

By Mary Bratcher, MA

taming stress

Discover strategies for getting to the root of—and tackling—your stressors.

Welcome to 2006! The hustle and bustle of the holiday season is over, and it's time to refocus your energy on your fitness career and personal goals.

For many, the new year brings promise and opportunity, but you may feel irritable and angry instead. The period after New Year's Day is an unpleasant time for many people. The weeks leading up to the holidays are often filled with work, family, financial and/or diet and exercise worries that don't magically disappear at midnight on New Year's Eve. In addition, January is an especially busy time for many fitness professionals.

Don't worry. You *can* learn to manage and release stress through a few wise strategies. Then you can get back to being happy and productive.

Recognizing Stress

The first step toward feeling better is to acknowledge what is at the heart of your problem—stress! Over the past several weeks you probably ate or drank more than you usually do, spent more money than you had, worked less because clients (or you) were away, had a blowout with a family member or friend and got less sleep than usual. Any one of those situations can generate stress, but pile them all together and the feeling can be overwhelming.

You might be saying, "But I don't feel stressed out." However, your body may be telling a different story. Common physical signs of unhealthy stress levels include headaches; muscle/joint pains; mouth ulcers; stomach or bowel problems;

muscle tics; and skin problems like pimples/acne breakouts, eczema, psoriasis, hives or rashes. Common psychological responses to stress include difficulty sleeping, irritability, tearfulness, anger outbursts, trouble remembering things, panic attacks, increased alcohol/drug consumption, overeating and loss of sex drive.

If you experience any of these symptoms without a legitimate reason (such as a serious illness or the death of a loved one), you probably have high levels of stress. On the brighter side, these "early-warning" signs can help you identify your stress before it becomes debilitating.

Identifying Types and Sources of Stress

People often misidentify the source of their stress and end up blaming or taking it out on the wrong person. Consider the following case.

Tim received some negative marks on his end-of-year performance evaluation at the fitness center. His boss told him he had until February 1 to increase his client load and improve his punctuality and timekeeping or she would have to let him go. When Tim left the gym later that day, he was cut off by a woman driving while talking on her cell phone. Tim blared his horn and screamed at the woman and, in doing so, accidentally cut off another driver. When that driver honked at Tim, he indignantly pointed to the lady in the other car and shouted, "It was her fault!" Mumbling as he drove along, Tim then encountered heavy traffic and became very angry. Once he arrived home, he snapped at his wife for leaving the garage window open. When she asked what was wrong, Tim identified the woman who cut him off and the subsequent traffic as the reasons he was upset.

If Tim had correctly identified the sources of his stress—the possibility of losing his job, and his anxiety over having to find more clients and get to work on time—he could have developed a controllable plan of action to help him

address the issues. Blaming his stress on things over which he has no control (i.e., other drivers and traffic) doesn't help him resolve the situation.

What You Can Do. One way to uncover the source of your stress is to keep a "stress journal" for a few days. When you notice physical or psychological symptoms of stress, write down what you were thinking or doing at the time. Also record recurring thoughts that keep you awake at night. This strategy will help you identify the cause of your stress.

Determine What to Tackle First

Once you've accurately identified the sources of stress, decide which item to tackle first. Sometimes it is more beneficial to start working on smaller issues to help you gain the perspective (and strength) to take on the bigger stuff.

Consider Tim's situation. He needs to acquire more clients; to get to work on time; and to prevent his sessions from running over. If he decides that acquiring clients is the priority, he may panic about marketing strategies. However, he could make big improvements by addressing his time and punctuality issues first.

For example, if Tim asked his wife to drop the kids off at school in the morning, he'd be able to get to work 20 minutes early rather than always being late. He could then use this extra time to contact former and prospective clients to arrange consultations or assessments. He could also plan his sessions better, to stop them from running over. Furthermore, conducting timely sessions would help Tim improve customer service, which could result in increased referrals.

Eliminating the lower-priority stressors actually helps Tim make time for his higher-priority marketing needs. This approach also helps him gain clarity to develop a successful marketing plan.

What You Can Do. Determine what to address first in your life by looking at the list of stressors you identified in your

stress journal. See what stressors you can easily eliminate and take the first step toward resolving those issues. It may involve something as simple as making a phone call, sending an e-mail to a client or asking someone for help. Once you begin to shorten your list of stressors, you will soon discover that you have the energy to tackle the more complex issues.

Make a Plan

To manage high-stress situations effectively, you must be aware of how stress affects you, make choices about how to handle it and develop a workable plan of action. Following are components of a good stress management plan:

1. Recognize and acknowledge the fact that you are not immune to stress.
2. Be aware of your physical and emotional reactions to stress (e.g., getting angry, withdrawing, overeating).
3. Counteract your initial reaction with positive strategies (e.g., count to 10, breathe deeply).
4. Make a deliberate choice to do things differently each day (e.g., “I won’t yell,” “I’ll speak up for myself” and “I won’t binge eat”).
5. Tackle one issue at a time (e.g., curb overeating). Trying to fix everything at once will only create more stress.
6. Set short-term goals, review them often and recognize your achievements.

Your stress management plan should also include some form of relaxation. (For ideas, see “Take It Easy,” above.)

The most important thing to remember is that developing a stress management plan takes time and practice. You

take it easy

Relaxation is a crucial part of your stress management plan. Try these methods of alleviating stress:

- Determine how you like to relax and then schedule activities you prefer (e.g., go mountain biking, take a bath, play basketball or go for a stroll).
- Take a “time-out”—breathe deeply, turn off your phone, stop moving, start moving, etc.
- Accept offers of assistance from others or ask for help when you need it.
- Eat, drink and be merry—choose healthy food, drink lots of water and get plenty of rest.

may find it difficult to improve your situation at first and you may experience setbacks. If you do, simply refer back to your plan and adjust your behavior until the new actions become second nature.

The time and energy you put into developing stress awareness and creating your stress management plan will bring many rewards. You’ll be healthier, happier and more pleasant to be around. You’ll also be able to take better care of clients, friends, family members and, most important, yourself.

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recommended reading

Check out these resources to learn more about decreasing stress in your life.

Benson, H., with Klipper, M.Z. 1976.

The Relaxation Response. New York: HarperTorch.

Johnson, S. 1998. *Who Moved My Cheese? An A-Mazing Way to Deal With Change in Your Work and in Your Life*. New York: Putnam.

Varcoe, M.J., & Burnett, P. 2004. *Toxic Stress: 7 Steps to Recovery*. Ann Arbor, MI: J.W. Edwards.