

Learning How to Deal with Stress: Using the Pandemic to Grow

By [Dr. Elizabeth Lombardo](#) (Dr. E)

How stress affects our bodies and minds

Stress is the response we all have to outside pressures: it can be good or bad. Stress can be the motivator that helps us succeed at a personal or career goal. But continual, or chronic stress, can have a negative toll on the mind and body.

Dr. E suggests we think of our stress levels as being on a continuum of 1-10, 1 being no stress at all, and 7-10 meaning it feels like steam is coming out of our ears. Dr. E refers to this as the “red zone.” She explains that when we are in the red zone, we are much more likely to say things we don’t mean, and to offend our loved ones or our co-workers. “I always tell my clients, when you’re in the red zone don’t let anything into or out of your mouth,” she explains, “Meaning, we are much more likely to say things we don’t mean to the people around us, and/or we are more likely to consume things that are not good for us, like over eating or substance abuse.”

When we are in the red stress zone, we tend to personalize others’ behaviors and assume everything they do is about us in order to further annoy or offend us. When we are in this state, there are biological responses that can cause us to feel anger or hostility toward the people we perceive as adding to our stress.

Constant stress can have a negative impact on the health of our brains and our bodies. A stressed out brain is more susceptible to anxiety and depression, and it can have an effect on our entire body, making us more susceptible to becoming ill.

Another concern about being in the red zone: stressed brains are not productive brains, making it very hard to get meaningful work done. Dr. E notes, “Before this health crisis, stress cost American companies 300 billion dollars in absenteeism and loss of productivity. It’s hard to even imagine what that number will be now with the added stresses of enduring a global pandemic!”

The good news in all of this is you can choose to proactively and reactively deal with and conquer the negative effects of stress. Proactively dealing with stress means you have an action plan in place to avoid becoming stressed, and reactively dealing with stress means you know how to deal with stress if, despite your best efforts, you find yourself nearing the red zone.

Proactive measures

There are many ways to relieve stress, and Dr. E suggests actually making appointments with yourself like you would with your boss, to proactively relieve stress throughout the day. Here are a few commitments you could make with yourself (don't be afraid to ink these into your calendar as actual appointments!) :

Start and end each day on a positive note. Dr. E explains that the way you frame your day is more powerful than you may realize. Make it a habit to start and end each day in a positive way. This may mean naming something you're grateful for, or taking a moment to imagine your favorite beach. It might mean spending a minute in quiet personal reflection or prayer, or repeating a positive aspiration. Whatever you decide, make it a habit. If a negative thought tries to intrude, push it away and replace it intentionally.

Change your state. "Changing your state, or doing something different than what you are currently doing is an incredibly powerful way to become more positive and to stop stress in its tracks," Dr. E explains. Changing your state could simply mean getting up and walking around for a few minutes. It doesn't have to take long, even 1-3 minutes can be a game changer. Plan these throughout your day, and put them on your calendar to make sure you do them.

Other actions to consider:

- **Call a friend you love to talk to**
- **Check social media (if it makes you happy) for 5 minutes**
- **Do 10 burpees, pushups or sit-ups**
- **Watch your favorite comedian on YouTube for 5 minutes**
- **Pray or meditate for a few minutes**
- **Take 5 deep breaths**
- **Take a coffee or tea break**
- **Listen to music**
- **Schedule a full cardio-pumping workout**

- **What are we missing? Take some time to think about what relieves your stress – everyone has different coping mechanisms and you should honor yours!**

Take care of basic needs: mind, body and soul

Make sure you are taking care of your basic needs to maintain your healthiest self and to manage stress levels.

“Ever wonder why sleep deprivation is used as a form of torture?” Dr. E. half-jokingly laughs, “it’s because it makes us crazy!”

You may think watching TV is a great way to beat stress, but are you sacrificing your sleep to keep up with your shows? Face sleep issues head on by treating sleep apnea and following basic sleep hygiene. You may need to contact a sleep specialist if you’re still having trouble getting a good night’s sleep.

Eating regular nutritious meals and moderating your alcohol intake is also extremely important for staying healthy.

Commit to getting the recommended amount of exercise, and don’t forget to take care of your spiritual needs as well, whether through prayer, meditation or spending time in nature.

Address any depression or anxiety you may have by reaching out to a mental health professional. Most major medical plans will cover these visits now, and given the current circumstances, you could even consider connecting with a qualified therapist online.

Reactive measures

“Despite taking these proactive measures, you still may find your stress meter creeping up, but there are steps you can take to recognize and react,” Dr. E explains.

Stay tuned with how you’re feeling. If you notice your stress level is rising, take time to acknowledge it, and take action to stop it. Remember, you can do and say things you may later regret when you’re in the red zone, and being in the red zone is harmful to your physical and mental health.

As mentioned above, the best way to gain control is to change your state, taking the suggested actions like moving your body, calling a friend or finding a way to

laugh. Dr. E suggests writing down 5-7 things that help you de-stress, and choosing one of them when you feel your stress levels rising.

Try Dr. E's [complimentary strategies to relieve stress](#).

Corporate responsibility

Dr. E stresses the importance of corporations taking notice of how their employees are doing, especially during this difficult time, and taking proactive measures to help them. She suggests that companies create new programs to help struggling employees. This can help employees connect with the company and their co-workers in a positive light, making them feel more centered and purposeful at work amidst the uncertainty in the world right now.

Some ways companies can help their employees deal with stress include:

- Providing positive or mental health speaker series
- Workshops to manage stress
- Outlets to relieve stress, like gym memberships and walking trails
- Pleasant break rooms with coffee and tea
- Access to healthcare that covers mental health treatments
- Access to mini massages, or manicures
- A place to rest, like a quiet room or a sleep pod
- Training leaders to be empathetic and supportive

Growing together

It's our choice, whether we will let this period of time make us stronger or weaker. We are all facing unprecedented struggles with this global pandemic, whether we are trying to work from home while managing children's e-learning or entertaining toddlers, dealing with a sudden loss of income, or having to put our own lives in danger as we fulfill our essential roles in society. No matter what we are facing, the common denominator is stress. Thanks to Dr. E for helping us learn how to manage it so we come out of this crisis stronger and more resilient than ever.