

All of us experience stress, to one degree or another, in our everyday lives. Stress is the body's reaction to an event that is experienced as disturbing or threatening. Our primitive ancestors experienced stress when they had to fight off wild animals and other threats. In the contemporary world we are more likely to experience stress when we face overwhelming responsibilities at work or home, experience loneliness, or fear losing things which are important to us, such as our jobs or friends. When we are exposed to such an event, we experience what has been called the "fight or flight" response. To prepare for fighting or fleeing, the body increases its heart rate and blood pressure. This sends more blood to our heart and muscles, and our respiration rate increases. We become vigilant and tense. Our bodies end up on full alert.

Stress is adaptive when it prompts us to take action to solve a problem. We can use our perceived stress as a clue, in fact, that there is a problem and that we need to confront it. Public speakers, athletes and entertainers have long known that stress can motivate them to perform much better. The real difficulty occurs when we feel blocked. For various reasons, we may be unable to solve the problem — perhaps because we don't realize that there is a problem or we don't have the tools for solving it — and we continue to expose ourselves to the stress. In such instances, stress becomes a negative experience.

Negative stress is demanding on our bodies and our lives in general. When our bodies are in a constant state of readiness for prolonged periods of time, we end up with heart palpitations, increased blood pressure, sweating, high stomach acidity, stomach spasms and muscle spasms. There is evidence that prolonged stress can lead to heart disease and a compromised immune system. Stress can deplete our energy and interfere with our concentration. It can lead us to become abrupt with other people and to engage in emotional outbursts or even physical violence.

Our relationships and job security can be jeopardized. People who experience unresolved stress are more prone to self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Those who deal with stress in a positive way usually have:

- a sense of **self-determination**
- a feeling of **involvement in life's experiences**, and an ability to change negatives into **positives**.

Self-determination refers to an ability to control or adapt to the events of everyday living. Rather than seeing ourselves as helpless in trying to overcome obstacles, we can begin to define ourselves as problem-solvers. We can remember times when we have been successful in solving problems and then see ourselves in those terms. We can learn to trust that we will have success in meeting life's difficulties. When we take this approach, we can begin to face problematic situations as a challenge which, when resolved, can bring new and exciting opportunities into our lives.



All About Us Biographies

Jody Michael, M.A., L.C.S.W. is founder and president of Jody Michael & Associates, a coaching consultancy that works one-on-one with individuals and small businesses to help them reach their career, executive, small business, and life goals.

She brings to her coaching practice over 15 years of corporate leadership in the finance industry, successful entrepreneurial ventures, teaching credentials, an M.A. and PhD studies from the University of Chicago, and more than eight years of practice applying clinical psychology principles to work-life, career, and business building issues.

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Involvement means opening ourselves up to the world around us. It means letting friends and family members into our personal lives and sharing our private experiences with others when appropriate. Cultivating a social network serves us well when we are dealing with stressful situations. Talking our way through a crisis in the presence of a supportive listener, rather than holding it in alone, is one of our best ways of gaining helpful feedback, putting the situation into perspective, and sensing that we are not alone. When we lack involvement with others, we often feel vulnerable and may question whether we have the resources to cope with stressful experiences.

A positive approach toward life is one of the main attributes of those who deal well with stress. Rather than seeing life's difficulties as situations to complain about, the more adaptive person sees them as challenges which can be met with success. Losses can be seen as opportunities for gain. The life process is one of loss and gain — it's as natural as night and day. When we trust that our losses will give rise to new gains and life experiences, the stress associated with loss need not be devastating. For example, the loss of a job can open the door to more satisfying employment and the opportunity for more fulfilling life experiences. The clue is to change our negative thoughts about situations into more positive thoughts — and positive feelings will usually follow a change in thinking. For example, if a close friend moves away, rather than harboring negative thoughts about how lonely and devastated you will feel, think about the good memories you will always have, how your friendship will leave a positive legacy that will always touch your life, how you can still keep in touch and visit, and how you can now spend your time in new and positive pursuits. There really is no need for stress in this situation. We can choose to move toward the open doors of life rather than futilely knocking on closed doors.

The clue to handling stress adaptively is to acquire the skills we need to feel empowered. This requires a good, honest exploration into our lives. We need to explore the strengths that we already have for coping with stress, as well as to learn new skills. We need to be able both to comfort ourselves and to let others nurture us as well. All of us can learn, with some healthy exploration, to manage stress successfully.

The Top Life Stressors

Researchers have identified a number of life stressors which are associated with vulnerability to anxiety, accidents, and physical problems. Here are the top fifteen on the list, along with a rating which indicates the severity of stress associated with each of these life events. The higher the number, the more likely a person will be prone to stress related problems. Even good events, like marriage, can bring on stress.

1. Death of a spouse	100
2. Divorce	65
4. Detention in jail or other institution	63
5. Death of a close family member	63
6. Major personal injury or illness	53
7. Marriage	50
8. Being fired at work	47
9. Marital reconciliation	45
10. Retirement from work	45
11. Change in health of a family member	44
12. Pregnancy	40
13. Sexual difficulties	39
14. Gaining a new family member	39
15. Major business readjustment	39

What's New?

Personal Growth

Jody Michael, keynote speaker at the Union League Club, will present "Choices for Change: A Personal Program for Transformation" to kick off their "Prosperity, Pampering and Personal Growth" the weekend of January 21st.

Website

We invite you to visit us at: www.jodymichaeltherapy.com.

Small Business Alliance

Since inception, JMA has hand picked a small cadre of entrepreneurs that provide consistent high quality product and outstanding customer service at reasonable prices. If client needs arise that are specialized and are outside JMA's expertise, we go to our trusty list of specialized SBA service providers that we and many of our past clients have come to trust. If you would like to meet the team and review their specialties, please visit the Small Business Alliance, located in the 'About Us' section of our website, www.jodymichael.com.



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Some Proven Ways to Cope with Stress

The first step in learning how to manage your stress is to increase your level of awareness in two areas — first, your level of experienced stress in your body, and second, the nature of the events which bring on your stress. You need to do the first one before you can effectively do the second. In order to increase your level of awareness in your body, check your stress levels throughout the day and rate yourself, perhaps on a ten-point scale, on the degree of stress you are experiencing at that time. To do this, check out your body. Are your muscles tense? Is your heart pounding? Are your hands cold and clammy? Are you able to concentrate normally? When you become adept at recognizing the degree of stress you are currently experiencing, work on increasing your awareness of the people, things and events that are triggering your stress. These can also be rated on a ten-point scale. This exercise can yield a lot of surprises. For example, you might find that a close friend, a family member or your job may increase your stress levels dramatically. You may learn to avoid the stressors or else to deal with them more realistically. Doing this exercise within the context of therapy may lead you to explore life issues which can finally be resolved.

The second step in learning to deal with stress is to take positive action to reduce your tension. Learning any of the following techniques can serve as an effective tool for combating unnecessary stress, and they may even change how you live your daily life.

Relaxation. There is a wide range of relaxation techniques available for coping with stress. Most of these methods can be learned in therapy, but the most important point to keep in mind is that you should find a technique that works for you.

The list of choices includes breathing exercises, yoga, stretching exercises, biofeedback, meditation, massage, visual imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation (which is an especially effective tool).

Exercise. Regular physical exercise helps reduce stress, and it also raises self-esteem. It primes your immune system and plays a crucial role in preventing disease. Physical exercise need not be strenuous. Walking at a brisk pace for 20 or 30 minutes daily decreases stress just as effectively as vigorous jogging.

Self-Rejuvenation. Find things you enjoy that make your spirit soar. This could include listening to music, meditation, prayer, sports, dance, painting, visiting nature, hiking, or writing. Take time for recreational and spiritual pursuits on a regular basis. This will help you to maintain balance and perspective in your life —and it gives you better control over being stressed out.

Setting Limits. Much stress, especially these days, comes from biting off more than we can chew. We often embrace faulty expectations about how much we should accomplish in life. Unfortunately, this is a prime culprit in increasing our stress levels. It may help to examine what is really important in our lives, scale back, think smaller, and give our time more completely to the things that matter the most. Bringing expectations into line with reality and learning to say no when we choose to offers immediate relief.

Effective Communication. If you are too passive with others, you may come to feel that everyone is taking advantage of you or controlling you. On the other hand, if you are too aggressive in your dealings with other people, you may antagonize them and create more stress for yourself. Assertiveness training is one way of expressing

How a Coach Can Help You

Whether your career is not quite where you'd like it to be, you're a small business owner in search of new ideas, or you're an executive reaching for the next rung, a coach can prove instrumental in helping you identify, accomplish, and achieve. Please refer to 'Client Case Studies' and read a few examples of how JMA coaches have helped their clients overcome obstacles and succeed.

A Listening Exercise for Couples

Reciprocal listening is a powerful tool for couples who need to improve their communication. Couples who try this may become aware of how limited their communication has been in the past. They also learn an effective technique, which can increase the respect, trust, and intimacy of their relationship. This exercise may seem structured and perhaps contrived at first, but stay with it. The rewards can be immense.

The couple decides on a minor disagreement that they need to talk about. Each partner takes turns being either the speaker or the listener. The speaker has five minutes to speak without interruption. As speaker, talk about the problem as you see it. Present your argument briefly and stick to the

your needs without feeling ignored or offending others. A number of effective communication techniques can be explored in therapy.

Social Support. Find people who can nurture and support you, and learn to trust appropriately in them. Our stress levels increase when we try to deal with life's difficulties alone. Talking things through with a good listener can help us to put things into a more realistic perspective — and the mere act of talking about issues that we usually hold inside serves to reduce our stress levels. When stress decreases the quality of life, remember that professional help is available. Therapy can help us to take charge of our lives in an effective way — and this is a much better alternative than living under the control of stress.

The Many Faces of Stress

Stress comes in many forms. **Generalized anxiety disorder** occurs when a person has endured for at least six months a state of being excessively worried, being on edge continually, having sleep difficulty, and finding it hard to experience pleasure and relaxation. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** happens if a person has been through a serious, life-threatening event, and may for months or years afterward experience severe stress, nightmares, hypervigilance, avoiding similar situations, and angry outbursts. **Phobias** are intense fears that occur when a person is exposed to a certain type of situation, like the dark, or heights, or snakes, or the sight of blood, or certain social situations like public speaking. **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder** happens when stress or chaos in one's world causes a person to think and worry repetitively about something (these are called obsessions) or else to engage in repetitive behaviors, like hand-washing or checking on things excessively (these are called compulsions).

One of the most debilitating manifestations of stress is the panic attack. These dramatic episodes of stress seem to come out of the blue and happen even when there is no real danger. They are usually intense for a few minutes and then they subside. The sufferer may experience chest pains, the feeling of smothering, dizziness, heart pounding, sweating, numbness, or nausea. These symptoms may be accompanied by fears of dying, going crazy, and losing control. Those who experience panic attacks often live in fear of their next attack, and this may prevent them from leaving the house, being alone or driving.

If you feel a **panic attack** coming on, it is helpful to just let it happen, as uncomfortable as this may seem. If you don't tense up, the symptoms will generally subside within a few minutes. Tensing up will perpetuate the episode. You may feel faint, but you won't really faint (blood is going to your muscles as you tense up and not to your brain, and this may bring on the sensation of fainting — but your blood pressure and heart rate have increased, so you're actually less likely to faint). During a panic attack, try to contain your thoughts. Challenge your negative thinking (you are not having a heart attack; you will not suffocate; you are not going crazy). Trust that this will end soon. Tell yourself the following: "Well, here it is again. Let me watch my body respond to this, just like I've done before. I will survive this and I can handle it. This may be unpleasant, but it's only anxiety and it will pass. Let me flow through this."


point. Be sure to use "I statements" to present your views and don't place the blame on your partner (that is, just talk about how you feel about the conflict without putting your partner in a defensive position). After five minutes your partner (the listener) will verbally summarize what he or she has heard. This allows the speaker to let the listener know if anything has been left out or if it has been misinterpreted. Keep going until the speaker feels that the point has been completely heard.

As the listener, pay close attention to what is being said and try to attune yourself to your partner's needs. When you summarize what your partner has said, make sure you don't disagree, argue, or criticize. Just repeat what you have heard.

Now switch positions. The speaker becomes the listener and the listener, the speaker. Follow the same procedures until the new speaker feels satisfied that his or her position has been understood. It is important to avoid letting this exercise turn into an argument. Because this is such a powerful way of learning to listen and to communicate better, many people prefer to try it with a therapist present, at least for the first few attempts.

New Downtown Location

Continuing our tradition of offering comfortable and convenient locations for our clients, we announce the opening of our new downtown location at 405 N. Wabash. Solid natural materials and a birds-eye view of the Magnificent Mile create an ideal setting that prompts both relaxation and renewal. The ambience metaphorically reflects the new heights and perspective our clients achieve in their one-on-one work with us. Please call and schedule an appointment with us at this provocative setting today.



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