

Transforming Stress into Positive Energy

The following suggestions are to help you transform your stress into positive energy. If you are experiencing stress right now, try to start slowly to transform it by picking one or two items from the list below. Not everything on the list is for everybody. Make a conscious effort to incorporate the steps that best fit you and your lifestyle into your everyday routine. Try not to stress over distressing! Once you feel like things are more under control, then you can start building your toolbox for transforming stress by adding more and more suggestions to your everyday life choices. Be gentle and patient with yourself and know that these skills will help guide you through the rest of your life.

Master the Stress in Your Life

Change your attitude – Mindset Reset. Find other ways to think about stressful situations. Life is 10% what happens to us, and 90% how we react to it. Give yourself a pep talk by saying, “I can handle it,” “this will be over soon,” or “I have handled difficult things before, and I can do it again.” Ask yourself what might be positive about the stress – how it is motivating you or helping you to change and grow into a fuller human being.

Practice acceptance. We need to learn to accept things we cannot change without trying to exert more control over them. This saying by Reinhold Niebuhr has a lot of wisdom in it: “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Be realistic. Set practical goals for dealing with situations and solving problems. Find the courage to recognize your limits. Recognize that you are human and, therefore, not supposed to be perfect! Develop realistic expectations of yourself and others. Setting our expectations or goals too high may seem like a useful way to push ourselves and get things done, but we may also set ourselves up for disappointment and continued stress.

Get organized and take charge. Being unorganized or engaging in poor planning often leads to frustration or crisis situations, which are usually accompanied by feelings of stress. If you have time (!), take a time management class. Start to more consciously plan your time, make a schedule, establish your priorities. Do this regularly until it becomes a productive (and unconscious) habit. Take responsibility for your life. Be proactive. Solve problems and look for solutions rather than worry.

Learn to say “no.” This skill goes along with all of the previous suggestions. Learn to pick and choose which things you will say “yes” to and which things you will not. Protect yourself by not allowing yourself to take on every request or opportunity that comes your way. “No” doesn’t mean “Never.” You can always say, “No, not for now.” The point is you need to learn how to express your “no” in a relational way. This takes practice. It is okay to decline a request for a favor. Saying “no” does not mean you are bad, self-centered, or uncaring. Learn skills of assertiveness so that you can feel more confident and have effective ways of saying “no.”

Slow down. Know your limits and cut down on the number of things you try to do each day, particularly if you do not have enough time for them or for yourself. Be realistic about what you can accomplish effectively each day. Also, monitor your pace. Rushing through things can lead to mistakes or poor performance. Take the time you need to do a good job. Poorly done tasks can lead to added stress. Take afternoon naps! Einstein did!

Seek Caring Support

Find a support system. Find someone to talk to about your feelings and experiences. Speak to someone who cares about you, not just anybody. Talking with friends, family, a teacher, a minister, or a counselor can often bring new light and a more holistic perspective onto our problems. Sometimes we just need to “vent” or get something “off our chest,” but you probably won’t feel relieved until someone who really cares about you listens attentively to your feelings.

Find Meaning in Your Life

Seek a higher purpose. We can often endure acute stress when we keep the higher purpose of our situation in mind. While you might feel a lot of stress, keep in mind that in the end, your final rewards will be great (like that PhD!). You can find meaning in your life through satisfying personal activities, enjoyment of the arts, beauty and nature, and through your life struggles which lead to personal and professional growth.

Support Yourself

Take breaks, give yourself “me time.” Learn that taking time for yourself to relax is just as important as giving time to other activities. Take short breaks during your busy day. You might purposely schedule time in your agenda just for yourself so that you can recharge for all the other things you need to do. Learn to recognize your “red flags” for stress and be willing to take time to do something about it.

Take good care of yourself. Eat properly, get regular rest, keep a routine. Allow yourself to do something you enjoy each day. When we feel overwhelmed, we tend to eat poorly, sleep less, stop exercising, and generally push ourselves harder. This can tax the immune system and cause us to become ill more easily. If we take good care of ourselves to begin with, we will be better prepared to manage stress and accomplish our tasks in the long run.

Get regular exercise. Regular exercise can help relieve some symptoms of depression and stress, and help us to maintain our health. Exercise can build confidence, self-esteem, and self-image. It is also a great way to take time for yourself, blow off steam, and release physical tension.

Discover a hobby, do something different. For a balanced lifestyle, play is as important as work. Leisure activities and hobbies can be very enjoyable and inspiring, and they can offer an added sense of accomplishment and meaning to our lives. For ideas on new hobbies, browse through a bookstore, surf the internet, look up local organizations, or see what classes or courses are available in your community or university. Don’t quickly dismiss new opportunities.

Laugh, use humor. Do something fun and enjoyable such as seeing a funny movie, laughing with friends, reading a humorous book, or going to a comedy show.

Learn to relax your thinking. Learn some relaxation exercises and develop a regular relaxation routine. Try yoga, meditation, prayer, listening to music, or some simple quiet time. Relaxation techniques are skills that need to be developed with patience and practice so that we can use them effectively during difficult times of stress.