

How to Manage the Stress in Your Life

Smoking and Stress Management

Many smokers believe that smoking somehow gets rid of all the stress in their life or helps them deal more effectively with the problems that do occur. You may be surprised to learn that smoking actually *increases* stress on the body. Several recent studies have confirmed this fact.

Understand that there is no chemical in a cigarette that calms you. They do the exact opposite. The chemicals in cigarettes stimulate your heart to beat faster and increase your blood pressure.

However, many smokers do report that they feel more calm and relaxed when they smoke. Why is that? Three things are happening.

First, when you smoke you practice deep breathing. This is the same kind of breathing that is taught in meditation classes, for martial arts and during natural childbirth. That way of breathing actually does relax you. That's why it's used in all these situations.

Secondly, when you smoke while tense you are shifting focus from whatever is bothering you. Whether or not you actually take a break or simply stop to smoke for a minute or two, you are no longer focusing on the issue at hand. Your mind is on the act of smoking. This shift of focus reduces anxiety and tension.

Finally, as you know by now back when you smoked your body was used to a certain amount of nicotine. When your blood nicotine level dropped below that amount you began to feel irritable, anxious, and impatient, all the same feeling that most people experience when under stress. So, you smoked a cigarette to relieve the withdrawal and you felt better. Putting more nicotine into your body simply relieved the withdrawal but since you felt better you mistakenly equated that with reducing stress. Doing this unconsciously during many stressful times over the years reinforced that notion. It is important to clearly understand now that **relieving withdrawal is not the same as relaxing or becoming calm.**

Furthermore, a cigarette never did help you figure out how to deal with your angry boss, give you advice on how to stretch your budget, or show you how to fix the flat tire. Did, it? Of course not. You figured all that out by yourself!

You just happened to be smoking during most of these times so you inadvertently gave the cigarette credit for making the situation better. You began to believe that the cigarette somehow helped you and that you couldn't cope without it. But think back to some stressful time. Did the situation resolve itself simply because you had a cigarette? Was your life totally stress free just because you smoked? Of course not.

A cigarette is not a magic wand that you can wave to make all your stress disappear. It is nothing more than a tube of paper filled with dried leaves.

Now is the time to take back the power you have given cigarettes. Give yourself credit for something that you have been doing on your own all along.

It's a fact. You have always been the one to relieve your own stress. **You** have always figured out how to deal with the problems in your life. Any calm or relaxation you have experienced is a direct result of what **you** have done or chosen not to do in any given situation.

Recognize your own ability to successfully deal with life's ups and down.

What else can I do?

Because the association between smoking and stress management is so powerful for most smokers, it is extremely important for you to learn new ways to deal with the stress in your life. That way you won't be tempted to reach for a cigarette the next time you encounter a problem. Here are some helpful suggestions to help you construct a new stress management strategy:

- Take long slow deep breaths as often as you can throughout the day but especially during times of stress.
- When you encounter a problem, step back, take a few minutes to think things over, and then proceed.
- Separate the cigarette from the situation. Think back to situations that you find stressful. Ask yourself what a cigarette could do to make those situations better.
- If you become angry with someone tell yourself, "If I smoke I will only hurt myself, not that person." Smoking is simply not a good way to get back at anyone!
- Close your eyes and practice seeing yourself handling a stressful situation without a cigarette. See someone offering you a cigarette but you turning it down. Practice saying, "I can deal with this without smoking."
- Stop tolerating. Every day we put up with all kinds of situations that sap your energy and cause unnecessary irritation. They can be little things like the leaky faucet and the broken door hinge. Or much bigger situations like the neighbor's dog that barks all night or the brother-in-law who's always asking for money.

On one hand we view the smaller things as "just little irritations" so we ignore them. However, when you add them all together, these "little irritations" can really drag you down.

On the other hand, we put up with the bigger situations out of some misguided belief that we should be "nice" and not complain. We think we need to accept these situations as just a natural part of life. But if the

barking dog or begging brother-in-law is a constant source of irritation, why should you put up with them?

Whatever the case, putting up all of these situations, little and big, can add up to a tremendous amount of stress in your life. It is time to start examining what you are tolerating and fix as many of these situations as you can.

- Slow down. Part of the stress in our lives can be traced to our increasingly fast paced life style. We just rush from one thing to another without a minute to ourselves. No wonder we are so frazzled. Here are few tips to help you reduce the pace of your life and “stop and smell the roses”:
 - Create a place at home and at work where you can be quiet and peaceful. “Hide” there every so often.
 - Don’t live by such a rigid schedule that you have to be someplace every moment of every day. Do something spontaneous every day.
 - Eat slowly. Set aside plenty of time for meals. Don’t eat in your car, at your desk, or on the run.
 - Turn off the computer, cell phone, TV and radio. Just try being quiet for a few minutes every day.
 - Stop yourself when you are rushing around like crazy. Ask yourself “Why am I doing this?” The answer may give you some important insight.
 - Really do stop and smell the roses. The experience can be wonderful.
- Meditate or pray. Set aside at least half an hour every day to do so.
- Allow some time each week to play. This does not mean that you need to participate in some type of organized sport (although that’s great if you want to do so). Rather, give yourself ample time to just have fun, whatever that means for you.
- *Set aside fifteen or twenty minutes every day to practice the Relaxation Technique on the accompanying page. This powerful technique has been used successfully by thousands of individuals for many years.*

Now that you have some excellent stress management suggestions, take a few minutes to devise your *Personalized Stress Management Plan*. By all means add your own suggestions to your plan if they don’t happen to appear on the above list.

Relaxation Technique

Find

A place where you can be alone.

Sit

In a comfortable chair or lie on the floor

Think

Of a short word or a sound you can say over and over again

Close

Your eyes

Release

Any tension in your body by tightening that muscle and then letting go

Begin

To breath deeply and slowly, breathing the air in through your nose and letting it out through your mouth. Say your special word over and over to yourself as you breath out.

Do

This for fifteen to twenty minutes a day

Practice

Don't worry if you have trouble letting go and clearing your mind at first. Just like everything else, it will become easier with practice.

My Personalized Stress Management Plan

Poor management of stress leads more ex-smokers back to smoking than any other cause. Therefore, it is essential that you have a powerful plan to deal with the stress in your life. This plan should include ways of eliminating stress before it happens as well as techniques to deal with stressful times that do occur.

In the space below, detail how you plan to cope with the stress in your life. Be as specific as possible. And don't be afraid to try something new!

I plan to eliminate as much stress as possible by:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I will deal with the stress that does occur by:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I plan to use the following relaxation techniques often:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I realize that I put up with too many negative situations in my life. This week I will no longer tolerate _____.

Then, next week I will begin to work at eliminating these other "little irritations":

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Finally, I will use one of these phrases as my "stress buster". Instead of telling myself how bad things are or giving myself negative messages, I will use one (or more) of these phrases to help me through stressful times:

"Every problem has a solution *that does not involve smoking.*"

"I am in control."

"I am strong. I can handle this."

"I am proud of myself."

"I am calm."

