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This Month’s Focus: Stress Less

The next time your stomach hurts, your eyelid twitches or your back aches, consider this—it could be stress. Much as we would like to, we can’t always avoid stress. But we can learn how to deal with stress in a more effective way.

From the healing power of laughter to the "4A" method, this month's Member Matters is filled with tips on how to stress less.
Meetings, deadlines, spilled coffee, traffic jams — after a long day's work, we may crave a relaxing evening at home. But an unhappy home life can be a source of stress. Even a happy home can be stressful at times.

We may come home to a noisy environment, an unhappy spouse, inconsiderate roommate or financial worries. Chronic health issues, time pressures, difficult circumstances or major life changes can weigh on us. Even smaller daily hassles, such as folding laundry or mowing the lawn, can add stress over time.

Sometimes, we may not even realize that stress is at the root of a queasy stomach, stiff neck or pounding headache. We may also not suspect stress when we overeat, snap at others, drink or stay under the covers instead of facing the day.

A HAVEN OF A HOME

When your home life is stressful, any activity — working late, being with friends, going to the gym — is preferable to going home. But there are ways to make your home life happier and healthier:

1. Communicate.
   - Hone your assertiveness skills. Being assertive means expressing your needs effectively and standing up for yourself while being diplomatic. Doing so can strengthen your self-esteem and lower your stress level. To start, identify what would help you unwind. Next, talk with the people you live with to work those things into your schedule when you get home.
   - Hone your conflict resolution skills. Try this approach the next time someone you live with sounds upset:
     - Say, "It sounds like..." then recap what the person said to you in a sentence or two.
     - Follow with, "That must feel..."
     - Then ask, "Keeping both our needs in mind, what do you think would be a good compromise?"

2. Pare down your schedule.
   Keep only the most important commitments. Do you really have to bake cookies for that baby shower from scratch? Or babysit your neighbor’s daughter?

   Some people find that meditation, yoga, biofeedback and tai chi can help. Others may feel a greater sense of relaxation from knitting, listening to calming music, painting and sculpting.

4. If your finances are causing stress, take action.
   Create a budget and an emergency savings fund, explore ways to earn more income, consider adding more skills or education or increase your financial knowledge. Taking action can help you feel more in control of your situation. On the other hand...

5. Learn when to let go.
   Understand that there are situations and people that we cannot control, and trying to do so just increases our stress level and anxiety. If your sibling's marriage is falling apart or your son just lost his job — take a deep breath and focus on what you are actually capable of doing. Devoting your energies to what you can do — rather than what you cannot do — will help you to be more productive and feel less overwhelmed.
6. **If living with a chronic health condition is adding to your stress, make taking care of yourself a top priority.**
   Surround yourself with supportive people, simplify daily life when you can (shop for groceries online, freeze large batches of food, hire a house cleaner once a month) and accept help from others. Carve out time each day to rest.

7. **Get organized and simplify your life.**
   Unsure how to start? Visit a website such as Zen Habits for inspiration.

8. **Have fun together as a family.**
   Simple things can make for a happier home — reading to your child, playing with a pet, making a meal together or playing a board game.

**SHELTERING MIND AND BODY**

Your surroundings at home can also affect your mood. Try the tips below to transform your home from chaotic to calm:

1. Spend some time each day eliminating clutter. Clutter can make you tired, researchers at the University of Chicago found. That fatigue can stimulate the hormone cortisol leading you to eat an extra 200 to 1,000 calories a day.

2. To avoid feeling frazzled each morning, set up one place for keys, mail, sunglasses and other such items.

3. For better sleep, keep your television and other electronic devices out of the bedroom, or make sure to leave some time before sleeping where you are not using electronic devices.

4. Create a personal space zone where you can spend time away from others. It can be a separate bedroom or even the garage, basement or a room with a privacy screen.

5. Change the way your home looks — and feels. Bring in natural elements, such as stone, wood and plants. Use lamps with dimmer switches for soothing lighting at night, and during the day, let the sunlight in. Paint your walls in cool, calming colors — such as light greens and blues. Bring in elements that reflect who you are and what you love to make you feel more comfortable.

With these tips, you can create a happier, healthier home — one that you can't wait to come home to after a day's work.

### Need Stress Relief? Try the “4A” method

Expand your stress management tool kit by mastering these four strategies for coping with stress: avoid, alter, accept and adapt.

When we feel the effects of stress weighing us down, it's like lugging a backpack that's becoming heavier by the minute. Too much stress can make our journey through life difficult.

Happy events, such as a wedding, as well as unhappy events, such as overwork, can cause stress. When your stress level exceeds your ability to cope, you need to restore the balance by reducing the stressors or increasing your ability to cope or both. Try using one of the four A's: avoid, alter, accept or adapt.
AVOID

Believe it or not, you can simply avoid a lot of stress. Plan ahead, rearrange your surroundings and reap the benefits of a lighter load.

- **Take control of your surroundings.** Is the traffic insane? Leave early for work or take the longer, less traveled route. Hate waiting in line at the corporate cafeteria? Pack your lunch and eat at your desk.

- **Avoid people who bother you.** If you have a co-worker who causes your jaw to tense, put physical distance between the two of you. Sit far away at meetings or walk around his or her cubicle, even if it requires some extra steps.

- **Learn to say no.** You have a lot of responsibilities and demands on your time. At a certain point, you cross the line between being charitable and being foolish. Turn down the neighborhood sports league. Pass on coaching T-ball. Those around you will appreciate more time with a relaxed you. And you'll have time to enjoy them, too.

- **Ditch part of your list.** Label your to-do list with A's, B's and C's, according to importance. On hectic days, scratch the C's from your list.

However, some problems can't be avoided. For those situations, try another technique.

ALTER

One of the most helpful things you can do during times of stress is to take inventory, then attempt to change your situation for the better.

- **Respectfully ask others to change their behavior.** And be willing to do the same. Small problems often create larger ones if they aren't resolved. If you're tired of being the butt of your wife's jokes at parties, ask her to leave you out of the comedy routine. In return, be willing to enjoy her other jokes and thank her for humoring you.

- **Communicate your feelings openly.** Remember to use "I" statements, as in, "I feel frustrated by shorter deadlines and a heavier workload. Is there something we can do to balance things out?"

- **Manage your time better.** Lump together similar tasks — group your phone calls, car errands and computer-related tasks. The reward of increased efficiency will be extra time.

- **State limits in advance.** Instead of stewing over a colleague's nonstop chatter, politely start the conversation with, "I've got only five minutes to cover this."

ACCEPT

Sometimes we have no choice but to accept things the way they are. For those times try to:

- **Talk with someone.** You may not be able to change a frustrating situation, but that doesn't mean your feelings aren't legitimate. Phone or schedule a coffee break with an understanding friend. You'll feel better after talking it out.

- **Forgive.** It takes energy to be angry. Forgiving may take practice, but by doing so you will free yourself from burning more negative energy. Why stew in your anger when you could shrug and move on?

- **Practice positive self-talk.** It's easy to lose objectivity when you're stressed. One negative thought can lead to another, and soon you've created a mental avalanche. Be positive. Instead of thinking, "I am horrible with money and will never be able to control my finances," try this: "I made a mistake with my money, but I am resilient. I'll get through it."
Learn from your mistakes. There is value in recognizing a "teachable moment." You can't change the fact that procrastination hurt your performance, but you can make sure you allot more time in the future.

ADAPT

Thinking you can't cope is one of the greatest stressors. That's why adapting — which often involves changing your standards or expectations — can be most helpful in dealing with stress.

- **Adjust your standards.** Do you need to vacuum and dust twice a week? Would macaroni and cheese be an unthinkable substitute for homemade lasagna? Redefine success and stop striving for perfection, and you may operate with a little less guilt and frustration.

- **Practice thought-stopping.** Stop gloomy thoughts immediately. Refuse to replay a stressful situation as negative, and it may cease to be negative.

- **Reframe the issue.** Try looking at your situation from a new viewpoint. Instead of feeling frustrated that you're home with a sick child, look at it as an opportunity to bond, relax and finish a load of laundry.

- **Adopt a mantra.** Create a saying such as, "I can handle this," and mentally repeat it in tough situations.

- **Create an assets column.** Imagine all of the things that bring you joy in life: vacation, children, pets. Then call on that list when you're stressed. It will put things into perspective and serve as a reminder of life's joys.

- **Look at the big picture.** Ask yourself, "Will this matter in a year or in five years?" The answer is often no. Realizing this makes a stressful situation seem less overwhelming.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TECHNIQUE

Stressors good and bad are a part of every life. Practice applying these techniques to balance your stress equation. With practice, that once-hefty backpack will become your private bag of tricks. Soon, you'll be able to pull out just the tool that will keep you hiking through life at a steady clip.

Stress Relief from laughter? It’s no joke

When it comes to relieving stress, more giggles and guffaws are just what the doctor ordered. Here's why.

Whether you're guiltily guffawing at an episode of "South Park" or quietly giggling at the latest New Yorker cartoon, laughing does you good. Laughter is a great form of stress relief, and that's no joke.

STRESS RELIEF FROM LAUGHTER

A good sense of humor can't cure all ailments, but data are mounting about the positive things laughter can do.

Short-term benefits
A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body. Laughter can:

- **Stimulate many organs.** Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.
• **Activate and relieve your stress response.** A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response and increases your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.

• **Soothe tension.** Laughter can also stimulate circulation and aid muscle relaxation, both of which help reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

**Long-term effects**

Laughter isn't just a quick pick-me-up, though. It's also good for you over the long haul. Laughter may:

• **Improve your immune system.** Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can affect your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses.

• **Relieve pain.** Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers. Laughter may also break the pain-spasm cycle common to some muscle disorders.

• **Increase personal satisfaction.** Laughter can also make it easier to cope with difficult situations. It also helps you connect with other people.

• **Improve your mood.** Many people experience depression, sometimes due to chronic illnesses. Laughter can help lessen your depression and anxiety and make you feel happier.

**IMPROVE YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR**

Are you afraid you have an underdeveloped — or nonexistent — funny bone? No problem. Humor can be learned. In fact, developing or refining your sense of humor may be easier than you think.

• **Put humor on your horizon.** Find a few simple items, such as photos or comic strips that make you chuckle. Then hang them up at home or in your office. Keep funny movies or comedy albums on hand for when you need an added humor boost.

• **Laugh and the world laughs with you.** Find a way to laugh about your own situations and watch your stress begin to fade away. Even if it feels forced at first, practice laughing. It does your body good.

• **Share a laugh.** Make it a habit to spend time with friends who make you laugh. And then return the favor by sharing funny stories or jokes with those around you.

• **Knock-knock.** Browse through your local bookstore or library's selection of joke books and get a few rib ticklers in your repertoire that you can share with friends.

• **Know what isn't funny.** Don't laugh at the expense of others. Some forms of humor aren't appropriate. Use your best judgment to discern a good joke from a bad, or hurtful, one.

**LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE**

Go ahead and give it a try. Turn the corners of your mouth up into a smile and then give a laugh, even if it feels a little forced. Once you've had your chuckle, take stock of how you're feeling. Are your muscles a little less tense? Do you feel more relaxed or buoyant? That's the natural wonder of laughing at work.
Stress relief: When and how to say no

Sure it's easier to say yes, but at what price to your peace of mind? Here's why saying no may be a healthier option for stress relief.

Is your plate piled high with deadlines and obligations? Are you trying to cram too many activities into too little time? If so, stress relief can be as straightforward as just saying no.

WHY SAY NO?

The number of worthy requests isn't likely to lessen, and you can't add more time to your day. Are you doomed to be overcommitted? The answer is no, not if you're willing to say no. It may not be the easy way, but it is a path to stress relief.

Keep in mind that being overloaded is individual. Just because your co-worker can juggle 10 committees with seeming ease doesn't mean you should be able to. Only you can know what's too much for you.

Consider these reasons for saying no:

- **Saying no isn't necessarily selfish.** When you say no to a new commitment, you're honoring your existing obligations and ensuring that you'll be able to devote high-quality time to them.
- **Saying no can allow you to try new things.** Just because you've always helped plan the company softball tournament doesn't mean you have to do it forever. Saying no gives you time to pursue other interests.
- **Always saying yes isn't healthy.** When you're overcommitted and under too much stress, you're more likely to feel run-down and possibly get sick.
- **Saying yes can cut others out.** On the other hand, when you say no, you open the door for others to step up. They may not do things the way you would, but that's OK. They'll find their own way.

WHEN TO SAY NO

Sometimes it's tough to determine which activities deserve your time and attention. Use these strategies to evaluate obligations — and opportunities — that come your way.

- **Focus on what matters most.** Examine your obligations and priorities before making any new commitments. Ask yourself if the new commitment is important to you. If it's something you feel strongly about, by all means do it. If not, take a pass.
- **Weigh the yes-to-stress ratio.** Is the new activity you're considering a short- or long-term commitment? For example, making a batch of cookies for the school bake sale will take far less time than heading up the school fundraising committee. Don't say yes if it will mean months of added stress. Instead, look for other ways to pitch in.
- **Take guilt out of the equation.** Don't agree to a request you would rather decline out of guilt or obligation. Doing so will likely lead to additional stress and resentment.
- **Sleep on it.** Are you tempted by a friend's invitation to volunteer at your old alma mater or to join a weekly golf league? Before you respond, take a day to think about the request and how it fits in with your current commitments. If you can't sleep on it, at least take the time to think the request through before answering.
HOW TO SAY NO

No. Nope. Nah. See how simple it is to say one little word, allowing you to take a pass on tasks that don't make the cut? Of course, there will be times when it's just not that easy. Here are some things to keep in mind when you need to say no:

- **Say no.** The word "no" has power. Don't be afraid to use it. Be careful about using wimpy substitute phrases, such as "I'm not sure" or "I don't think I can." These can be interpreted to mean that you might say yes later.

- **Be brief.** State your reason for refusing the request, but don't go on about it. Avoid elaborate justifications or explanations.

- **Be honest.** Don't fabricate reasons to get out of an obligation. The truth is always the best way to turn down a friend, family member or co-worker.

- **Be respectful.** Many good causes land at your door and it can be tough to turn them down. Complementing the group's effort while saying that you can't commit shows that you respect what they're trying to accomplish.

- **Be ready to repeat.** You may need to refuse a request several times before the other person accepts your response. When that happens, just hit the replay button. Calmly repeat your no, with or without your original rationale, as needed.

Saying no won't be easy if you're used to saying yes all the time. But learning to say no is an important part of simplifying your life and managing your stress. And with practice, you may find saying no gets easier.

**Getting Started is Easy!**

*Call your EAP for more information*