

Municipal Advocate

The Massachusetts Municipal Association

- Customer Service
- Managing Conflict
- Building Teams
- Reducing Stress

PERSONNEL Management



Taking Control



of

Stress

Simple Strategies Can Have a Big Payoff

BY JANET FONTANA

Recently I was facing a very stressful situation.

My son's college roommate—one of his best friends—was late in paying his rent for a condo we own in Colorado. He wouldn't return our phone calls or e-mails and was two months overdue. The situation was getting very frustrating. For weeks, I considered calling the student's parents, but looming in my mind were visions of hard feelings between the boys, defensive parents, and maybe even the need to start an eviction process. So I kept putting off the inevitable.

Worries, fears and anxieties such as these can consume an enormous amount of our energy. They are mentally and physically exhausting! Whether you're actually in a stressful situation or simply thinking about something stressful, your thoughts can set off the fight-or-flight syndrome—a protective response that prepares you to fight or flee from a physical threat. Since our bodies don't distinguish emotional stress from physical threats, that same response can occur when, for example, you're frustrated that someone is late for a meeting, or you're feeling guilty that you haven't spent much time with your family during the week. Undoubtedly, there were times when my worries about my tenant situation were causing my heart rate, blood pressure and muscle tension to rise even though these physical reactions were not needed to deal with my predicament.

Janet Fontana, a registered nurse and professional speaker, is the founder of Spectrum LifeWorks, a company that provides wellness and stress management seminars.

In fact, ninety-nine percent of the stress we experience is psychological rather than physical. That's not to say that the stress you feel is not real. It is important to recognize, however, that negative thoughts and emotions can inappropriately trigger the stress response. The release of the stress hormones—adrenaline and cortisol—can contribute to high blood pressure, pain, insomnia, anxiety, depression, asthma, allergies, irritable bowel syndrome, and many other conditions.

Here's a very startling statistic I learned at a course in positive psychology sponsored by Harvard Medical School: seventy-five percent of the average American's thoughts are negative. You are constantly thinking, whether you are aware of your thoughts or not. Most people are not in the habit of paying attention to their thoughts. Are you?

Thoughts that create negative emotions such as anger, guilt, resentment and anxiety can cause a release of adrenaline and cortisol. For example, when you think, "I'm never going to get all the way across town in time for that appointment!," your mind and body interpret that thought as a call for help. Your blood pressure rises, your heart speeds up and your muscles get tense in preparation to rush across town.

The good news is that you don't necessarily need to spend hours meditating or relinquish all responsibilities to feel less stressed and enjoy improved health and greater happiness. By practicing the suggestions that follow you can gain greater control over your thoughts, develop a more optimistic attitude, and dramatically reduce your stress without adding to your "to-do" list.

Just Breathe

The fastest way to break the cycle of anxious, stressful thinking is to take a few, releasing breaths. Most likely, when you are under stress, you hold your breath or take quick, shallow breaths from your upper chest. Your heart rate and blood pressure rise. Your body is on alert and you feel more anxious. By becoming aware of your breathing and shifting to diaphragmatic breathing (see related story, next page), you can lower your heart rate and blood pressure and approach stressful situations more effectively.

It doesn't take any extra time to use your breathing as a stress-relieving tool, but it does take awareness. Pay attention to your breathing throughout the day. Use regular events to remind yourself to take a few deep breaths—at traffic lights, while waiting in line, before answering the phone, in a meeting, anywhere you want to feel more focused and at ease.

Challenge Negative Thoughts

Challenging negative thoughts is a highly effective way of lowering your level of stress. During stressful times, our thinking tends to become emotional and narrowly focused, making challenging situations feel even more intense. Psychologists refer to automatic stress-producing thoughts as “cognitive distortions.” Some of the most common ones follow. See if you recognize the ways in which you generally react in challenging situations.

The “**awfulizer**” is always on alert for things to go wrong:

- “They are never going to approve this plan.”

- “There is no way we are going to get through this agenda in one night.”

The “**catastrophizer**” imagines that situations are going to be worse than they are.

- “If we miss the state funding deadline for the project then we are never going to be able to build a new school.”
- “My stomach was upset last night. I'm probably coming down with the flu and will be sick for the next week.”

The **perfectionist** feels that everything they and others do needs to be perfect.

- “I might as well do it myself; nobody else will get it right.”
- “We still haven't arrived at the best solution. We'll need to keep working.”

Jumping to conclusions is another way that we create our own stress.

- “She's probably calling to complain about something.”
- “I know him, he'll never go for this idea.”

My negative thoughts about the situation with my tenant were definitely inflated. I was jumping to the conclusion that his parents would become defensive,

and I was catastrophizing that he may never pay his rent and we would need to evict him. All of these thoughts were overly emotional and irrational.

When we react to events in automatic, emotional ways, we are less creative in our problem-solving capabilities. The other day, my husband was very upset because his e-mail was not working. “We have a report that needs to go out today and I can't get my stupid e-mail to work. If I don't get these changes to my boss, then he won't have time to integrate them and we'll miss the deadline.” He struggled with his e-mail program for over an hour—restarting his computer, calling his Internet service provider, and trying several times to transmit the file. Totally frustrated, he decided to take a break for dinner. When I asked him if he could send the e-mail from my computer, he looked surprised. Of course he could. In fact, he could have done so an hour earlier!

The stress of the situation had narrowed his focus and caused him to lose sight of his primary goal: getting the e-mail to his boss. Instead, he focused on the problems with his e-mail program.

Of course, it is always easier to notice these cognitive distortions in others. The key to lowering your level of stress is to pay attention to your own thoughts and responses to the events in your day. When you notice a negative thought, follow these four steps:

1. Tell yourself, “Stop.”
2. Take a few deep breaths.
3. Ask yourself questions to help uncover irrational, stressful thinking and develop more optimistic responses.
 - “Is this thought really true?”
 - “Is this thought helping me in this situation?”
 - “Is there another way that I could look at this situation?”
4. Chose your response.

In approaching my situation with my tenant, I used this process to reframe my negative thoughts before calling his parents. I was then able to handle the situation in a calm, rational manner rather than adding fuel to the fire. I presented an objective summary of the situation and clearly stated my expectations. We had a good conversation and his mother assured me that she would take care of the rent payments. By finally making the phone call, the mental weight of the situation had lifted and I felt relieved. As is true in most cases, I spent more energy worrying about the situation than it warranted.

Be Where You Are

Our worries and concerns have a way of invading our minds even during moments of unrelated activities. Have you ever had the experience of driving all of the way home from someplace only to realize that you

have no recollection of the drive? Where were you? Your body was driving the car, but your mind and emotions were miles away. In your mind, you were probably working on your to-do list or were absorbed in thoughts of something that happened earlier that day. We spend much of our lives “asleep at the wheel.” As John Lennon said, “Life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans.”

Most of our stress is not the result of what is happening in the moment. Lamenting over past events and worrying about possible future situations are the sources of nearly all of our stress. The more you focus your attention on what is happening in the moment, the less stressed you will feel.

Chose one daily activity and practice it in a mindful way. Try taking a shower, brushing your teeth, eating a meal, or driving to and from work with all of your attention focused on that experience. Whenever you notice that you are thinking about other things, bring your attention to your breathing and come back to the moment. What do you see, hear, feel, smell, taste? Keep bringing yourself out of “automatic pilot.”

Becoming more aware of what you’re thinking throughout the day can reduce stress. If you plan to shoot some baskets as you work out a plan to handle a challenge, that’s OK; you have made a conscious choice. But if you want to loosen up and relax by playing basketball, yet find yourself distracted by afflicting thoughts, you have unintentionally brought yourself to a stressful place. Your thoughts have robbed you of what could have been a relaxing experience. Through the practice of mindfulness, you can learn to quiet your mind and be less reactive to stress.

Attitude of Gratitude

One of the best ways to stay focused in the moment is to expand your awareness of gratitude for the many people, experiences and things you have in your life. Psychologist Martin Seligman has discovered that a core character trait of happy, fulfilled people is a strong sense of gratitude. By adopting an attitude of gratitude, you can lower your level of stress and train yourself to be more focused on the good in your day.

A ten-week study found that people who recorded five things each day for which they feel grateful experienced higher levels of alertness, enthusiasm, determination, optimism and energy. They also were less stressed and depressed and were more likely to help others. These positive attributes lasted for at least six months.

Most of us spend a considerable amount of time and energy wanting our lives to be different. We wish it were Friday instead of Monday. We wish we didn’t need to work so many hours. We wish we made more money. As Sheryl Crow sings in “Soak up the Sun,” “It’s not having what you want, it’s wanting what you’ve got.” By shifting your focus from what you

want to what you have, you will be more aware of the many gifts that fill your life.

The following strategies will strengthen your attitude of gratitude:

- Keep a gratitude journal and record five things each day.
- Ask each person at the dinner table to say something for which they feel grateful.
- During a busy time at work, thank your colleagues for their hard work and support by treating them to lunch.
- Write a letter of thanks to someone who inspires you or to someone who taught you a valuable lesson.
- Share a moment of gratitude with your significant other before falling asleep.

When life gets busy, it’s easy to get caught up in the stressors of our day and feel overwhelmed by our to-do list. No matter how hectic your schedule, you can always take a few deep breaths, reframe negative thoughts, be in the moment, and feel grateful. After a few weeks of integrating these practices into your day, you will gain greater control over your thoughts and feel more energized and happy. Remember, when negative thoughts and emotions arise, you have the tools needed to lift the weight from your shoulders. 🌟

Breathing Exercise Helps Relieve Stress

Enjoy a stress break any time, any place, in just a few minutes with the following diaphragmatic breathing exercise:

1. Sit comfortably in your chair.
2. Bring your attention to your breathing.
3. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Feel your abdomen expand as you breathe in (like a balloon inflating inside your belly).
4. Hold the breath for a few seconds.
5. Exhale slowly and completely, noticing your abdomen flatten as you breathe out (like a balloon deflating).

Repeat the exercise for several breaths.

Try counting the breath—inhale to the count of four and exhale counting from four down to one. As distracting thoughts wander through your mind, simply notice them and then bring your attention back to your breath and the counting (or a phrase of your choosing).

Use each exhale as an opportunity to let go of any worries or concerns and release any physical tension you have been holding in your body.

If you find it difficult to relax your abdomen as you breathe in, try this exercise while lying down for a few minutes each day. Placing your hands on your abdomen may help. After about six weeks of practice, abdominal breathing will become second nature.

— *Janet Fontana*

