

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

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Contents

Introduction	3
The Emotional and Physical Toll of Stress	4
Identifying What Makes You Worried and Stressed	5
Finding Peace in the Chaos	7
Sleep	7
Exercise	8
Eating Well	9
Connecting with Others	10
Strategies for Keeping Calm and Finding Peace	11
Meditation and Mindfulness	11
Connecting with Nature	12
Niksen, Otherwise Known as Doing Nothing	12
Practice Gratitude	13
Dealing with the Unexpected	13
What's Next?	14

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Introduction

Do you feel overwhelmed, stressed, and unsure about the future? You are not alone. Studies show that Americans are feeling remarkable levels of stress. While everyone experiences stress from time to time, when stress levels stay high for a long period, serious health consequences can result.

If you are experiencing stress and chaos in your life, it's important to identify the causes and take steps to lower your stress level, take care of yourself, and build strength and resilience going forward.

Read on to learn more about the physical impact of stress, and simple practices you can adopt to help you cope better.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

The Emotional and Physical Toll of Stress

In a 2019 Gallup survey of moods around the globe, 55% of Americans said they had felt stressed the previous day – much higher than the global average of 33%. People under 50 and those with a low income had the highest levels of stress.

In addition to stress, many people are also experiencing other negative moods. For example, loneliness is a significant issue that has roughly the same health impact as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness increases the risk of heart disease by 29%, and the risk of stroke by 32%. Sadly, in the US, 40% of adults sometimes or always feel that their social relationships are not meaningful, and almost half say they feel lonely or socially isolated at least some of the time.

Both stress and loneliness can contribute to more serious mood disorders, including depression and anxiety. Rates of anxiety are growing, and it's worse for children than adults. Estimates suggest that as many as 32% of adolescents experience anxiety. Among American adults, around 40 million (or 18% of the population) have an anxiety disorder. Depression is also very common, with around 17 million, or 7% of Americans, experiencing a major depressive episode each year.

In addition to the increased risk of mood disorders, stress also affects our physical health. In the short term, stress can cause headaches, muscle pain, digestive problems, trouble sleeping, and a lowered immune system. Stress can also worsen asthma, arthritis, and skin problems such as acne, eczema, and psoriasis. In the long term, stress increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and dementia.

If thinking about the negative effects of stress is increasing your stress levels, that's normal. Fortunately, stress, while serious, can be managed. Stress reduction starts with simple self-care such as getting enough sleep, exercise, healthy food, and connecting meaningfully with others. Once you have the basics down, soothing practices such as meditation, connecting with nature, and practicing gratitude will help you build the internal resources to keep your calm, no matter what life throws at you.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Identifying What Makes You Worried and Stressed

In small doses, stress can be healthy and inspiring. When you stare down a difficult run on the ski hill, wait behind the curtain before you step out to give a speech, or walk into a new job for a first time, the butterflies you feel in your stomach are caused by stress. A little stress fires us up and gets us ready meet new challenges head-on.

Unfortunately, too much stress has the opposite effect, and can result in serious health consequences, as discussed above.

Humans tend to feel stress any time we experience change or loss. Common sources of stress including negative events, such the loss of a friend or family member, a serious health problem, a traumatic event such as a crime or natural disaster, or financial difficulties. Positive events such as starting a new job, getting married, or moving homes can also be very stressful because these events involve both the uncertainty of new situations, and the loss of the familiar.

Work and school are major sources of stress for Americans, with 40% of Americans experiencing stress at work, and 80% of college students saying that they feel stress sometimes or often. Stress at work and at school can have many causes, and many are similar: worries about performance, interpersonal struggles with colleagues and bosses (or fellow students and teachers), financial worries, and overwhelm from too much to do and too little time to do it.

Worry about the news and world events, as well as the personal effects that larger forces may have, are also major sources of stress. For people in marginalized and minority communities, worries about the news may be more urgent: these groups are more likely to be affected in difficult economic times, and are likely to experience more negative effects from climate change and pollution.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Whatever the cause of your stress, it can be managed. Simple self-care strategies can help you manage stress and perform at your best. In addition to following the self-care suggestions laid out in the next section, consider talking to a therapist or a life coach about your specific stressors. These experts can help you navigate your specific situation and teach you coping skills that are tailored to your own strengths and weaknesses.

If you are in serious distress, speak to your doctor. There are many treatments that can help manage the negative effects of stress on your body, and help you feel better soon.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Finding Peace in the Chaos

While there are many relaxation techniques that can help you find calmness and control in the midst of chaos, the simple truth is that most of our health comes down to four simple practices: sleeping well, exercising, eating well, and forging meaningful connections with others. If you don't have these four parts of your life under control, start there.

Sleep

Adults need around seven to nine hours of sleep each night, teens need eight to ten, and school-aged children need nine to eleven. Sleep is essential for our health, mood, and cognitive function. A lack of sleep increases your risks of high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, mood disorders, and dementia.

In addition to the long-term effects, a lack of sleep lowers your productivity and reaction speed to a similar degree as alcohol. Studies show that after 17-19 hours without sleep, driving ability is impacted as much as a blood alcohol level of 0.05, the legal limit in many places. It's simply impossible to perform well when you are overtired.

If you aren't getting enough sleep, getting more should be your number one priority. Without enough rest, it's impossible to relax and find calmness in your life. To improve your sleep:

- Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day
- Keep your bedroom temperature between 60 and 67°F (15-19°C)
- Stop using screens, electronics or TVs for an hour before bed
- Develop a soothing night-time ritual, such as reading a book, taking a bath, or sipping chamomile tea
- Consult your doctor if sleep problems persist. There are many techniques that can help you get a better night's sleep.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Exercise

When you are stressed, your body prepares for physical battle. This is known as the “fight or flight” response, and it occurs when your body releases stress chemicals, including cortisol and adrenaline, in response to a stressor. These chemicals help us fight our enemies, but if they circulate in our blood stream for too long, they can cause inflammation and a variety of health problems.

Fortunately, any kind of exercise or physical activity helps your body burn off stress chemicals and return to a relaxed state. In addition to lowering your stress levels, getting enough movement in your day helps keep your weight steady; lowers your risk of heart disease, blood pressure, and diabetes; strengthens your bones and muscles; improves your mood; and keeps your brain and memory sharp as you age.

While exercise is one of the best ways to improve health, lower stress levels, and stay youthful, only 20% of Americans get the recommended minimum of 150 minutes of moderate movement in per week. That’s just 20-30 minutes of walking, most days of the week.

If you don’t yet get 150 minutes of moderate activity each week, start moving today! Whether you walk, run, bike, swim, dance, garden, or just play with the dog, the activity doesn’t matter as long you get your heart pumping. The key to sticking with an exercise plan is finding something you enjoy doing. If 20-30 minutes is too much right now, just do what you can. Even a couple of minutes is better than nothing – every bit counts!

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Eating Well

What we eat dramatically affects our health, mood, and cognitive function. A poor diet raises your risks of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, some types of cancer, and dementia. In contrast, eating well helps keep us healthy and combats the effects of stress on our body. Yet, in America, only one in ten people get the recommended 1.5 to 2 cups of fruits and 2 to 3 cups of vegetables each day.

Simply by adding a serving of vegetables and piece of fruit to each meal, most Americans would feel a big improvement in their health, energy, and wellbeing.

Even though – or maybe because – most Americans don't eat a healthy diet, we are surrounded by books, magazines, websites and social media filled with advice on exactly what to eat to get healthy, lose weight, make a million dollars, get famous, and walk on water. Despite the grandiose claims of most diet plans, the basics of healthy eating are simple:

- Eat plenty of:
 - Whole grains
 - Fruits and vegetables
 - Lean protein such as poultry, fish and legumes
 - Healthy fats such as fatty fish, nuts, and avocados

- Reduce your consumption of:
 - Heavily processed food (junk food)
 - Red meat, and especially cured meat such as bacon and sausage
 - Full-fat dairy
 - Sugar-sweetened beverages and other sweets
 - Alcohol

- Eat at regular intervals to keep your energy up

Don't worry about eating "perfectly". There's no such thing. Just eat healthy things that you enjoy, most of the time, and have a treat now and again because life is short. That's all there is to it.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

While the basics of healthy eating are simple, eating well can be a challenge for many people. Often, cost is an issue. Rest assured that some of the cheapest foods are also the healthiest. Staple foods such as oatmeal, rice and beans, apples, bananas, cabbage, carrots and potatoes can all be cost-effective, tasty, healthy, and easy to prepare.

For more guidance, visit [Choose My Plate](#), the USDA's nutrition advice site. If you follow the Choose My Plate recommendations and still have nutrition questions, skip the internet and book an appointment with a registered dietitian. They can help you create an eating plan that's right for your health, tastes, budget, and cooking skills.

Connecting with Others

Humans are social and we need meaningful connections to other people to be at our best. Yet as mentioned earlier, in today's society, loneliness is a growing epidemic. In 2019, more than three in five Americans reported feeling loneliness, making it a true public health emergency. Without regular human connection, our health, mood, and cognitive function declines, and our mortality risk increases.

If you don't have good friends you can turn to, your health may depend on making some. Build more human connections by:

- Joining a club, team or group that does an activity you enjoy
- Volunteer for a cause you believe in
- Take a class in a subject you enjoy
- Call, text or email an old friend you haven't spoken to in a while
- If you belong to online communities, take the conversation into the real world, and arrange a meetup in your city

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Strategies for Keeping Calm and Finding Peace

If you have the basics of sleep, exercise, nutrition and human connection sorted, you've taken huge steps toward making yourself the healthiest, calmest, smartest and most capable you can be. However, there are also many other powerful techniques you can learn to help cultivate relaxation and calm in your life.

Meditation and Mindfulness

Modern neuroscience is discovering what many cultures have known for thousands of years: meditation is a powerful tool for improving our health, mood, and intelligence. Studies show that mindfulness meditation can lower stress levels, improve mood, lower blood pressure, improve sleep, and more in as little as ten minutes a day.

To begin a mindfulness meditation practice, all you need is a few minutes and a comfortable place to sit. Start paying attention to your breathing. Breathe in deeply and slowly, and pay attention to the sensation of your breath as it enters and leaves your body.

As you try to focus on your breath, all sorts of other thoughts may pop up. That's normal. It's a misconception that meditation is about turning off all of your thoughts. That's not possible. Instead, the object of meditation is to teach you how to direct your attention. Keep your focus on your breath and let the other thoughts go. Over time, you'll get better and better at ignoring random thoughts while keeping your attention where you want it.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Connecting with Nature

Humans intuitively know that being out in nature is healing. For thousands of years, poets and philosophers have extolled the benefits of being in nature, and today, science is validating what we have long known: connecting to nature is profoundly relaxing.

In a [recent study](#), scientists asked participants to spend at least 10 minutes three times a week connecting with nature. Participants could choose any space they liked that made them feel connected to nature, whether park, beach, forest, or backyard garden. Scientists then measured participant's level of cortisol (a stress chemical) as they went about their day. Researchers found that spending just 20-30 minutes connecting with nature brought about a significant reduction in stress.

Even in the most crowded urban environments, it should be possible to find a bit of green space a few times a week. But, if you crave even more connection with nature, the Japanese practice *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing, might be for you.

Forest bathing is the name given to spending a couple of hours in a natural environment, drinking in the sights, sounds, smells, and texture with all of your senses. Wander at will through a forested area. Crush leaves in your hand and smell the sap or wiggle your toes in the dirt. Listen to the birds and feel the breeze in your hair. Studies show that two hours gently exploring a natural environment can produce real physical benefits, including reduced heart rate; improved mood; decreased depression, anxiety and fatigue; and increased vigor.

Niksen, Otherwise Known as Doing Nothing

If meditation is not to your taste, the Dutch practice of *Niksen*, or doing nothing, might be more your style. To practice Niksen, simply do nothing. Just be for a few minutes. Stare out the window. Watch the wind play in the trees. Sip your coffee in complete idleness. Just a few minutes of letting yourself relax and do absolutely nothing can be enough to induce a state of calmness and tranquility.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

Practice Gratitude

If you could make yourself healthier, calmer, and more resistant to stress in just a few minutes, would you? Studies confirm that practicing gratitude can do just that. When we reflect on what we are grateful for in our lives, even for just a few minutes each day, it has the effect of calming negative thinking and boosting positive thoughts, no matter how bad a day you are having.

To start your own gratitude practice, simply take a few minutes each night to jot down three or four things that you are grateful for. It can be something very small, such as the taste of a strawberry, or something very profound, such as the health of your children.

If you don't care to write down your thoughts, try talking over what you are grateful for with your family. This also has the effect of bringing your loved ones closer. In addition, if you have children, sharing a gratitude practice with them gives them a tool they can use for better mental health and resilience for their whole lives.

Dealing with the Unexpected

In every life, unexpected stressors arise. Whether you experience a car breakdown, a sudden illness, an unexpected work deadline, or an unannounced visit from the in-laws, unexpected stresses can derail your life in big and small ways. The problem is, it's impossible, by definition, to avoid unexpected stresses. What can you do?

The best way to handle unexpected stress is to build resilience. Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, and it's the answer to handling stressful events. To build your resilience, developing good self-care habits is key. Sleep well, eat well, exercise, and build a strong network of friends. Further enhance your resilience by meditating, practicing gratitude, and connecting with nature.

The more you develop stress-busting rituals and habits, the more you will be able to bounce back from stress, and stay healthy, happy, and calm.

Keeping Calm in the Midst of Chaos

What's Next?

I hope you've found this guide useful. I'd recommend you print this eBook, if you haven't done so already, and work your way through each section one by one.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed at this point and feel there's a lot to think about.

Start off by deciding which part you want to start with first (it really doesn't matter ... what's important is that you start) and schedule in a 60-minute slot in your diary over the next couple of days.

Create a non-distraction zone; switch off your phone, close down your email and shut off social media. Focused time will serve you well.

