



GUIDE

Occupational Therapy
Stress Management



The Ottawa | L'Hôpital
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Disclaimer

This is general information developed by The Ottawa Hospital. It is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified health-care provider. Please consult your health-care provider who will be able to determine the appropriateness of the information for your specific situation.

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P1080 (REV 11/2014)

Printed at The Ottawa Hospital

Stress management

Being in a hospital and feeling unwell can be a difficult experience. You may be feeling stressed. The purpose of this booklet is to help you:

- Increase your understanding of stress and the symptoms you have as a response to stress
- Recognize certain situations that may trigger stress
- Understand the stress you may have during your hospital stay and how to help manage it
- Experience a variety of strategies to cope with stress, enabling you to choose the most appropriate ones for you
- Benefit from the effects of relaxation:
 - Improved quality of sleep
 - Reduced pain and fatigue caused by muscle tension
 - Increased self-esteem and confidence
 - Better quality relationships with others

As you go through this booklet, you will be invited to do some exercises that will help you know yourself better and develop ways to fight stress.

What is stress?

Stress is unavoidable in our day to day lives. It causes a unique personal reaction or stress response in times of perceived danger, situations that cause worry or periods of change. Stress can be helpful as it encourages us to accomplish tasks but having ongoing high levels of stress is not healthy.

Each one of us sees situations differently and we all have our own ways to cope. For this reason, we all respond in a different way to a situation. Stress affects your body, your mind and your behaviour.

In a hospital stress can be:

- Environmental: noise, bright lights, confined spaces
- Social: demands from family and visitors, changes in privacy, roommates
- Physical: health issues, interrupted sleep patterns, reactions to treatments or the illness itself
- Mental: your worries, fears, expectations and concerns

Feeling NUTS?

While what stresses you is different from what stresses your neighbor, the recipe for stress is universal. So are the ingredients. For a situation to be stressful it must contain one or more of the following elements:

Novelty	Something you have not experienced before
Unpredictability	Something you had no way of knowing it would occur
Threat to the Ego	your competence as a person is called into question
Sense of Control	You feel you have little or no control over the situation

www.humanstress.ca

Recognize your symptoms of stress

The following are symptoms commonly reported by people during a stressful experience. How we react to stress is very unique. It is important to realize what symptoms you have. This will help you realize when you are having a stress response.

Take some time to review the list below and think of what are the 3 main symptoms you have when you are experiencing stress. If there is a symptom that you experience that is not included in the list on the following page, please add it.

Physical

- Headaches
- Muscle tension/aches
- Fatigue
- Weight change
- Changes in breathing
- Digestive upsets
- Pounding heart
- Teeth grinding
- Restlessness
- Sweating
- Trouble sleeping

Emotional

- Frustration
- Low mood
- Crying spells
- Irritability
- Fear
- Worrying
- Easily discouraged
- Feeling vulnerable

Behavioural

- Spending more time on the computer/watching TV
- Eating more/less
- Excessive shopping
- Being reckless
- Biting nails
- Low productivity
- Nervous laughter
- Increased alcohol and/or drug use

Spiritual

- Emptiness
- Loss of meaning
- Doubt
- Unforgiving of self or others
- Looking for magic solutions
- Loss of direction

Cognitive

- Whirling mind
- Loss of creativity
- Boredom
- “Spacing out”
- Negative self talk (i.e. “I can’t”)
- Forgetfulness
- Trouble concentrating

Relational

- Resentment
- Loneliness
- Lashing out
- Clamming up
- Nagging
- Distrust/paranoia
- Lack of intimacy
- Using people
- Fewer contacts with friends

Write down your 3 main symptoms:

You can then try to reduce your stress through some of the techniques mentioned later in this booklet.

Here is another exercise to help you understand how you react to stress. Take some time to think about the following questions. Looking back on the symptoms of stress may help you complete this section.

What makes me feel anxious?

What physical symptoms do I usually experience when I feel anxious?

What thoughts do I have during times when I feel anxious?

What do I do when I feel anxious?

What activities do I find helpful when I feel anxious?

(adapted) Cooper, J. (2006)

Remember, stress is an unavoidable part of our lives and it can impact your body, thoughts and actions. Knowing your stress symptoms and what makes them arise (i.e. the situation, the thoughts involved) will help you to manage stress. You can learn ways of coping with stress.

How to cope with stress?

Stress can be managed in a number of ways and you can learn new coping strategies to deal with daily stressors. The following are some ideas on how to relieve stress and tension:

- Don't judge yourself. Try not to be overly critical of yourself and others.
- Look at your lifestyle and see what can be changed at work, with your family or with your schedule.
- Use relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation or the techniques described in this booklet.
- Practice having a positive attitude. Think of 5 things that bring you a sense of peace and calmness. Think of 5 things you are grateful for.
- Exercise. Being active is one of the most effective stress reducing activities.
- Manage your time. Prioritize and do essential things first. Tackle one thing at a time and break down larger tasks into smaller more manageable ones. You may find it helpful to use checklists. Ask for help if you need to.
- Watch your diet and try to avoid/limit alcohol, caffeine, sugar, fats and tobacco. They impair your body's ability to cope with stress.
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Talk with others such as family, friends, counsellors, or a support group. Make the first move to reach out to others.
- Take a break and have some time that's just for you: read a book, watch a movie or go for a walk.

- Let go of trying to control everything and be flexible.
- Don't try to be perfect or overly competitive.
- Practice acceptance. Be willing to experience a situation as it is, rather than how you want it to be. "Let go and let be"; try not to judge the situation as good or bad.
- Have some fun! Laugh and be with people you enjoy.

How to cope with stress in the hospital environment?

- Bring in familiar objects such as family photographs, blankets or pillows.
- Listen to relaxing music.
- Place inspiring quotes or photos of nature in the room.
- Don't be afraid to ask for what you need. If you are cold, ask for another blanket. If you are experiencing increased levels of pain or cannot sleep tell the nurse.
- When you want to rest, ask your nurse to close curtain by your bed or if possible to close door to your room.
- Try not to focus on the possibilities of what can go wrong.
- Read a magazine or a book, take a walk/get out of the room, call family or friends.
- Remember that laughter can be a very effective method of relieving stress. Watch a funny movie or read a humorous book. Tell jokes or funny stories.
- If you are unclear about the nature of the procedure you are about to undergo, ask one of the nurses for clarification.
- If you are afraid, tell a member of the staff. Only then can your fears be addressed.

- Many hospital patients take great comfort from speaking to a member of our spiritual team. Ask any team member to have this organized.
- Refer to the following stress management techniques in this booklet.

by M. Boland, James Connolly Memorial Hospital



Stress management techniques

This section gives you a few techniques for managing your stress. Grounding activities, visualization, breathing techniques, and positive thinking will be reviewed.

These techniques can help you control the physical symptoms, thoughts and behaviours when facing an anxiety-provoking situation.

Whichever method you choose, it may take a few trials before you feel the benefit of the relaxation. Not all relaxation techniques will work for all individuals. You can actually feel strange at first if you are not used to relaxing (for example, you may get fidgety).

Consult with your Occupational Therapist to help you choose the relaxation techniques and materials that are appropriate for you.



**“I’m finally learning how to relax.
Unfortunately, relaxation makes me tense.”**

Grounding activities

If you are suffering from stress, you may be feeling ungrounded, disorganized or have a sense of “things falling apart”. The next exercise teaches you ways to help you feel more centered and focused.

1. Observe and describe

- What is my body feeling right now?
- What are my thoughts right now?
- What do I need to do to take care of myself right now?

2. Naming 5 things

When we are distressed, and our minds race with worry, one way of keeping ourselves grounded in the present moment is to focus on our senses. What can I see? What can I touch? What can I hear? By focusing on the specific facts collected

through our senses in this present moment we give our minds a job to do and distract ourselves from our worries until we are calm enough to sort out our feelings.

- Name 5 things you can see
- Name 5 things you can hear
- Name 5 things you can touch
(For example, table, book shelf, lamp, chair, potted plant)
- Now go back and describe them in even greater detail

The more you truly look at the details in your environment, the more you will be mindful of the present and less vulnerable to negative thoughts.

3. Keeping yourself focused

- Hold something in your hand. Feel it, focus on the sensation. Describe it, be present.
- Focus on your patient arm band: read your name. This reminds you that you are in a hospital, a safe place.
- Carry with you a card with positive and encouraging statements. This reminds you that you have the strength within yourself to deal with a situation.

Visualization

Think of a positive image such as a place you enjoy visiting, or the face of a family member or close friend. Picture this in your mind and take in all the details. When you are having a stress response and having symptoms of stress, bring this image into your mind and focus on it. Your brain will initially see the situation as stressful but by bringing to mind something positive, you can distract/change how the mind interprets the situation and decrease your stress response.

Breathing techniques

Please note: If you are feeling lightheaded or unwell as you are doing the breathing techniques, stop the breathing technique. Let the nurse know if you continue to feel unwell. Daily practice will assist you to achieve the benefits from these breathing techniques.

Simple breathing technique

This exercise slows your breathing to help you calm down. It can be done for 5 to 10 minutes. During the exercise, you can think of a positive word or phrase, such as “I am relaxed” or “I feel calm”. Another option is that as you breathe in, you think “I breathe in calmness” and as you exhale “I let go of tension/worries”.

1. Loosen any tight clothing, position yourself comfortably either lying or sitting. Ensure that your back is supported.
2. Close your eyes if you wish. If you prefer to keep your eyes open, softly gaze at the floor, wall or ceiling.
3. Keep your shoulders and upper chest relaxed.
4. Place your hand flat on your stomach.
5. Breathe in slowly (through your nose, if possible). As you inhale, your stomach should gently swell underneath your hand (this should not be a forced movement using your abdominal muscles).
6. Remember to keep your shoulders and upper chest relaxed.
7. Breathe out slowly through your mouth.
8. Your stomach will gently flatten beneath your hand.
9. Pause, and then repeat steps 2 to 9.

Benson's technique

This is an exercise in mindfulness, in being aware of this present moment. It can help you settle racing thoughts. You can do this anywhere, anytime, and no one needs know you are doing it. When you are first trying this technique, it can be done for about 5 minutes. As you feel more comfortable with this technique, you can build up doing it for 10 to 15 minutes.

Get into a comfortable position and close your eyes.

Breathe in through your nose and become aware of the sensations of breathing. Be aware of the sensation of the air passing in through your nostrils, the cool air on the back of your throat, the rising and the falling of your chest and abdomen. Focus on these sensations, and, as you breathe out through your mouth say the word "one" quietly to yourself.

Bring your focus of attention more and more inward, to the sounds and sensations of your breathing. Leave aside your other thoughts and focus inwardly. Focus on the sound of the simple word "one". Breathe easily and naturally, and each time you breathe out say the word "one" quietly to yourself.

If you find your mind wandering to other thoughts, don't be disturbed. Simply remark that you have been distracted and come back to the practise of the next breath. Breathe easily and naturally and each time you breathe out say the word "one" quietly to yourself.

When you finish, stay quiet for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes open.

Challenging negative thinking

Negative thoughts can make you feel even more anxious. You may not even be aware of these thoughts. Positive statements provide a way to change your negative thoughts to thoughts that promote peace and calm. Positive statements replace the anxiety producing messages with thoughts that make you feel good.

You may want to take some time to think about the following:

What are my thoughts when I am feeling anxious?	Are these thoughts reasonable? Why and why not?	How can I consider these thoughts in a more positive way?

(adapted) Cooper, J. (2006)

Here are some examples of positive phrases for stressful situations. You may want to use them or write your own.

There is
nothing to
worry about.

I will do
my best.

It won't last long,
and I can cope
with it.

Take it easy, step
by step. Don't
rush.

I have survived
this feeling
before. It will
pass.

I will be
all right.

I can be pleased with
the progress
I'm making.

I can do this.
I am doing it
now.

I did it!

I handled that;
it will be easier
next time.

