



# COMMON STRESS REACTIONS AND EFFECTIVE SELF-CARE

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# ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

When you experience stress, your body releases a series of “stress” chemicals designed to help you deal with the stressful situation. If you stay stressed over time, a variety of uncomfortable stress reactions are likely to show up in your body, thoughts, feelings, choices, spirituality, and relationships. However, we can also find effective self-care strategies and pathways towards wellbeing in each of these areas.

## What’s in this resource?

This tips sheet explores what happens when our stress levels go up, common stress reactions, and effective self-care and coping strategies.

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# COMMON STRESS REACTIONS

## What happens in our body when stress levels go up?

When our stress levels go up, a series of chemicals and hormones are released into our bloodstream. These are designed to help us deal directly with threats (“fight”) or escape them (“flight”).

These reactions have been developed and honed over many years of human history. They are normal and useful. Especially when we are in physical danger, they can save our lives.

However, the human stress response system was designed to help us react to serious threats, then we move through the stressful moment and the stress response subsides.

The real problems begin when the stress response system is strongly activated and stays activated for long periods of time. This is when we start to see some of the uncomfortable experiences we call “stress reactions”—irritability, mood swings, anxiety, difficulty focusing and concentrating, trouble sleeping, and other signs of stress. Over time, we will also see other health and wellbeing impacts, and the stress response system can become “stuck on high.”

Experiencing stress reactions is a sign that you would benefit from making changes to increase healthy self-care and coping activities. Any significant change in what is “normal” for you signals that you would benefit from some additional support, especially:

- Feeling chronically exhausted or “stuck”
- Feeling cynical, disengaged, or incompetent
- Avoiding people, even those you love and typically enjoy
- Increased impatience, irritability, anger, and conflict with others
- Difficulty sleeping
- Physical complaints (aches, pains, frequent illnesses)
- Feeling more anxious, fearful, jumpy, or on edge

## Summary Table: Common Signs of Stress

When we experience stressed or stay too stressed for too long, the “side-effects” that we experience can start to interfere with things like our sleep, our ability to get things done, and our relationships. Common signs and symptoms include:

<p><b>Physical</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Sleep disruptions (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, dreams or nightmares)</li> <li>&gt; Muscle tension and other physical reactions</li> <li>&gt; Stomachache and other digestive problems</li> <li>&gt; High blood pressure and blood sugar levels</li> <li>&gt; Getting sick more easily or often</li> <li>&gt; Easily startled</li> </ul>
<p><b>Mental &amp; Emotional</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Difficulty focusing, concentrating, making decisions, or planning ahead</li> <li>&gt; Forgetting things</li> <li>&gt; Irritability, anger, and sudden mood swings</li> <li>&gt; Feeling anxious, worried, overwhelmed, or stuck</li> <li>&gt; Feeling depressed or numb</li> <li>&gt; Recurrent or intrusive thoughts about stressful events or issues</li> </ul>
<p><b>Spirituality and meaning</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Doubts about meaning, purpose, faith, and/or religion</li> <li>&gt; Feeling disillusioned, and changes in beliefs that are important to you (about the world, yourself, others, or work)</li> <li>&gt; Feeling cynical, hopeless, or helpless</li> </ul>
<p><b>Behavior</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Increased conflict in relationships (irritability, anger, blaming)</li> <li>&gt; Changes in eating patterns, sleep patterns, or sex drive</li> <li>&gt; Avoiding people, even those you love or typically enjoy</li> <li>&gt; Decline in work performance (increase in mistakes, lower productivity)</li> <li>&gt; Decline in doing things you enjoy or spiritual practices</li> <li>&gt; Increase in use of alcohol or other substances or activities that make you feel good in the short-term or distract you.</li> </ul>

# COPING AND SELF-CARE

## Stress and coping

Think of a scale with stress on one side and all the supports that help us cope on the other side. In order to stay balanced and cope, we have the option to remove stress or to increase/add to our coping basket.

Sometimes it is not a realistic option to remove or resolve the stress. In these cases, we must add more helpful strategies into our coping basket. This is where healthy self-care comes in.

## What is healthy self-care?

Healthy self-care involves things that we know are good for us, even if they do not always feel fun or easy in the moment. They are things that make us feel **self-respect** and **connection**.

**Healthy self-care and coping strategies** make us feel more alive, confident, strong, refreshed, inspired, energized, empowered, and equipped to deal with the problems in our life.

**High-risk coping strategies** are things which make our problems worse or make us feel more numb, detached, and distracted. Unhealthy or high-risk coping tends to make us feel disengaged from life and reality, and disempowered to actually do anything about our problems.

## Effective self-care and coping strategies for managing stress

A number of particularly important self-care strategies are listed below. As you look over this list, consider where you are already strong and where you can improve. Also think about where you can take action now to take good care of yourself and increase your sense of calm, control, and safety.

1. **Get enough sleep:** It is difficult to function effectively if you are consistently getting less sleep than you need. Most people function much better if they get close to 8 hours.

2. **Nutrition:** The food and drink you put into your body fuels you. If you put in poor quality fuel, your body and brain cannot respond and work as effectively. When we are stressed, it is even more tempting than normal to turn towards high-risk coping and consume extra alcohol, caffeine, sugar, processed food, and other substances that can give us a temporary boost but make us feel worse over time.
3. **Exercise/Movement:** Moving our bodies is critical for maintaining and improving health and functioning. Among many other benefits, raising your heart rate when you are stressed for at least twenty minutes (e.g., with a brisk walk) can “use up” some of the many stress chemicals your body is producing and help you feel calmer and less helpless.
4. **Connection and relationships:** Connection is probably our best and strongest buffer against emotional distress. One of the most effective ways to truly address stress is to invest in our most supportive, close relationships. There is no single magic wand when it comes to improving wellbeing, but this is as close as we get. As a result, when it comes to building resilience, time spent with people we love and who love us is never wasted.
5. **Rest:** We are living in an era of information overload (news articles, status updates, text messages, notifications, and emails.) We know that nourishing our bodies with the right food and rest is important, but we do not think the same way about nourishing our minds—the thought of relaxing and renewing our mind can feel like laziness. However, just as our bodies need fuel, our minds need stillness and rest. We must intentionally create downtime for our minds.
6. **Fun/pleasure:** What are things that bring you joy or feed you internally—things that you want to do just because you enjoy them? These things do not have to be related to job or family. In fact, it is healthiest to have at least one source of fun/pleasure in our lives that does not involve our job or family. As important as these things are, our thoughts about them are often enmeshed with our responsibilities towards them. Look for ways to put some pleasure and fun into your life. When we do things we feel passionate about and that are fun and enjoyable, it has a powerful positive spill-over effect onto other areas of our life.
7. **Perspective anchors:** Perspective anchors are things that point us towards our important values, what we believe to be true and right, or our deepest sense of meaning and purpose. Perspective anchors can help us hold firm during times we feel depressed or overwhelmed. They can offer us hope and help us gain a broader perspective, think more positively, and feel less burdened. Things that often function as perspective anchors are spiritual or religious practices, practicing gratitude, and spending time in nature.

## Summary Table: Stress Management and Self-Care

<p><b>Physical</b></p> <p><b>Goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce physiological arousal and relax</li> <li>• Stay well-fueled</li> </ul> <p>&gt; Increase exercise and physical movement</p> <p>&gt; Get sufficient sleep</p> <p>&gt; Eat nutritious food</p> <p>&gt; Stay well hydrated</p> <p>&gt; Practice deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation</p>	<p><b>Mental &amp; Emotional</b></p> <p><b>Goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek mental rest &amp; refreshment</li> <li>• Shift perspective &amp; increase efficacy</li> </ul> <p>&gt; Ensure daily screen-free, phone-free time</p> <p>&gt; Spend time doing things you enjoy (that give you energy and are fun)</p> <p>&gt; Practice mindfulness</p> <p>&gt; Practice gratitude</p> <p>&gt; Seek humor</p>
<p><b>Behavior &amp; Relationships</b></p> <p><b>Goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect with trusted others</li> <li>• Build healthy habits</li> </ul> <p>&gt; Do things that create a sense of progress or control (e.g., track progress on work/life tasks and celebrate achievements)</p> <p>&gt; Limit working hours</p> <p>&gt; Spend time with supportive friends and family</p> <p>&gt; Limit consumption of alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and other substances</p> <p>&gt; Practice kindness (intentionally encourage others, check in with colleagues)</p>	<p><b>Spirituality &amp; Beliefs</b></p> <p><b>Goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect with sources of meaning/purpose</li> <li>• Reflect &amp; (re)make meaning</li> </ul> <p>&gt; Participate in a community of meaning (e.g., a faith or volunteer group)</p> <p>&gt; Spend time in nature</p> <p>&gt; Spend time alone</p> <p>&gt; Write about your challenges and problems</p> <p>&gt; Discuss challenges and struggles with others, and/or seek counseling</p> <p>&gt; Practice meaningful rituals (e.g., family or religious gatherings, spiritual practices)</p>

## Questions to consider and discuss

1. When you start to feel stressed, what signs show up first that your stress levels are too high?
2. What are some of the things you already do well in terms of healthy self-care?
3. What do you do for fun, just because you enjoy it?
4. How do you create down-time for your mind?
5. What are some changes you could make with regards to how you use your phone that would help create more down-time?
6. What sort of things help “ground” you or shift your perspective during hard times?
7. What is one change you would like to make in your self-care?
8. We all know self-care is good for us, but often fail to put that knowledge into practice. How do you bridge that gap between theory and practice and help yourself actually put self-care in action?



## ABOUT KON TERRA

At KonTerra, we specialize in supporting clients that operate in complex and high-stress environments where organizations and their staff face difficult challenges.

When staff work in high-pressure roles or locations with elevated exposure to threat, suffering, graphic content, or conflict, they are at risk of experiencing overload, attrition, and stress reactions such as burnout. The KonTerra Group works directly with individuals, leaders, and teams to equip them with tools to better understand and manage the challenges they face.

Providing support in a meaningful way is only possible with the right people. The experience and sensitivity of our counselors, trainers, and coaches allows us to work with clients in a way that is unique. Our specialists all share two attributes which equip them to deliver excellent support: all are veteran mental health clinicians (master's or doctoral-level); and experienced supporting staff in high-stress and high-stakes environments and roles.

**Services delivered by our uniquely positioned professionals include:**

- Individual Counseling and Coaching
- Virtual and Onsite Training and Educational Events
- Staff Wellbeing Assessments
- Manager Support and Consultations for Organizations and Leaders
- Critical Incident Response Services

If you are interested in learning more about any of the above services, please contact your KonTerra Account Manager or email: [info@konterragroup.net](mailto:info@konterragroup.net).

