

Managing life's stresses

Five essentials that should be in your personal toolbox

As a family medicine doctor and psychiatrist for years, I've seen over and over again how much stress can negatively affect physical health.



DR. FRANÇOISE ADAN

Medical director

University Hospitals Connor Integrative Health Network

Françoise is an expert on stress management, mindfulness and resiliency.

(216) 285-4070

www.uhconnorintegrativehealth.org

Stress can literally make you sick. Yet it's impossible to rid your life of stress. We deal with it every day — at work, at home — and sometimes, it overtakes us and consumes our life, our emotions or our health.

So how do you keep your mind — and in turn, your body — healthy despite everyday stresses? In other words, how do you harness the power of stress and manage it instead of letting it manage you?

It takes a bit of resiliency and practice.

Here are a few tools to help deal with stress:

- **Breathe deep:** It sounds simple, but taking a minute every day to breathe deep when stress starts to build up can be cathartic. Breathing in and out slowly can bring your heart rate down, refocus your mind and calm you so you're ready to take on the next challenge.
- **Be present:** We often get caught up with what's next instead of focusing on what's happening now. Take a moment to close your eyes, picture a peaceful place and breathe in while silently telling yourself that you are peaceful and present. Affirmation is powerful.
- **Be mindful:** Similar to being present, being mindful means turning your focus away from past sorrows, regrets, should-haves, would-haves and could-haves and focusing on the now. Noticing five things around you — a

nice smell, a cool breeze, a pleasant picture or view — can help in this practice.

- **Be positive:** For most of us, focusing on the bad stuff in ourselves and others is easier than focusing on the good stuff. It's often easier to criticize than to praise. But next time you feel that urge, take a moment. What's the upside of things? Instead of starting a meeting talking about what's going wrong, focus on what's going right.
- **Be grateful:** Even in the most difficult of times, we have things to be grateful for. Don't like your job? Be grateful you have one to pay your bills and enjoy life. Don't like the way you look? Be grateful you are healthy and have the power to exercise and eat better to change the way you look. At the end of the day, take a moment and give thanks for what you have.

Working in a hospital, I know that nothing is more contagious than emotions. Being positive is an intentional practice, a choice, a discipline like brushing our teeth.

The most resilient people learn to reframe stress in their lives so that they are open to seeing it from a positive perspective.

So while it's OK to spend time at the gym exercising our body, it's just as important to focus and exercise our minds to keep our brains healthy, too. ●

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