

Building Strong Families

Stress Management Activities and Tips

Activities

1. Soothing Sounds

Play some soothing music (like nature sounds, instrumental music, or whatever music you find relaxing). You can try several different kinds. Focus on a positive thing in your life for ten minutes.

Or, play a relaxation tape. Many tapes have a narrator leading a person through visualizations.

2. Relaxation Vacation

Sit quietly in a comfortable position with both feet on the ground. Close your eyes. Imagine you are in a place that is quiet that you would enjoy visiting (e.g., a meadow, a mountain, a garden, the beach, the ocean, a lake). You can feel the warmth of the sun shining down on you. A cool breeze is blowing as you sit in the soft grass or on the sandy beach.

As you sit there quietly, enjoy the sounds that are around you: the wind blowing through the trees, the surf, the birds, etc. Become aware of all the fragrances that are around. Attempt to experience all of your senses while you are on your vacation: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.

3. Quieting Response/Focus on Breathing

Stand in a comfortable position. Take a deep breath in and let it slowly out. As you exhale, relax from the top of your head to the bottom of your toes. Focus separately on each area of your body as you move from head to toe. Relax your head, neck, shoulders, abdomen, legs, feet. This is a quick and easy activity that can be done anywhere.

4. Breathing Relaxation

When you notice that you are feeling stressed or uptight, try the following:

Blink your eyes once or twice. Then take deep, calming breaths. Repeat this exercise several times. As you do so, repeat to yourself, "I feel (as you inhale) relaxed (as you exhale)."

5. Hot Air Balloons

Cup your hands together and blow deep breaths into them. As you do this, count to 10 and allow your hands to expand like a balloon. Keep blowing and counting until your balloon has gotten as large as it can and explodes.

6. Muscle Tensing and Relaxing

NOTE: If you have diabetes, high or low blood pressure, a hypoglycemic condition, or a heart condition, check with your doctor before you do this type of exercise.

Alternate between tensing the muscles and relaxing them--squeeze your hands into tight fists. Then release and relax your fingers. Repeat 5 times. Tense your arms and release. Tense your leg muscles and release. Repeat the activity with different muscle groups in your body.

For a quick exercise in the middle of the day, try **Bulldog Face**. Tighten your face muscles and try to look like a bulldog and growl like an upset bulldog. Once you feel the tension in your face, stop. Now relax your face and let the tension go.

7. What We Say

What we tell ourselves is just as important as what the body's physical response is. Often we can work ourselves into feeling angry or overwhelmed.

Example of negative self-talk:

"I can't keep up with all of this work. I'm a terrible person."

Example of more positive self-talk:

"I am doing the best I can. I will work on one project at a time. I can only do what I can do."

8. STOP That Thought

Sometimes people repeat negative statements over and over to themselves, and they get more and more tense and upset each time they repeat the phrases. A way to stop these thoughts is to yell "STOP" and picture a big red stop sign.

Yell it out loud if you can. As you use the technique more and more, it will probably work to just yell it inside of your head or to just picture the stop sign.

After you've stopped, replace the negative thoughts with something positive. Or, visualize a comforting place (a beach, a special room) to get your mind thinking more positive thoughts.

Example:

If your mind says: "I'm a terrible person."

Yell STOP and picture your stop sign.

Replace the "I'm so terrible" statement with something like, "I'm doing what I can do. I am a responsible person."

For more information

Most libraries and bookstores offer books, tapes, and videos that may be helpful. Check with a reference librarian or clerk for suggestions.

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook (Martha Davis, Elizabeth Eshelman, Matthew McKay. New Harbinger Publications, Inc.: Oakland, CA, 1998) offers exercises and strategies for changing the way you think about and react to stress.

Your local hospital, YMCA or gym may offer stress management classes (yoga, stretching, etc.).

Tips for Reducing or Preventing Stress

- Practice saying “no.” Don’t allow others to control your time.
- Talk to other family members about sharing household responsibilities.
- Value yourself. Don’t wait for others’ approval.
- Live in the present moment; don’t relive the past and don’t borrow trouble about the future.
- Be flexible and forget about being perfect.
- Plan for fun and relaxation everyday.
- Focus on your accomplishments rather than on your shortcomings.
- Practice changing negative thoughts into positive ones.
- Take care of yourself. A balanced diet, regular exercise, and adequate sleep go a long way.
- Tell others what you need and prefer.
- Surround yourself with cheerful people and try to find a reason to laugh everyday.
- Work on relationships of cooperation, support, and friendship.
- Find ways to build exercise and physical activity into your life (take the stairs, park further from work, walk with your children while talking about their day, etc.).
- Break a big project into smaller, manageable tasks. Celebrate small successes.
- Use a family calendar to keep track of commitments, due dates, and events.