



It's Never Too Late to Improve the Quality of Your Life

Managing Stress in the Latter Part of Life

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Stress Management is a skill for people of all ages because stress is a fact of life. How we manage the stress

we experience will create our quality of life. Stress is a psychos-physiological response to living. It impacts our body, mind and spirit. No matter what age we are, our bodies respond to stress with physiological changes including muscle tension, increased heart rate and rapid breathing. Hormones (including adrenaline and cortisol) are released to prepare our body to meet a threat or challenge. Not all stress is bad – when our body is activated to meet a challenge, it can increase performance. However, if stress is excessive or prolonged it can create adverse health issues. The stress response creates tension in our bodies. Increased tension in our bodies can increase pain, aggravate illnesses and contribute to other illnesses ranging from colds to heart disease and strokes.

Our mind determines what we experience as a threat or challenge. What is threatening or challenging to one person may not be so to another. Our experiences, our temperaments, our coping style all impact what we experience as stress. Stress can impact your mind by affecting memory, concentration and problem-solving skills. It is hard to think straight if you are experiencing a lot of stress. Stress can impact your emotions. It can manifest as anger or anxiety or self doubt. If stress levels are not managed well it can lead to depression and other mental health issues.

During times of stress we may question the meaning and purpose of our lives. It can be an important time to take stock of your values, your priorities and your lifestyle habits.

Stress can be the catalyst to begin a deeper spiritual inquiry in our lives. 

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As a mature adult there are circumstances in life that are specific to growing older that may be the source of stress in your life. Aging, retirement, changes in living arrangements, illness, changes in independence, death of a spouse or a loved one, caring for a loved one, lack of social support, mobility issues, regret, concern about personal safety and financial concerns can create stress. The good news is that our circumstances do not have to dictate our quality of life. Stress management skills can help you manage your response to circumstances so that you can experience peace on the inside regardless and sometimes, despite, what is happening on the outside of your life.



Here are 7 Stress Management Skills that can be practiced at any age:

1. BREATHE DEEPLY AND SLOWLY: One of the first things that happens when we are stressed is that our breathing becomes more rapid. Deep breathing from our diaphragm is a signal to the body to slow down and helps to invoke the relaxation response. Over time many adults adapt a habit of breathing shallow breaths from their chest. Bringing conscious attention to your breathing and noticing whether you are breathing fast or slow, shallow or deep and from your chest or your diaphragm is the beginning of stress management. For diaphragmatic breathing, your stomach should inflate when you breathe in and when you breathe out your stomach pulls in toward your back.

2. PRACTICE AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE: Gratitude can turn any external circumstance or event into a secondary matter. When we focus on what we have to be grateful for it helps us shift perspective on the things that are causing stress in our lives. It can also help us to connect with a larger meaning that extends beyond our current circumstances.

3. FOCUS YOUR THOUGHTS ON WHAT YOU CAN INFLUENCE: Spending time thinking about matters outside of our control can be an instant stressor. First, determine whether you can change the thing that is causing you stress. For example, if you are retired and having a difficult time adjusting to life without the structure of work, you can create a routine for yourself that fits your life now. Even if we can't change the situation, person or event that is happening in our lives, we can, with practice influence how we think about the stressor. None of us can change the fact that we are aging, but we can focus on the rewards of growing older and the unique gifts of this time in our lives. Our thoughts, feelings and behaviors are connected and when we change the way we think about something, our feelings about it and our behaviors often change too.

4. FEEL YOUR FEELINGS: Feelings are friendly even though they may be uncomfortable. They give us information about how we are doing, how we are impacted by people and events and what is important to us. It can be tempting to avoid feelings if they are uncomfortable or painful. Feelings of loss, sadness, anger, anxiety can feel unwelcome. Stored feelings can cause a chronic stress reaction. Find a way to feel your feelings — journal, talk to someone you trust, cry, create art, do something physical. Express your feelings.

5. MOVE YOUR BODY: Our physical body is designed to move. Movement flushes stress related hormones out of our body and promotes healthy physiological reactions. Ten minutes a day of physical activity or exercise has been shown to lower blood pressure, body mass index and improve overall health. The sooner that you get up and move after you feel stress, the better. It is like cleaning up a spill as soon as it hits the carpet.

6. LET GO AND LET GOD: Things in life happen that are outside our control. Acknowledging that we can't control everything and finding meaning and purpose beyond ourselves can alleviate stress. Whatever spiritual or religious beliefs, practices and traditions you have, a connection with your spiritual life is good for your health. In addition to the wisdom of the ages, there is now a substantial amount of research that supports the health benefits of spirituality.

7. LAUGH: We've heard that laughter is the best medicine and it does in fact, help us to relieve stress. Laughter helps us find delight, experience joy and release tension. The first documented case of humor positively affecting disease was in 1964 when Norman Cousins, published "Anatomy of an Illness." Humor allows us to shift perspective about a situation, expresses emotions and increases respiration and circulation. Tell a joke or read a joke, watch a funny TV show, see the humor in your situation. **SRG**

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