At one time or another all of us are under stress. Stress can be defined as “any change that you must adapt to.” Stress consists of two parts: the events or problems that cause it, which we call stressors, and how we react to or deal with these stressors, which we call coping.

Imagine that you are walking across a log which has fallen over a stream. Any event which causes you to fall off the log—like a sudden gust of wind—is a stressor, and anything which helps you stay on the log is a way of coping.
How does stress affect you?
In a stressful situation, a surge of adrenaline causes your heart rate to speed up and may cause your blood pressure to rise. You may feel tension in your muscles and perhaps a churning in your gut. When stress is chronic, you can feel exhausted, at the end of your rope, stretched to your limit, and as though you can’t go on. You may also feel irritable and angry.

Not all stress is bad. In fact, we probably need some stress in our lives to keep us on our toes. Many activities are worth doing even if they are stressful, such as paying bills or talking out an upsetting problem. It is often not the stressors themselves which are the problem, but how you cope with them.

Coping with Stress
Coping refers to how well you manage the problems or stresses in your life. Everybody copes in different ways. Some people don’t seem to be bothered by situations that are overwhelming to others.

Are you coping well?
If you are having symptoms caused by stress, it may be a sign that you are not handling your stress well. Common symptoms of stress are listed below. Check off the ones you may be having.

Physical Symptoms
- Headache
- Backache
- Clenched jaw
- Neckache
- Tight muscles
- Stomachache
- Tired without a good reason
- Trouble sleeping (insomnia)

In some cases, these physical symptoms could also be caused by a medical condition or, in a few cases, by your medications. Ask your doctor if you are not sure.
Stressful Situation
Bills to pay and income tax forms to fill out

Adapting to It
A day’s delay in paying a bill will probably be okay.
I can get an extension on my taxes if I need to.

Look over the stressful situations you listed earlier. Try to find different ways to think about them so they won’t be so stressful.

4. Avoid stressful situations.
You can’t avoid all of the stressful situations in your life and you probably wouldn’t want to.
However, when you are feeling very overwhelmed you may want to avoid some situations. Let’s look at the examples to see how stressful situations might be avoided:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stressful Situation</th>
<th>Avoiding It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late for doctor’s appointment because of traffic</td>
<td>Cannot be avoided. Stop and notify the doctor if possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter was arguing with granddaughter</td>
<td>Leave room and do something else for a while.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills to pay and income tax forms to fill out</td>
<td>Sign up for automatic bill paying. Get help with the taxes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now review each of the stressful situations you have listed. Could you avoid any of them? If so, how?

Note:
If you can’t think of ways to change or adapt to the stressful situations in your life, try asking a family member, friend, or someone else whom you trust for advice.
Plan ahead for these regularly scheduled events:

**Stressful Situation**
Late for doctor’s appointment because of traffic  
**Changing It**
Allow more time to get there. Schedule appointments for times when there is less traffic.

**Stressful Situation**
Daughter was arguing with granddaughter  
**Changing It**
 Tell them how much this upsets you. Help them work it out.

**Stressful Situation**
Bills to pay and income tax forms to fill out  
**Changing It**
Get an extension on the taxes, if necessary.

Look over the stressful situations you wrote down on page 3 of this booklet. Think of ways to alter or reduce the stress. Try to be flexible, clever, and open-minded. When you are under stress, it is easy to overlook simple changes that could make a big difference.

---

**3. Change how you think about the problem.**

Sometimes, we can not change or avoid a problem or situation and must adapt to it. Relaxation may help you adapt. You may also be able to change the way you think about the problem. For instance, try asking yourself: “Does this really matter?” “What will I think of this situation a day from now? A year from now?”

Here are some examples of how to adapt to situations by thinking about them in a slightly different way:

**Stressful Situation**
Late for doctor’s appointment because of traffic  
**Adapting to It**
The traffic delay is not my fault and the doctor will still see me. It’s not the end of the world.

**Stressful Situation**
Daughter was arguing with granddaughter  
**Adapting to It**
This is not my problem. They usually work it out anyway.
Emotional Symptoms
- Anxious/tense
- Irritated all the time
- Angry
- Impatient
- Feel short of time
- Feel things are out of control
- Feel stretched to the limit
- Feel rushed all the time

Behavior
- Can't sit still for long
- Speak and eat fast
- Eat to calm down
- Drink alcohol to calm down

Learning to Cope Better

The first step to coping better is to understand how certain situations affect you. Think back over the last week and try to recall situations that caused you to feel stressed. How did you respond? Use the space on the next page to write down the situations and your responses.

Example

Stressful Situation
Late for doctor’s appointment because of traffic
Response
Became angry at other drivers. Felt tension in neck.

Stressful Situation
Daughter was arguing with granddaughter
Response
Got mad at daughter. Felt lack of control.

Stressful Situation
Bills to pay and income tax forms to fill out
Response
Felt overwhelmed.
Unhealthy habits include:

- **Smoking**
  It’s best to quit, but cutting down helps too.

- **Drinking too much alcohol**
  Alcohol does not reduce the effects of stress and may keep you from facing issues you should handle in better ways.

- **Drinking too much coffee (or caffeine)**
  Coffee in small amounts seems harmless, but too much can make you feel nervous and tense.

- **Overeating, especially between meals**
  Try to replace “nervous eating” with a healthy habit such as relaxation, physical activity, or pleasurable activities.

2. **Change the things that cause stress.**

You can change stressful situations by taking some control over them. Be careful to change such situations in ways that do not cause you more stress. On the next page are some examples of changing situations.

---

**Five Steps to Help You Relax**

1. Sit in a comfortable position with your feet on the floor and your hands in your lap, or lie down. Close your eyes.

2. Imagine yourself in a peaceful place, such as lying on the beach, walking in the mountains, or floating in the clouds. Hold the scene in your mind.

3. Focus on breathing slowly and deeply.

4. Each time you exhale repeat a calming word or phrase like “relax, let go.” You may use a religious or spiritual word.

5. Continue the slow breathing for about 10 minutes.
Once you are aware of how you respond to stress, you can begin to do something about it. There are four basic ways to cope with stress:

1. Learn healthy habits that help you resist stress.
2. Change the things that cause stress.
3. Change how you think about the problem.
4. Avoid the stressful situation.

**My stressful situations** | **My response(s)**
--- | ---
1. | 
2. | 
3. | 

**Healthy habits include:**

- Taking 15–20 minutes each day to relax. (See box on next page.)
- Getting regular physical activity, such as walking or other exercise.
- Praying or meditating to strengthen your religious or spiritual side.
- Getting enough sleep. (Your doctor may be able to help with certain sleep problems.)
- Bringing pleasure into your life with things you enjoy, such as visiting with friends, starting a hobby, reading, or listening to music.

Unhealthy habits may reduce your resistance to stress. They may also have other negative effects on your health.

1. **Learn healthy habits.**

Your lifestyle habits (sleep, exercise, smoking, etc.) can affect how your body handles stress. Certain habits make coping easier; other habits may only make you feel worse. Try to develop healthy habits, and avoid or change harmful ones.
Many counselors are skilled in stress management and can provide help if you need it. Ask your doctor for a referral if you think you need help.

**Your Stress Management Plan**

Once again, look back at the things that bothered you last week. You may be ready to add more to your list by now. Use this page as a worksheet to list these stressors and some better ways to cope with each of them. Remember to be clever and flexible; think of coping with your problems as a challenge and look for new solutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Stressful Situations</th>
<th>Better Ways to Cope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Remember:**

Many counselors are skilled in stress management and can provide help if you need it. Ask your doctor for a referral if you think you need help.