



# Learning to Manage Stress More Effectively

by Kathy Taylor-Rogers

If there is anything we should have learned from the past two years, it is that we have to practice effective self-care strategies if we want to manage our stress levels. We have all lived through probably the most challenging two years of our personal and professional lives. Everything that had been our “normal” disappeared and our lives were forever changed. Change for most of us is difficult at the best of times but having it thrust upon us in a way that no one has ever experienced before made it a lot worse. The messages we were getting have been constantly changing and the ways we had to adapt changed just as much. On-line learning was thrust upon you with little to no preparation. No one asked if you were comfortable with it or provided you with guidance on how to do it – each teacher was left on their own to figure out how to best move forward with the shift. Then throughout the pandemic there has been a constant shifting back and forth between in-classroom learning and on-line learning. The need for flexibility has been taken to a whole new level.

**“...we all face challenges, but it is important to learn to manage our thoughts, mood and behaviors related to those stressors.”**

On a personal level, this past two years has also taken a large toll on many. We are all living in very different circumstances, but many of us who live alone or live with someone who is not a great support have really suffered during this very isolating time. Many of us have purposefully kept away from our main support sources for fear we might unintentionally pass Covid on to loved ones that were possibly more vulnerable. Throughout this pandemic fear has been a predominant emotion. Fear that if we don't do everything “just right” then we could possibly get

extremely ill and die or someone we love could get ill and die. If one of the ways we maintained our mental health was travel, then we became isolated from that enjoyment. Many of us were unable to celebrate joyous family events together such as weddings, graduations, births, showers, anniversaries, birthdays. For any of us who experienced a significant loss during the pandemic, the ways we typically get our support during our grief were taken away from us.

There is little wonder why stress levels have reached an all-time high. The Oxford Dictionary defines stress as *a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances*. That pretty much summarizes the past two years. Some common reactions to a stressful event or to prolonged stress can be:

- Disbelief
- Feelings of fear, shock, anger, sadness, worry, frustration
- Changes in appetite, energy, desires and interests
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
- Difficulty concentrating, focusing and making decisions
- Physical reactions, such as headaches, body pains, stomach issues
- Increased use of tobacco, alcohol and other substances
- Feelings of isolation, withdrawal or worthlessness
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Feeling like “you are not yourself”
- Changes in your levels of tolerance and patience
- Constant anger and irritability
- Loss of interest in activities

The Achieve Center for Leadership uses another way to determine our stress level, which is a four-phase system.

- Phase One: **High Functioning** and is when we are managing our stress well and our motivation is high and we are engaged in both work and home.
- Phase Two: **Becoming Disillusioned** and is when we start to feel overwhelmed by pressures of home and/or work. In the second phase we often start to

disengage and start to avoid certain people or tasks and our overall life satisfaction begins to suffer.

- Phase Three: **Withdrawing** and at this phase we are feeling a general sense of dissatisfaction. The flow of negativity between home and work lives is now open and we start to find both draining. We begin to find many people and tasks major irritants and our enthusiasm for most things in our lives is diminished or nonexistent.
- Phase Four: **Complete Disengagement**. In this last stage, the stress has been so overwhelming that the individual is no longer able to cope with the everyday demands of life at work or home and is “burnt out”. There is complete disengagement from expectations at home and work and a high risk of depression.

It is very important that we each do a self-assessment and critically reflect on our stress levels now that we are approaching the end of this school year. Be mindful that sometimes high levels of stress can become the “new normal” so we may not think we are very stressed, but once we really take a deeper look, we do realize that we have been experiencing a number of these symptoms. The reality is that we all face challenges, but it is important to learn to manage our thoughts, mood and behaviors related to those stressors. How you respond to anything in your life is a choice and once you figure this out you can figure out how to make positive changes to manage the stress more effectively.

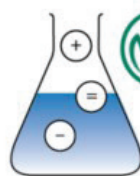
I'd like to talk now about some of the most effective coping strategies we can use to help us manage our stress:

- Take breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories, including those on social media. While it is good to be informed, at a certain point it can become overwhelming and have a negative impact on our mental health.
- Take care of yourself – exercise, get at least 7 hours of sleep per night, engage in relaxation activities that you enjoy.
- Learn Deep Breathing and practice it daily.
- Talk to those closest to you when something is bothering you. Sometimes talking about something bothersome becomes less stressful when we talk it through with a supportive listener.
- Although alcohol, nicotine and caffeine can temporarily reduce stress, the negative impacts over time can increase negative stress reactions.
- Eat well – it has been proven that well-nourished bodies cope better than bodies that are running high on carbs and fatty foods. Avoid comfort foods and emotional eating as both are negative coping strategies that decrease our coping ability.

- Carve out time for hobbies or activities that make you feel good.
- Practice meditation, yoga or other mindful-based stress reduction activities. Bridgethegapp.ca is a website with many free resources and some free mindfulness apps are: My Life Meditation, Insight Timer, Smiling Mind and Healthy Minds.
- Spend time with your pet; this has actually been proven to assist with people's stress management.
- Take a holiday that is truly a break. This can be a staycation somewhere or a trip away. Whatever you plan needs to be something truly relaxing and enjoyable.
- Consider seeing a counsellor to develop a stress management plan that works for you.

Some people might think, “I know all of this stuff” and while I will readily admit that these are not new strategies, ask yourself the question: “Have I actually really critically reflected on each one of these strategies and examined how they fit into my life?” Bill Phillips is quoted as saying, “There is a World of Difference between knowing what to do and actually doing it.” This is true for stress management, as for many other aspects of our lives. Another potent quote that he has used is, “Food is the most widely abused anti-anxiety drug in America, and Exercise is the most potent yet under-utilized antidepressant.” Think about both these quotes and consider what they mean to you and how you might be able to use them to decide on some changes that you can make to improve your life. While managing stress takes critical reflection and a commitment to make positive changes in your life, the benefits are immeasurable.

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