

# The Stress Management Series

## Part 2

### What is Stress Management?

Gary E. Foresman, MD

March 2013

In [Part 1](#) of the series I gave a very physiologic perspective to the definition of stress. Of course, everyone's own subjective definition of stress may be more important than my description. Because each individual's experience of stress may manifest in a myriad of ways, your personal definition of stress makes an abstract concept extremely clear. To get a further overview of stress and its symptoms please go to [www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org).

Many will continue to point out that we can't live without stress, and with this I agree. Without challenges in our day most of us would sense a lack of fulfillment in our lives. The key aspect to facing these exciting challenges is the recognition of what is going on internally as we confront them. If you welcome a sense of calm, peaceful reflection in the face of turmoil then, indeed, you have activated your spiritual self in the midst of physical or psychological stress. This represents healthy stress. If you notice any other experience, then stress is wreaking havoc upon you. That is how we distinguish "healthy" vs. "unhealthy" stress. If you are not in a calm, reflective, clear state throughout your day, no matter how much turmoil, then a stress reduction practice is called for.

Since no one seems to agree on what stress is, it's not surprising to realize that no one really agrees on what stress reduction is either! So let's delineate a very broad range of **stress management practices** into a few distinct categories for clarity and teaching purposes:

#### **Stress Unloading:**

- Live the *Serenity Prayer*: "Grant me the **Serenity** to accept those things I cannot change, the **Courage** to change the things I can, and the **Wisdom** to know the difference."
- Understand, live your "Dharma", expressing your unique talents in service to humanity. Am I in the right vocation?
- Honor the balance between "doing-ness" and "being-ness", masculine and feminine, spending and saving, activity and rest.
- What are your avocations? Do they fulfill me or are they part of a conditioned pattern? Do I balance my vocations and avocations?
- Honor your psychological self; truly everyone needs psychotherapy to help deal with a human's primary source of stress: The Conditioned Self. Am I in healthy relationship with myself and those around me?
- Honor your physical self; the unhealthy physical body can cause as much stress as Fox "news". You can often do more to "deal with stress" by eliminating toxins from your environment, exercising, taking healthy supplements than by taking a "spiritual retreat". Do I have a health-care practitioner on my team that prescribes nutrition and health-supporting practices?

- Energy, do I promote my connection with nature and consciously use “all senses for healing” to promote the energy necessary to escape the social conditioning driving my unhealthy behaviors?

### **Stress-Relieving:**

- The fight or flight response, when activated repeatedly has the hormonal ability to tear your body apart. Consciously utilizing the energy of fight or flight responses can minimize the toxic effects of stress on the body.
- *Intense* exercise even for several minutes per day can provide a myriad of positive emotional, psychological and metabolic benefits.
- Whether dance, martial arts, chopping wood, sprinting, any form of bursts of activity can utilize fight or flight responses. Exhausting yourself, training for marathons, is a great way to create more stress in your life.
- Intense exercise provides a great method to practice present-moment awareness as these activities require both attention and intention. We are not “zoning out”.

### **Stress Reduction:**

- Stress reduction is truly a *self-realization practice* and the focus of many of my upcoming articles. A self-realization practice is one which allows us to see ourselves, and ultimately everything, exactly as it is.
- This means taking time to know your spiritual self as well as you know your mental and physical aspects.
- This can be best spoken metaphorically. According to every wisdom tradition, the truth of a wave on the ocean is that it has unique wave-like properties, but a deeper truth to this wave is that it is, at its core, truly the ocean. As humans are to humanity, the truth of each unique individual, who we honor as an individual, possesses the truth that he or she is part of something much bigger.
- Although there are innumerable levels of importance to this truth, the practical point is if we view the world from a very small “wave-like” perspective it is a very dangerous, stressful place. Once we learn to view the world from our inherent “ocean-like” perspective, there are very few things that can stress us.
- To know thy self is what makes us human and the only path to authentic freedom in our lives.

### **Stress Distraction:**

- I included this category to distinguish it from an actual stress reduction practice. Stress distraction is any practice that “takes my mind off things for a while”.
- Whether alcohol or drugs, computer or TV time, hobbies, or gambling, or shopping, most of us have some practice which “helps us unwind”. Most of these practices initially provide a sense of calm after some stress.
- In actuality, none of these practices treat the stressor or help us develop a perspective that changes our response to future stressors. Furthermore, our minds start to crave the feeling we get with that distractor and an addictive cycle can easily ensue.

- Having several healthy stress distractors like reading, listening to music, or watching a favorite TV show, etc. is normal and healthy. However, if your stress distractors keep you from evaluating and actually treating stress, it can potentially become an addiction or even your primary hurdle to directly dealing with any issue. Stress distraction must be distinguished from real stress reduction.

I have now defined the most basic aspects to what most people call stress management into four simple categories. A healthy stress management program involves the conscious and balanced utilization of all four categories above. The next article will go deeper into how to develop and practice a true stress management program unique for every person.

Your Journey to Health and Healing,  
Gary E Foresman MD