Biofeedback

Different techniques work better for different people—try them out and find the combination that works best for you. Relaxation only requires a total of 10-20 minutes once or twice a day, preferably after physical activity but not after meals since digestion interferes with relaxation.

Breathing control or diaphragmatic breathing is one of the oldest and simplest and one of the most effective stress reduction techniques known. Try it when you can't sleep or when you feel tense. To practice breathing control:

1. Lie on your back with your knees slightly bent.
2. Place your hands over your navel.
3. Relax completely and breathe normally through your nose—as you achieve relaxation your chest and shoulders will not move.
4. Concentrate on your breathing—feel your hands rise as you breathe in and fall as you breathe out.
5. Practice this simple exercise once or twice daily for 10-20 minutes.

Calming down is a relaxation technique developed by Dr. George Everly that combines deep breathing with relaxing self-suggestion. It has been found to work as quickly as in 30-60 seconds. Try the following when you feel under severe stress:

1. Place your left hand over your navel.
2. Place your right hand comfortably over your left.
3. Begin to inhale and imagine that there is a hollow pouch lying internally beneath the point at which your hands are resting and that as you inhale the pouch is being filled to the top.
4. Slowly begin to exhale to empty the pouch and as you do, repeat to yourself the phrase, "My body is calm".
5. Repeat this exercise two times in succession.
6. Breathe normally for 5-10 successive breath cycles and emphasize the expiration of each breath as the point of relaxation.
7. You may repeat the entire process of 2 deep breaths followed by 5-10 normal breaths.
8. Practice this exercise 5-10 times a day. After one to two weeks of practice, steps (1) to (3) may be omitted.

If at anytime during this exercise you should experience any discomfort, e.g., lightheadedness, stop at that point.

Meditation calms the mind and leads to a "relaxation response". To meditate:

1. Choose a quiet room free from interruptions and distractions.
2. Sit quietly in a comfortable position—sitting comfortably in a chair with one's hands on one's thighs is one of the more commonly used positions. The goal is to remain restful but alert and not to fall asleep.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Do not worry about whether or not you will be successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation—just let go of your worries and allow relaxation to occur.
5. Deeply relax all of your muscles, beginning with the toes and progressing to the head.
6. Find something to focus the mind on. Breathe through one's nose and become aware of your breathing, especially the exhalation phase. As you

breathe out, say the word “one”, silently to yourself. Breathe freely and naturally for 10-20 minutes.

7. When you are finished, sit quietly for 10-15 minutes, initially with your eyes closed and later with them opened.
8. Wait another 5-10 minutes before standing.
9. For best results, it is recommended that you meditate once or twice daily but not within 2 hours after eating since the digestive process seems to interfere with the relaxation response.

Imagery is a relaxation technique which was first discussed by Paul Schilder—it is based on one of the best supported concepts in psychology which is that we feel and behave according to the images and thoughts in our minds. Hence, if we image a peaceful, relaxing scene, our bodies and our minds relax. This technique should not be used by persons who are very agitated or actively psychotic. To practice imagery:

1. Choose a quiet place free from interruptions and distractions.
2. Get into a comfortable position.
3. Close your eyes.
4. Deeply relax all of your muscles, beginning with the toes and progressing to the head.
5. Take a few deep, relaxing breaths.
6. Image the sensations of one of your favorite scenes, e.g., lying on the beach, listening to the waves and the wind in the trees. You are peaceful and happy. Life is worth living. Stay there for a few moments, leave slowly—you can return there to rest each day if you wish.
7. Try different scenes and find the ones that work best for you.
8. Practice this technique daily or as often as you like.
9. Take medication as prescribed and get regular medical check-ups.

End of Section Quiz

Please circle the correct answer.

- | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---|
| 1. | Relaxation is the opposite of stress. | T | F |
| 2. | It is not always necessary to identify a problem before trying to solve it. | T | F |
| 3. | Watching a game of cricket is always relaxing. | T | F |
| 4. | One can meditate effectively in a busy hall-way. | T | F |
| 5. | Imagery is a relaxation technique which is very useful in agitated persons | T | F |
| 6. | It is a dire necessity that we be loved by everyone. | T | F |
| 7. | Vegetarian diets are healthier than those rich in meats. | T | F |
| 8. | Self-esteem building starts with accepting yourself and then growing. | T | F |
| 9. | You must always choose to assert yourself. | T | F |
| 10. | We don't need friends. | T | F |

Quiz answers appear in Appendix 2.

Score Interpretations

(1) *How stressed are you?*

Scores between 26 and 50
indicate a low degree of stress,

between 51 and 75
indicate a moderate degree of stress, and

between 76 and 100
indicate a high degree of stress.

How stressful is your job?

Scores between 26 and 50
indicate exposure to a low degree,

between 51 and 75
indicate exposure to a moderate degree, and

between 76 and 100
indicate exposure to a high degree of work-related stressors.

(3) *How well suited are you to coping with stressful situations?*

Scores between 26 and 50
indicate good coping skills,

between 51 and 75
indicate frequent negative self-talk, and

between 76 and 100
indicate that you have lost control of your life.

Quiz Answers

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Section 1 (page 4)	F	F	F	T	F	F	T	T	T	T
Section 2 (page 15)	T	T	T	F	F	F	T	F	T	F
Section 3 (page 25)	F	T	F	T	F	F	T	F	T	F
Section 4 (page 35)	F	T	T	T	T	F	T	F	F	F
Section 5 (page 44)	T	T	T	T	T	F	T	T	T	T
Section 6 (page 65)	T	F	F	F	F	F	T	T	F	F

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What Is SUMA?

At the beginning of the 1990s, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean pooled their efforts, with the support of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the government of the Netherlands and the Colombian Red Cross, to develop SUMA—the Humanitarian Supply Management System.

SUMA is an information management tool that helps governments improve the management of humanitarian assistance and ensure efficiency and transparency in the reception and distribution of relief supplies. SUMA also helps disaster managers to provide donors and humanitarian agencies with the information they need to guarantee accountability.

What Does SUMA Do?

- It streamlines the identification, sorting and classification of arriving humanitarian supplies.
- It helps to assign different priorities to the incoming supplies based on the needs of the affected population.
- It consolidates all the information about incoming shipments and existing stocks into a single database.
- It provides a clear picture of the circulation of donated supplies from the point of arrival until they get to the final beneficiaries.
- It eases and encourages the preparation of reports and exchange of information among all stakeholders (governments, NGOs, donors, etc.).

Who Handles SUMA?

SUMA trains national teams and promotes self-sufficiency by ensuring that countries can manage humanitarian assistance employing their own resources. The national teams comprise volunteers from health agencies, civil defense or emergency committees, the armed forces, the local Ministry of Foreign Affairs, customs, the Red Cross, NGOs and other bodies. Over 2,000 volunteers have already been trained in Latin America and the Caribbean.

SUMA—Towards a Global Standard for Humanitarian Supply Management

SUMA is accepted throughout Latin America and the Caribbean as *the* standard in the management of relief supplies. The countries of the Region are now exporting the model to other parts of the world that have requested assistance and training in the use of the SUMA System to meet their disaster management needs.

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Regional Disaster Information Center for Latin America and the Caribbean

Disaster management is, above all, the management of information. The goal of CRID is to provide the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean with access to the best disaster information sources and resources available so that users can make well-informed decisions when managing disasters and trying to prevent or reduce their impact.

CRID enjoys the support of six organizations and agencies¹. Its objectives are:

- To improve the compilation, processing, and dissemination of disaster information.
- To strengthen local and national capacity in setting up and maintaining disaster information centers.
- To promote the use of information technologies.
- To support the development of the Regional Disaster Information System.

Services Provided by CRID

CRID provides the following services:

- The ability to conduct bibliographic searches over the Internet, on CD-ROMs, or by contacting the Center directly.
- The publication and distribution of specialized bibliographies and reviews of the literature (*Bibliodes*).
- Direct access over the Internet to a wide collection of full-text documents on disasters and disaster reduction in general and in the Region.
- Distribution of publications and training material.
- Mass distribution of public and technical information.
- Technical advice and training on how to set up and manage disaster information centers.
- CRID promotes and supports the consolidation of a Regional Disaster Information System for Latin America and the Caribbean through technical support for national and local information centers, the development of a unified methodology and tools, and the establishment of uniform information services.

For more information please visit: <http://www.CRID.or.cr>

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**CRID, the best source of disaster information
in Latin America and the Caribbean**

¹ The Pan-American Health Organization / Regional Office of the World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), the National Risk Prevention and Emergency Response Commission of Costa Rica (CNE), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CEPREDENAC), and the Regional Office for Emergencies of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief Coordination Program

Pan American Health Organization

Regional Office of the World Health Organization

In 1976, the Pan American Health Organization created this Program in response to a call by the Member Countries to establish a technical unit to strengthen health sector disaster preparedness, response and mitigation activities.

Since then, the Program's main objective has been to support the health sector to strengthen their national disaster preparedness programs and its interaction with all the sectors involved in disaster preparedness. This support has been channeled to the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean in three principal areas:

In **disaster preparedness**, in addition to constant promotion of a strong health disaster preparedness program, PAHO regular activities include training (through hundreds of courses and workshops) and the preparation and distribution of training materials (books, slides and videos).

Disaster mitigation is just as important. An investment in disaster preparedness can be rendered useless if hospitals or health centers cannot withstand the impact of a disaster and collapse at exactly the moment they are most needed. PAHO promotes and supports including disaster mitigation in natural disaster reduction programs and legislation.

In **disaster response**, PAHO works with the affected countries to identify and assess damages and needs, carry out epidemiological surveillance and monitor drinking water, and mobilize international relief and manage humanitarian supplies. PAHO has established the Voluntary Emergency Relief Fund that collects money to support post-disaster activities.

The Program also has several special technical projects: Disaster Mitigation in Hospitals and Drinking Water Systems; Humanitarian Supply Management System; Use of the Internet for Disasters and Emergencies; and the Regional Disaster Information Center (CRID).

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