



Don't Let Stress Go Too Far — Learn How To Manage It

By Kristi Horner

“It’s not stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it.”

– HANS SELYE

Stress is a part of life... but it doesn't have to knock us flat.

In stressful situations, people turn to all kinds of things to help them cope. These can include healthy coping behaviors such as lowering expectations, asking for help, using problem-solving skills, taking responsibility, talking to supportive people, expressing your emotions, trying to change the source of the stress, distancing yourself from the stress, and exploring a spiritual perspective on the problem.

Unfortunately, many people also turn to unhealthy coping behaviors. These include abusing alcohol or drugs, compulsive or disordered eating, self-harm (such as cutting), and obsessive behaviors such as gambling, being a workaholic, or being addicted to your computer or phone.

If we can understand stress and how we react to it, we will be better able to cope with it in more healthy ways. If we can learn to notice our body's response to stress, identify our stressors (the external and internal things that cause our stress), and develop ways to relax during a stressful moment, we can give ourselves the chance to regroup, review our options, and make confident decisions.

In other words, ***stress can be manageable.***

And one of the first things to remember on your way to managing stress is what is in your control, and what is not. Quite often, things OUT of our control cause us the most stress.

For example, I am *in* control of how I respond to my own emotions, feelings, thoughts and memories; what I say to others and how I behave; what goals I set; and how I work toward them. I'm *not* in control of what others say or do, how others judge or perceive me, the past, the future, or other people's happiness.

That's why, at Courage to Caregivers, to help caregivers manage their stress, we focus on the 7 C's (as adapted from the 3 C's for addiction recovery). They are:

“I didn't *cause* it.
I can't *cure* it.
I can't *control* it.
I can't *change* it.

Yet, I can have
courage and
compassion,
and I can *cope!*”



Caregivers aren't the only ones who have to deal with stress, but it can have a tremendous effect on the quality of their lives and health if stress is not controlled. It can also lead to caregiver burnout. As noted by Prof. Elissa S. Epel, vice chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco: "Family caregivers experiencing extreme stress have been shown to age prematurely. This level of stress can take as much as 10 years off a family caregiver's life."

And as Drs. Emily and Amelia Nagoski say in their book *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*: "The stress itself will kill you faster than the stressor will – unless you do something to complete the stress cycle."

HERE ARE SEVEN OF THEIR SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO COMPLETE THE STRESS CYCLE AND RECLAIM THOSE 10 YEARS:

- 1 Physical activity – any movement of your body
- 2 Breathing
- 3 Positive social interactions
- 4 Laughter – genuine, uncontrolled, ridiculous laughter
- 5 Affection – a safe, warm hug
- 6 A big ol' cry
- 7 Creative self-expression

For some other great resources on the subject, check out [HealthyPlace.com](https://www.healthyplace.com), which shares many examples of healthy ways to cope with stress, such as positive self-talk, relaxation, meditation, exercise, balanced lifestyle, dealing with anger and making changes in your life. DailyCaring also shares some helpful stress-management strategies.

And because coping and relaxation skills are so important to helping us manage our response to stress, Breathing Meditation is one of our main programs at Courage to Caregivers. We have received strong feedback that the program helps reduce caregivers' stress. Our weekly breathing meditations are available for anyone to view on our [YouTube channel](#).

By understanding what causes stress, how you experience it and how you can best respond to it, you can become an expert at stress management in your own life.

But as a final note on burnout, here's another important message from Drs. Emily and Amelia Nagoski: "The cure for burnout isn't and can't be self-care. It has to be all of us caring for each other."

If we don't cope and manage our stress effectively, it can lead to burnout and hopelessness. If you're concerned about yourself, or someone else, reach out for help. Turn to a professional for support, or call 911 if it's an emergency.

Sign up for the [Courage to Caregivers blog](#) and find other resources at the [Courage to Caregivers website](#) [couragetocaregivers.org](https://www.couragetocaregivers.org) or reach out to Kristi kristi@couragetocaregivers.org.



ABOUT KRISTI HORNER

Kristi is the founder and executive director for Courage to Caregivers, a nonprofit with the mission to provide hope, support and courage to caregivers and loved ones of those living with mental illness. She believes that by sharing her story of supporting someone she loved very much living with mental illness, she can bring hope and healing to others. Kristi graduated from Denison University with a BA in economics. Throughout her career she has worked for a variety of nonprofits in different roles including director of special events, director of volunteers and director of admissions.

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