

How to Become Stress-Proof

Some people never seem to get rattled. Learn their secrets for staying calm and centered. BY JULIA TOLLIVER MARANAN



Look on the bright side to keep stress at bay and stay healthy.

Be a Realist

Sometimes your reaction to a stressor causes you more anxiety than the stressor itself, says Allen Elkin, Ph.D., New York City-based author of *Stress Management for Dummies* (John Wiley and Sons, 1999). Fortunately, you have the ability to reassess your thoughts and reduce your stress levels a few notches. The following will help you avoid creating unnecessary angst.

Get It Right. Try one of Elkin's favorite tricks: Rate the amount of stress you're feeling on a 10-point scale, where 1 is fairly calm and 10 equates to incredibly stressed. Next, grade how dire the situation really is on a similar scale, where 1 is equivalent to stubbing your toe and 10 is like losing a loved one. Then compare the two numbers. For example, if you just miss a subway train,

YOU TOO CAN JOIN THE ranks of the unflappable, even if your life isn't always serene. In the process you'll protect yourself from health problems like heart disease and cancer. Letting stress roll off your back may help you live longer, says Margery Silver, Ed.D., associate

director of the New England Centenarian Study in Boston. Silver says that the 100-plusers in that study possess inner strengths that helped them bounce back from difficulties.

Here's how you can develop three key traits that will allow you to handle stressful situations with effortless grace and resilience.

you might have a reaction of 4. But since you know that another train will likely follow three minutes later, the situation would realistically merit a 1. Here you have a 4 reaction to a 1 situation, which means your distorted thinking is creating extra stress. If you can correct your perspective, the problem won't seem so terrible and you can

2 1/8" X 9 3/8"

HOW TO BECOME STRESS-PROOF

wait in peace for the next train.

Break Negative Chains of Thought. Overestimating the significance of a stressor isn't the only mind game that can increase stress. Another common example of what Simone Ravicz, Ph.D., a stress expert in Los Angeles, calls "stinking thinking" is imagining the extreme worst-case scenario when something minor goes wrong. For



When you're stumped by a stressful situation, take 10 minutes to write down every possible solution.

instance, you might think "I didn't finish the project in time, so I'm a total failure." Another common stress inducer is predicting unrealistic consequences, like "if I don't do this presentation perfectly, I'll never get another chance to win this client." Often these patterns are so ingrained that you fall into them automatically, which can make it difficult to become aware of them and tricky to overcome them.

To discover which pattern you fall into, write down the situation (didn't finish the project in time) and your thoughts about it (I'm a failure). Seeing these two things on paper can help you recognize the incongruity. To correct your thinking, take an inventory of your experiences: Have you ever worked on a project that you completed successfully and on time? Most likely, you have done this several times. The next time faulty thinking strikes, use this audit exercise to put your stress in perspective. The more you do this, the less likely you are to fall prey to negative thought patterns.

Get Creative

It's natural to feel tense when your life seems out of control. But by developing your powers of creativity, you can find

ways to take charge of troubling situations. These tips can awaken your resourcefulness.

Make Use of Adversity. Wallowing in your distress prevents you from identifying solutions. But once you face the facts about a predicament, you can tap your creative problem-solving skills. For example, what if your commute leaves you tied in knots before you even get to work? Since you can't make traffic move any faster or reserve yourself a spot on

an overly crowded train, tackle what you can control: Turn that stressful time into something valuable. Take an audio course on a subject you have always wanted to learn about, read that book you've had on your nightstand for the past

two months, or meditate. Silver tells the story of one centenarian who loved to read but had severe visual impairment. Instead of giving up books, she figured out that if she used a dental visor with a strong light and a magnifying glass, she could read for a few hours.

Take Control. When you're stumped by a stressful situation, take 10 minutes to write down every possible solution, regardless of how outrageous it may seem. Seeing your options on paper helps you view the problem in a different light, and if you don't edit yourself you might uncover a brilliant solution. For example, if you have a problem at work, your list may range from the practical (asking your supervisor for help) to the fantastic (quit your job and move back in with your parents). Writing out a list of your options reminds you that you're free to choose your course of action, which can reduce your anxiety. No matter what you eventually decide, you have taken control of your situation.

Cultivate Optimism

Research confirms that having an optimistic outlook helps you handle stress better than being gloomy. "We're not asking you to ignore the negative, to ignore

REYNA

what is happening, but to focus on what is possible even through the difficulty,” says Lori Leyden-Rubenstein, Ph.D., a psychotherapist in North Kingstown, R.I., and author of *The Stress Management Handbook* (McGraw-Hill, 1998). Use these tips to silence your cynical nature.

Count Your Blessings. As soon as you open your eyes each morning, think of at least three things you are grateful for, recommends Leyden-Rubenstein. When you find yourself in the midst of a particularly difficult situation, you may have to resort to basic things like “I can breathe” or “I have all my fingers and toes,” but once you begin identifying these gifts in your life you can often recognize larger blessings. Realizing that your life isn’t so bad will help you take stressful events in stride. If you lose sight of your blessings during the day, write them down and post them where you will see them regularly.

Find a Success Partner. Sharing your triumphs, no matter how small, with someone else can help you shift your attitude

toward the positive. For example, if you struggle with losing weight, telling a trusted friend or co-worker how you bypassed a plate of brownies in the lunchroom can motivate you to deal with



stress better. (You might then diffuse deadline tension by going to the gym rather than scarfing down a candy bar.) You may even want to share three good things that happened that day with your success partner to help you end your day on an upbeat note.

Psyche Yourself Up. Coaching yourself with positive thoughts can curb your tendency to worry, says Ravicz. For example, if you are preparing for an important presentation, tell yourself “I’m excited about this opportunity to show my super-

visor what I can do.” You will calm your nerves enough to sleep well the night before—upping the odds that you will do well. Using visualization can also help you think positively and reduce your

Once you begin identifying small gifts in your life, you can often recognize larger blessings.

anxiety. The next time you encounter a challenge, picture yourself meeting or surpassing your goal. If you feel doubt starting to creep in, recall that mental image of success. Even if you don’t fully believe you can rise to the occasion, these strategies will eventually quiet your doubting mind and give you the confidence to rise above stress. ●

Julia Tolliver Maranan is the assistant editor at Natural Health. She is earnestly trying to stop imagining the worst.

6.7/8" X 4 1/2"