

Dealing with Relationship Stress:

HOW TO STAY CALM AND COMMUNICATE BETTER



Relationship stress causes some of us to get angry and do or say things we regret. It leads others to shut down, withdraw, and refuse to participate. Either way, our inability to listen and speak intelligently in the face of relationship stress just makes things worse. In this article, you will learn how to stay calm and focused, and to communicate clearly and powerfully even in tense situations. Instead of feeling like a situation is out of your control, you will see how you can experience a sense of trust and creativity, and even a heightened awareness.

In This Article:

Stress challenges relationships

How does stress challenge relationships at home and work? Our stress responses can paralyze us emotionally and undermine even the strongest love or work relationship. Consider the stressed conditions of these individuals:

Irene's new job is extremely hectic. She's not sleeping well, so she is cranky and in no mood to listen to Alex talk about his day. No matter how hard she tries, she can't stay focused. Alex feels hurt and goes out for the evening by himself.

Norm is under a lot of pressure at school, but doesn't want to break his date with Kristy. While Norm usually enjoys Kristy's playful kidding, tonight it infuriates him and he explodes.

Ben has collapsed in front of the TV and missed a critical call after over-scheduling and multitasking for days on end.

Corina and her best friend had such a heated argument that she heads to the mall to cool off. There, she loses track of time and doesn't show up for her dinner date with Sam.

Terri is so overwrought by tensions at home that she just goes through the motions at work, and accomplishes nothing—a fact that doesn't escape her boss' notice.

Stephanie is so jumpy and agitated that coworkers don't want to be near her. She thinks her colleagues dislike her, but they are just trying to avoid the waves of negative energy that radiate from her cubicle.

Stress damages relationships in various ways. When you are under stress, you may not even realize the effect it is having on your interactions with others. As shown in the examples above, stress can cripple your ability to accurately see and hear your partner; be self-aware and in touch with your own deep-rooted needs; and to communicate your needs clearly.

Stress and the nervous system

How does stress affect my nervous system and my ability to communicate? Your body's nervous system serves various functions. A crucial function of one part of the nervous system is to prepare you to face physical danger. The "fight or flight" response raises your heart rate, blood pressure, and metabolism to provide extra energy and allow you to flee or confront the danger. Another part of your nervous system tells your body to relax after the danger has passed.

For most people, stress is such a common occurrence that it becomes a way of life. When you are overwhelmed by stress or suffer from chronic stress, this causes parts of your nervous system to become imbalanced, and you experience physical symptoms such as high blood pressure. This imbalance also limits your ability to think clearly and creatively, or to act in emotionally intelligent ways.

Ways stress can cause communication problems and damage relationships:

- One person's stress-induced upset can easily trigger another's upset—leading to a communication *disconnect*.
- When you are overwhelmed by stress, your ability to pay attention to others—and to yourself—is greatly compromised.
- Stress can reawaken negative memories from past relationships, adding to the upset of the moment.

Stressful situations rarely give you advance warning. When you walk into a situation tired and irritated, coming face-to-face with an equally stressed-out colleague or loved one, you usually don't have the option to call for a "time-out" and leisurely contemplate the problem. Successful communication requires that you be able to do something in a hurry to calm, energize and focus yourself. This means you need to be able to recognize stress.

The benefits of recognizing stress

Why is learning how to recognize stress so important? Virtually all of us present a *game face* to the world, that is, an emotional mask that hides our private feelings. Sometimes, we are so good at masking our emotions that we even hide them from ourselves. However, to sustain healthy relationships, we have to be in touch with our own feelings, which require being able to deal with stress.

Learning to recognize and manage stress, to stay calm and focused, provides many relationship benefits. These include the ability to:

- **Focus internally**—focusing attention on your internal state in spite of external demands. For example: Jack's helpful attitude makes him popular, but his ulcers have shown him that giving too much of himself causes problems. Listening to his internal cues shows when it's time to focus on his own needs. Taking care of himself allows Jack to devote *more* energy to his favorite people and projects.
- **Create mind/body unity**—integrating communication so that your words and nonverbal communication convey the same message. Bright eyes, a relaxed face, and a calm tone—these communicate what you cannot when you are agitated, withdrawn, or zoned-out.
- **Recognize inappropriate behaviors in your relationships**—feeling "just right" and stable helps you avoid negative knee-jerk behaviors. Maintaining internal balance helps you stay focused even when the other person becomes angry.
- **Conserve your energy**—A lack of internal controls can leave you drained, but learning to soothe yourself is a powerful remedy. You will have a vast reserve of energy once your nervous system no longer spends energy on stress upsets.

Staying calm and alert under stress

How can you stay calm and alert during stress? Many of us spend so much time in a stressed state, we have forgotten what it feels like to be fully relaxed and alert. You can see that “just right” inner balance in the smile of a happy baby—a face so full of joy it reminds adults of the balanced emotional state that most of us have misplaced. In adulthood, being balanced means maintaining a calm state of energy, alertness, and focus. Calmness is more than just feeling relaxed; being alert is an equally important aspect of finding the balance needed to withstand stress.

Calmness is a state with several positive characteristics:

Feelings of Control	This is the ability to direct your energy and take charge in any situation
Heightened Sensory Awareness	This awareness is calming <i>and</i> invigorating. Colors are brighter, scents and tastes more intense, sounds are clearer, and touch is more penetrating.
Trust in Others	This is the knowledge that people are dependable and caring, and that you can feel safe in their company.
Curiosity	This is the sense that the world is there to be explored, coupled with the desire to uncover the unknown.
Playfulness	This is the experience of unbridled joy and finding childlike happiness in simple, noncompetitive activities.
Creativity	This is the delight you may feel when your thoughts break free of constraints, intellectual discovery becomes fun, and work takes the form of playful exploration.
Flexibility/Resilience	This emotional resilience and flexibility to adjust to what life throws at you makes it possible not only to shoulder losses, but also bounce back and score victories.
Sensitivity to Needs of Yourself and Others	This allows you to be flexible, to work collaboratively, and to be both a leader and follower. Although you can't please everyone, it's never necessary to cope with everything on your own.

Common responses to stress

How do different people respond to stress? Our nervous systems react differently to situations that are perceived to be overwhelming, isolating, confusing or threatening. In general, you will respond to stress in **one of three ways**. These three stress responses may look different from the outside, but involve very similar internal responses.

In describing stress responses, Dr. Connie Lillas, a Los Angeles child development expert, uses the analogy of driving a ca

Foot on the Gas (Overwhelmed)	Driver exhibits heated, angry, in-your-face response, is agitated, and can't sit still. Many of us react to stress by becoming angry and agitated. We want to act, sometimes impulsively. The energy here is analogous to the “fight” response.
Foot on the Brake (Underwhelmed)	Driver seems shut down, spaced-out, withdrawn—showing little energy or emotion. Other individuals react to stress by emotionally turning away from it. This is the “flight” response. Such individuals may seem restless, withdrawn, or zoned-out, and their stress reactions may seem minimally responsive though internally this is not the case.
Foot on the Gas and	Driver is tense and still; eyebrows raised, eyes wide open, shoulders

the Brake (Frozen)**tight and lifted; frozen; can't get going and can't accomplish**

anything. Some individuals have frightening overwhelming experiences that wire their nervous systems to “freeze” when challenged by stress. Their stress responses are especially complex and contradictory. They may look paralyzed but are racing within.

These responses can sometimes overlap. Stress is an equal-opportunity hazard, since it upsets everyone's equilibrium from time to time. Still, we are all capable of quickly and efficiently bringing stress into balance.

In order to balance stress, first you must recognize and understand your individual response to stress. The next step is learning which methods you can count on to regulate your nervous system and bring it back into the balance we discussed previously – the calm and alert state.

Your stress response pattern

Do you know what your stress response pattern is? Your nervous system has a characteristic response to stress that generally triggers one of three responses. This means that, depending on your particular stress pattern, some methods of stress relief will be more effective for you than others. Commonly recommended stress relief techniques may have no effect, or might even make matters worse! For example, if your response to stressful situations is to become withdrawn, you will need to do things that stimulate rather than relax you.

Finding successful relief techniques depends on your stress response patterns:

- If you have an *angry or agitated stress pattern* (“*overwhelmed*”), to techniques that calm and soothe you—slowed breathing, relaxing sensations.
- If your tendency is toward the *withdrawn, zoned-out stress pattern* (*underwhelmed*), your best response might be to stimulating activities, such as strenuous exercise and sensations that energize your nervous system.
- If you recognize yourself in the *frozen pattern*, this stress response is usually linked to some kind of trauma and may require professional intervention to treat.

Quiz: How Well Do You Respond To Stress?

1. When I feel agitated, do I know how to quickly calm myself?
2. Can I easily let go of my anger?
3. At work, can I turn to other people to help me calm down?
4. When I come home at night, do I feel alert and relaxed?
5. Am I distracted or moody?
6. Am I able to interact in a helpful manner with people who are stressed?
7. Do I easily turn to the calming influence of friends or family members?
8. When my energy is low, do I know how to boost it?

People who have been traumatized often require special help.

Individuals who have experienced an overwhelming physical or emotional event may have difficulty applying stress relief techniques and often require professional assistance. Sometimes people who have been traumatized do not recognize their situation as traumatic (for example, if survival depended on downplaying the significance of a situation). If you have difficulty applying these techniques on your own, you may want to consult a psychotherapist for assistance.

See [Emotional and Psychological Trauma](#).

How can I reduce stress?

How can I reduce the stress that can damage my relationships? To minimize relationship damage, you need to manage and reduce stress quickly before you do something you'll regret. When you are feeling stressed, there are two basic types of stress-busting measures you can use. One requires social interaction; the other can be done on your own. To determine which will be most effective for you, consider whether you are a social person or a more private individual.

- **Interactive Measures** - You can reduce stress and restore inner balance by seeking out someone who is calm and focused and makes you feel safe. Being with a relaxed and alert friend, neighbor, colleague, or loved one can help you reorient yourself.
- **Solitary Measures that Engage the Senses** - You can rapidly reverse the effects of stress by exposing yourself to sensory input that brings you into balance. The sensory input that works for you will not necessarily work for someone else. The smell of incense will lift one person, while others will benefit most from candlelight or physical action.

For the second skill see: [Recognize and Manage your Emotions.](#)

Related Links: Relationship Help Series

Part 1: Learning the Key Skills of Emotional Intelligence

[Relationship Help:](#) Building Great Relationships with Emotional Intelligence

[Nonverbal Communication:](#) The Hidden Language of Emotional Intelligence

[Managing Stress:](#) Recognize and Manage Relationship Stress

[Playful Communication:](#) Strengthening and Repairing Relationships with Humor

[Emotion Communicates:](#) Emotional Intelligence in Successful Relationships

[Conflict Resolution:](#) Communication Skills for Keeping Relationships Healthy

Part 2: Quick Course in Raising Emotional Intelligence

[Defusing Stress:](#) Find Quick Stress Relief that Works Best for You

[Raising Emotional Intelligence:](#) Learning to Experience Intense Emotions

Part 3: Research Linking Attachment to Brain Development and Relationships

[Attachment and Relationships:](#) How the Attachment Bond Shapes Adult Relationships

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