

How to Beat Serious Stress

Every day of our lives we face events that cause us stress. Although most of these events are minor in the grand scheme of things, there are situations that clearly can be considered major sources of stress -- such as an impending marriage or divorce, or trouble at home or work.

"In combating serious stress, one should first carefully appraise the seriousness of the situation and the adequacy of one's coping resources," explains Kenneth B. Matheny, Ph.D., A.B.P.P., Professor of counseling psychology at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

When you're faced with a highly stressful event in your life, the following strategies will help you cope.

- Avoid unnecessary changes in your life. Instead, reserve what energy you do have for dealing with the stressor at hand. If possible, stabilize your work and home environments while working out the primary problem.
- Quiet your mind. In times of stress, the mind makes things appear worse than they are by creating endless versions of impending disaster. Because the body can't tell the difference between fact and fantasy, it responds with heightened physical response. Keep in the present. You can calm both your mind and your body by keeping your mind in the present, which is seldom as stressful as an imagined future or regrettable past. To keep your mind in the present, center your attention on your breathing, a sound or visual pattern, a repetitive movement or meditation.
- Courageously and aggressively face the stressor. Resist any temptation to ignore the stressor. Instead, carefully appraise the seriousness of the problem without magnifying it out of proportion. Ask yourself, "What is the worst thing that is realistically likely to happen?" Then remind yourself of all the good things that will still be a part of your life even if the worst occurs. In addition, confirm your view of the stressor by talking with others. Make a special effort to speak to family, friends or co-workers who have dealt with similar experiences.

- Take inventory of your coping responses. Confidence is a valuable ally in combating stress, and it builds on memories of past successes. Review successes you've had with other stressful life situations. Recall some of the specific things you did to cope.
- Take action. Commit yourself to a reasonable course of action to deal with the stressor. Action is a powerful stress-reducer. Research shows that the body lowers its production of epinephrine, a powerful stress hormone, when a person shifts into action. Don't avoid taking action because you fear you'll make the wrong decision. Remind yourself that there are many different ways of successfully dealing with a stressful situation.
- Take time out to relax. At least once or twice a day, take time to decompress by relaxing -- perhaps by listening to soothing music, taking a walk, gardening, reading or exercising. You could also choose to perform a more formal relaxation technique such as deep breathing or meditation.