



- health /
- body /
- life /
- soul

Stress Less: How to Conquer 5 Life-Changers

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Even life's small events — a water leak, the revised deadline — can make you frazzled. And big, life-changing situations, like moving, breakups or losing your job, bring real turmoil. But constant stress doesn't have to wear you down. Find out how to tackle life's 5 toughest moments with more calm. Plus, how do you handle difficult emotions? Test yourself with our quiz...

The only sure thing in life is its unpredictability. And when you're already juggling kids, hubby and work, unforeseen events — good or bad — only pile on the stress.

Believe it or not, short-term stress *helps* our bodies, prompting a fight-or-flight response from the nervous system that revs our heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and even our sweat glands. It's what puts the "go" in our get-up-and-go, allowing us to accomplish tasks.

But chronic stress is a different story: It puts your body's motor in constant overdrive, raising your risk for heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune disorders and even obesity.

So how can you stay cool and collected when life shakes you up?

For starters, manage your reaction. How you respond largely determines how well you fight off chronic disease.

How you view the problems in your life "is more important than the events themselves," says Philadelphia-area psychotherapist Dana Lightman, Ph.D., a motivational speaker who has developed a program called **POWER Optimism**.

We asked experts for their advice on managing 5 real-world situations. Read on... and breathe deep:

1. Moving

You or your partner just got a new job and you have to relocate. Whether you're headed across the county line or country, moving tops the list of life's biggest stressors.

That's because "there's comfort in the 'same old, same old' that gets shaken up," says professional organizer Regina Leeds, author of seven books, including *One Year to an Organized Life* (Da Capo Press).

Moving makes us "re-adjust our relationship with the world, which can be scary," she says.

Stress-busters

Treat moving as a fresh start. Ask yourself, "what positive changes do I want to make in my life now that I'm in a new home or town?" Lightman says.

For example, join a gym to get in better shape, find a new hairdresser, keep the house cleaner, or start each day with a morning walk.

Reach out and touch someone – everyone, in fact. “Sharing what’s going on in the new house or town will keep your [old] contacts alive and help you feel connected,” Leeds says.

Technology makes staying in touch a snap: You can post daily updates on Facebook or Twitter.

“It takes just five minutes and makes them feel part of your new life,” she says.

Feel the pain. No matter how much you love the new job or neighborhood and hated your old one, you’ll mourn what you left behind.

“The five stages of grief □ anger, denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance □ will wash over you at various times,” Leeds says. “Acknowledge them and you’ll be able to move through quickly.”

And if you squash the grief? “You’ll be overeating, overspending □ fill in your personal avoidance technique □ in no time,” she says.

2. Losing your job

With the national unemployment rate over 10%, layoffs are a daily disaster for many. But just because millions of people are feeling your pain doesn’t make getting a pink slip easier.

In fact, today’s weak economy makes it scarier. How long before you get a new job? How will you pay the rent or mortgage? Feed your family?

Stress-busters

Indulge your sorrow. “You don’t have to pretend you’re not upset,” says Catherine Birndorf, M.D., associate professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York and co-author of *The Nine Rooms of Happiness* (Voice, March 2010).

In fact, it would be odd if you weren’t.

“So feel sorry for yourself or have a tantrum for a few hours or days,” she says.

By acknowledging your sorrow and anger, you’ll be able to move on, rather than blow up later because you stuffed your negative emotions deep inside.

Treat yourself with TLC. When the going gets tough, we stop taking care of ourselves. But that’s exactly when we need to focus on our health, Leeds says. Besides, “if you stop working out or eating right, when you get a new job, you’ll have 20 extra pounds to lose.”

So dedicate yourself to feeling good and staying healthy:

- Stop self-medicating with chips and cupcakes and focus on fruits, veggies, whole grains and lean meats and fish.
- Drink eight glasses of water a day (dehydration makes you droop).
- Keep up the exercise routine – or start one: It activates feel-good hormones, gets you out of the house and provides structure, something that falls apart when you lose a job. Plus, healthy eating and exercise give your self-esteem a boost at a very vulnerable time and helps your body cope with stress and anxiety.

Adjust your attitude. You are what you think. Telling yourself “There are no jobs out there” or “I’m too old to get a new job” will set you up for failure and despair.

“You’re operating from fear,” Lightman says.

Instead, adopt an attitude of abundance. Think, “There are jobs, so why shouldn’t I get one?”

A hopeful mindset will make you “more energized and inspired in your actions,” Lightman says. You’ll feel and appear more confident, so you’ll be able to ace that interview.

Figure out what went wrong. “People often blame other people – in this instance, their company – but you won’t learn anything if you don’t take responsibility,” Birndorf says.

Even if your layoff was the result of company downsizing, you can still ask yourself: “What could I have done better?”

Turn misfortune into a learning opportunity that you’ll take to your next job.

3. A breakup

Your long-time boyfriend just announced: “This isn’t working.” What? You can’t believe you put up with that jerk!

Even if the decision to break-up is a good one, it’s still painful. After all, it’s the end of a partnership and shared history, and you may feel overwhelmed by feelings of regret, failure and shame.

Stress-busters

Call in your posse. Focus on close friends and family. They’ll travel Heartbreak Road with you, hug you when you’re in tears or talk you down when you have that 1 a.m. urge to text the ex.

“It can be several people – your mother, sister and seven best friends – or just one,” says professional life coach and attorney Laurie Giles, author of *What Now, Divorce Planning - A Step-by-Step Guide to Navigating Through Divorce* (Prospering Leaf Press).

It’s hard to navigate this kind of stress alone, she says. “Your emotions can cloud your thinking or actions, but friends and family can help you bounce ideas around, keep you rational or just give you a shoulder to cry on.”

Find the gains. You’re sad, upset and angry and are taking it out on Ben & Jerry’s. Put down the ice cream scooper and think long term: Imagine at least three good things that may come from the breakup, Lightman says.

For example, maybe now you can take that new job in another state, eat that cuisine he hated or take a self-empowerment class.

Focus on these when you’re slipping to the dark side, Lightman says, to “turn you toward hope and away from despair.”

Get a grip on your emotions. Talk to a friend, see a therapist, hit the yoga mat or pray. Do whatever makes you feel calm and in control.

If you’re going through a divorce, “get centered before you call a lawyer,” Giles says. “You really can’t make sound decisions without some peace of mind.”

Try distraction. Take on a big new project or goal, something that you can immerse yourself in and not obsess your failed relationship, Leeds says. For example, learn Spanish, train for a marathon or

take culinary classes. Jot down a list of things you've always wanted to do – and go for it.

The technique worked for Leeds. After one breakup, she decided to study opera; she got season tickets to New York's Metropolitan Opera and read the librettos before each performance. "I concentrated on being a student rather than on my grief."

4. Cancer diagnosis

"You have cancer." This is one of the hardest things a woman can hear from her doctor.

Your heart flutters, time seems to stop. Your first reactions are fear, anxiety and disbelief. But there's a lot you can do to keep your stress level down while battling for your health.

Stress-busters

Take it slow. In the days ahead, you'll be flooded with information, doctors' appointments, hospital visits and treatments. Don't focus on the enormity of everything that awaits you, Lightman suggests: "Work on taking one day at a time, one decision at a time."

Get next to normal. "You need to hold on to the normal aspects of life as much as possible," says Leeds, a seven-year cancer survivor. Keeping a sense of order was her comfort.

"I maintained my physical environment – this wasn't a time to stop making my bed or let dishes pile up – because what you see and live with will either make you crazy or calm," she says.

Make a plan. "Figure out the next steps you need to take and [create] a written plan," Giles suggests. You're in for a rough time, and emotions can cloud your judgment and thought processes. "Having [a strategy] on paper to look at will help you navigate."

5. Empty nest

Your kid has gone off to college and you couldn't be prouder. So why do you feel weepy and empty, fighting the urge to call your child daily?

Partly because you're losing the mother role: "Motherhood is such a defining role for women that many – even those who work outside the home – see it as their primary identity," Lightman says.

Stress-busters

Let it hurt. It's time for those five stages of grief again, Leeds says. Allow yourself to feel the sadness and get nostalgic. If possible, talk with women who have been through it – or still are. Take good care of yourself, physically and emotionally.

"Remember, you're still a parent and you're showing your children how to move on," Leeds says. "If you sink into a depression, they get the message that life is over when children leave home."

Move forward. Some uncomfortable questions may await: What's next for me? What do I want?

"Try to approach this new beginning with a sense of exploration," Lightman says. "Treat it as an adventure."

You can acknowledge your sadness and still embrace new work or hobbies. Decide what you'll do with the next phase of your life. Spend time volunteering? Go back to work? Get a college or advanced degree?

"Once you figure this out, make a plan and organize the steps into your daily calendar so that while you are rightfully mourning the past, you are consciously creating the future," Leeds suggests.

Develop a new relationship with your child. You've given your child roots and independence, "but you're still needed," says Giles, whose weekly Skype chats with her college-age daughter have grown their relationship.

"Your evolving relationship needs to be one of mutual respect and that encourages your child's emotional maturation and independence," she says.

Her tips? Set and respect boundaries (i.e. don't show up at the dorm unannounced), let your child fend for herself with things like laundry, personal finances and housekeeping, and establish rules and expectations (curfews, overnight visits, etc.) for when your child is home.

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