

The Stress-busting Workbook



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Introduction

Military life can be stressful. In addition to the usual daily life stressors, there are multiple deployments, frequent moves, and separations from family and friends. These are times when the demands may be too many and your stress level too difficult to manage. Because of this, Military OneSource offers the following tips and exercises to help you to learn how to thrive in the midst of stress and avoid stress overload if possible.

Managing, not banishing your stress

A little bit of stress in your life is OK. Don't worry about getting rid of it all. Instead, try to bring it down to a level that you can manage.

The strategies in this handbook can help you manage stress. You may find that some tips are a good fit for you, and others are not. Be willing to try a few—it helps to have as much information—as many “tools in your toolbox”—as possible. This resource is writable: type in your answers on the charts and save your personal workbook to your computer.



1. The Right Amount of Stress

We all need some stress in our lives to move and to function. Some stress can help us to flourish and grow. This is why learning to manage stress is more important than trying to get rid of it all. Finding the right balance between too much and too little stress will help your overall wellbeing.

If you wonder whether your stress level is right for you, consider the following signs.

The right amount of stress:

- makes you feel motivated, inspired and focused on doing your best
- gives you energy, ambition and enthusiasm

Too much stress:

- harms your health and wellbeing and may lead to headaches, stomach aches and trouble sleeping
- makes you feel frazzled, frustrated, upset, out of control, or overwhelmed
- makes even simple tasks difficult or impossible to do



2. Assess Your Stress Level

If you have symptoms such as the ones on this chart and they don't seem to go away, you may be dealing with too much stress.

Possible Stress Symptoms	Frequency Rating 1: almost never 2: sometimes 3: often 4: very often 5: almost always
Physical Symptoms	
increased heart rate	
chest pain	
headaches	
upset stomach/digestive complaints	
teeth grinding/jaw pain	
fatigue	
sleep changes	
appetite changes	
high blood pressure	
suppressed immune function: getting sick more frequently	
Emotional Symptoms	
mood swings	
irritable/angry	
restless/anxious	
frustrated	
depressed	
overwhelmed	
Cognitive Symptoms	
difficulty concentrating	
poor memory	
racing thoughts	
negative, gloomy thoughts	
Behavioral Symptoms	
withdrawal from family and friends	
poor work relations	
increased use of alcohol or other drugs	
overeating	
acting impulsively	
crying	

Add up your total points. A score of 78 or higher (or rating even a handful of symptoms with 4 or 5) may mean you have too much stress. Many of the symptoms of stress can also be caused by certain physical or mental disorders. For that reason, see your doctor to rule out other causes.

3. Identify Your Stressors

Since prolonged stress can harm your health, your wellbeing and your relationships, it's important to learn ways to manage it. A good place to start is by looking at what in your life is giving you stress. Use this chart to track the causes of your stress.

Military life can place many demands on you—and many of these are not under your control. Use the last column to determine which of these stressors you can control. The tips in this workbook can show you how to get rid of stressors that are under your control and manage your reactions to stressors that are not under your control.

Date and Time	What Happened/Demand Placed on You	How You Felt on a Scale of 1 to 5 (1 = slightly stressed, 5 = extremely stressed)	How You Reacted (stomach upset, racing pulse, cried, yelled, withdrew, smoked a cigarette, etc.)	Can this demand or situation be avoided reasonably in the future? (yes/no)
EXAMPLE: 4/17, 8 a.m.	Son overslept and missed the school bus	3	Got angry and yelled	yes

4. Know Your Stress Profile

Some people become easily overwhelmed by stress while others handle it without getting upset. There are things you can do to stay calm in stressful situations.

The Way You Think

Your thoughts and beliefs about stressful situations might be making things harder on you. These suggestions may help your attitude:

- Expect surprises in your life, and remind yourself that there is no such thing as a stress-free life or situation.
- Remind yourself that you have handled similar situations in the past.
- Find some humor in the situation.
- Don't try to be perfect; remind yourself that no stressful situation can be handled "perfectly."
- Remember that there are some stressors you can walk away from.

The next time you feel overwhelmed by stress, try to identify thoughts that might be making things worse. Then try reframing your thoughts. You may feel much calmer afterwards!

Stressful Situation	Your Thoughts	Alternative Thoughts
Example: Assigned a new project at work	"I can't handle more work. I will never get this all done."	"I will prioritize my tasks and do my best to meet this and other deadlines."

Something's Got to Give

Added to your thoughts about stress, you may have habits that make you more easily overwhelmed by stress. See if these habits are ones that you can work to give up:

- **Being disorganized:** Get rid of excess clutter at home. Organize your home and your workspace and establish a system to prioritize your tasks. (Use the chart if it helps.)
- **Hurrying all the time:** Pace yourself. You can't do everything at once.
- **Trying to please everyone:** This doesn't mean don't do your best or stop caring. However, there are some people you just can't please, so stop trying.
- **Turning to alcohol or other drugs:** Doing this to "get your mind off things" only creates worse problems.

Prioritize Your Tasks

There will be times when the demands pile sky-high. Preparing to deploy or move the whole family for a PCS are likely such times. It is important to be organized and to tend to the urgent tasks before the not so urgent ones. Use this chart or create one of your own to organize all the demands on you at this time.

Must Do Today	Must Do by Tomorrow	Must Do This Week	Must Do Next Week	Must Do This Month

Advice for the Worrier

It is possible that what you need to cut out most from your life is the habit of worrying. You can learn to stop the flow of worries and give yourself a brighter outlook with these suggestions:

- **Take up a hobby** such as crafting or gardening to divert your mind.
- **Set aside a time every day to worry** so you're not swamped by anxiety 24/7. Why not plan a 30-minute "worry walk" each day? Allow yourself to wrestle with your anxious thoughts during that time, but not during the rest of the day.
- **Treat yourself like your own best friend**—if your friend couldn't stop worrying, what advice would you give him?
- **Do your best and then let it go.**

5. Find Relief from Stress Overload

For Immediate Relief

Many of the tips in this handbook will take time and practice to reduce your stress. What if you need relief right now? Follow the tips below:

- **Take a few slow, deep breaths.** This can work wonders on your physical and emotional response to stress.
- **Stay in the moment.** Worrying about the future or dwelling on past mistakes won't do you any good. It will only make you feel worse.
- **Write it down.** If you have trouble letting go of negative emotions caused by stress, try writing about what you are feeling.
- **Take a time out.** If you feel overwhelmed by people, noise or activity around you, try to "escape" for at least a few minutes to a private place or take a quick walk outdoors.
- **Unwind.** Listen to music, enjoy a soothing fragrance, take a bubble bath, step outside and take a brief stroll, spend some time with a favorite hobby, etc.

What are some of your favorite, healthy ways to distract from and unwind from high stress levels?

Relaxation Exercises for Long-term Relief

It's great to have a quick fix for a stressful moment, but what if you find that you feel tense practically all of the time? You may need to build relaxation practices into your daily schedule. Perhaps one or more of these methods will ease your tension.

Deep or rhythmic breathing

Set aside time each day to practice a breathing technique that goes beyond the quick fix. It will help you feel calm throughout the day. Here are some common breathing exercises:

- **Deep breathing**—Focus on breathing into your tummy; let your lungs and stomach rise and fall with each deep breath. With every long, slow exhalation, you will feel more relaxed.
- **Rhythmic breathing**—Inhale slowly, and then exhale slowly. Count to five as you inhale, and then count slowly to five as you exhale. Find a breathing rhythm that is comfortable, and remember it.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Our bodies tend to tense up when we're under stress. With progressive muscle relaxation, you tense and relax your muscles. This teaches you to notice when stress is making your muscles too tight. Then you can relax your muscles and let go of some of that stress.

Start from your forehead muscles and work your way down to the muscles in your feet, tightening each for several seconds, and then relaxing completely before moving to the next muscle.

Meditation

Meditation usually involves sitting quietly for 15 to 20 minutes. It can produce a state of relaxation that lowers heart rate, slows breathing and lowers blood pressure.

Getting started requires a little effort:

- Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit—in a chair, on a cushion, or even on the floor.
- Focus your attention on a phrase (or “mantra”), prayer, an object, your breath or positive thoughts—whatever works for you.
- Gently shift your attention back to focus if your thoughts wander.
- Don't worry about “doing it right.” Avoid trying to force a certain outcome or completely “blank out” your thoughts.

6. Remember the Stress-busting Essentials

When searching for ways to manage stress, it's easy to overlook some of the most basic, yet vital, tools to keep stress under control. If you're going to reduce stress and defend your body and mind from the damages of stress, you *must* eat nutritiously, get enough sleep and exercise regularly.

Healthy Eating

Eating well gives you the best odds for good health and helps you to better handle stress. Eat a varied diet that limits sugar, salt, saturated fat and processed foods and that includes:

- whole grains
- vegetables and fruits
- low-fat dairy products
- lean meats, legumes and eggs
- healthy fats from nuts and plant oils

Watch what you drink

Remember that what you drink is part of your nutrition picture as well. Choose water whenever possible. Low-fat milk, soy milk and orange juice are good choices for calcium and vitamins. Avoid sugary juices and soda. If you drink alcoholic beverages, do it in moderation. If caffeine makes you feel tense, avoid coffee and other drinks that contain caffeine.

Good Sleep

Not only must you eat well, but you must also get good sleep if you want to cope well with stress. Most adults require seven or eight hours of sleep each night. If stress is keeping you from getting a good night's sleep, try these tips:

- Eliminate or limit caffeine, nicotine and alcohol, especially late in the day or in the evening.
- Go to bed and get up at the same times each day.
- Reserve the bed for sleeping and sexual activity; read or watch TV in another room.
- Try not to nap late in the afternoon (a 30-minute midday nap is OK).
- Use the evening hours for settling down, and avoid challenging activities in the hours before bedtime.
- Give yourself a quiet, comfortable place to sleep. Use earplugs, window blinds or an electric blanket or air conditioner, as appropriate.

Regular Exercise

Another important stress buster is exercise. Exercise decreases stress hormones and increases feel-good chemicals in your brain. It also:

- helps your body withstand stress
- helps you develop a longer "fuse" when it comes to reacting to stress
- gives your body a chance to practice dealing with stress—you get a physical demand without any threat

Find what suits you

So exercise reduces stress. Is it possible that working out will become yet another chore you have to fit into your day? Don't let that happen! It's very important to find exercise that you enjoy.

You can walk, run, bike, swim, take aerobics classes—just get your body moving and your heart pumping faster. If those choices don't appeal to you, try a cardiovascular machine such as a stationary bike or elliptical trainer and read a book or watch TV while you work out.

The bottom line is to be consistent—strive for 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity each week. Be sure to check with your doctor before starting a new exercise program.

Track Your Stress-busting Habits

Are you taking care of yourself in the best ways possible? You might want to track your health habits for a few weeks to see what stress busters you are not using to your advantage as you learn to manage stress.

Healthy Habit	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Healthy eating: whole grains, vegetables, fruit, lean proteins, low-fat dairy, healthy oils, limited salt, sugar, and alcohol (Write in "yes" or "no" each day if <i>most</i> of what you ate was healthy.)							
Good sleep: (Write in number of hours each night.)							
Exercise: (Write in number of minutes each day.)							

7. Managing Different Stressors

People Stress

Just as you cannot banish stress from your life, you also cannot avoid occasional clashes with other people. You can, however, work toward having healthier relationships.

- **Be tolerant and patient.** You are not perfect and your loved ones will not be perfect. No relationship can exist very long without apologizing, making up, forgetting and forgiving.
- **Make simple gestures** such as smiling, saying hello and calling up a buddy with plans for fun. They go a long way toward forming meaningful relationships.

For couples

- **Let your partner know as often as possible what you admire, respect and love about him,** just like you did when you first fell in love.
- **Encourage each other to grow as individuals.** This growth, in turn, will strengthen your union as a couple.

Keep in mind that there is no better way to live your life than to be a generous, loving person. And when your relationships are strong, you will have support when stressful times arise.

When conflict occurs

A common source of stress with other people is when conflicts come up. Learning to resolve conflict maturely can reduce your stress. Be honest, but kind when talking about your feelings. Try not to be defensive or judge the other person harshly. The other person will probably take your lead and do the same.

If you have a complaint with someone, be kind, yet direct, as you state:

- what the problem is
- how you feel about it
- what you want

Other ways to keep a disagreement from growing out of proportion is to:

- Stick to the problem at hand—don't bring up old complaints.
- Use "I" more than "you" whenever possible.
- Listen carefully to the other person's responses to your complaint, even restating important points if necessary, using phrases like "I think I'm understanding you to say ..."

Work-related Stress

The workplace, civilian or military, can be a huge source of stress for many. Some common sources of work stress are:

- too many demands and not enough time to meet them
- having little or no control over events at work
- being in a job you don't like or aren't good at
- a dangerous work environment

While you cannot rid the workplace of every stressor, there are many steps you can take to reduce stress at work. Once you identify your sources of stress at work, see if you can eliminate or work around some of those stressors. You can also:

- Take a short break several times a day to help keep you focused, energized and productive.
- Get organized.
- Have a specific, written job description. With a clear job description, your expectations are spelled out.

Bringing work home

Are you taking work home? Our home and work lives can blur together easily. Over time, this can multiply our stress loads enormously.

You can set boundaries and establish routines for keeping work stress and family/personal time apart.

- As you travel home, find a physical cutoff point on work stress. When you drive past a certain building or bridge, tell yourself, "I'm in the home zone now. I'm done thinking about work for now. I'll find quiet time after dinner to think about my work problems, if I need to."
- On the way home, focus on something positive to do there. For example, focus on that ball game you want to watch. Think about taking a 20-minute walk around the neighborhood with a loved one.
- Don't unload on your partner. It's important to share work stress with someone besides your spouse. Have a pal you phone once or twice a week to blow off a little steam.
- If you must bring work home, try to keep work done at home to a predictable one-hour period. For example, focus on your family and unwinding until 8 p.m., and then tackle your work from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m.

You are the best judge of what schedule will work best to help you find a balance between work and home. Spend some time brainstorming a plan that is realistic for you.

Time Block After Work	Activity

8. Build Your Resilience

Some people seem to handle stressful times more easily than others. Those people may make use of several of the stress management tools described in this handbook. They may also have more resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from difficult experiences.

You can build your resilience by putting the following suggestions into practice:

- **Have a purpose and mission in life.** The most important way to build resilience is to connect with a purpose in life larger than yourself or any one event. Whatever the purpose or mission, resilient people develop goals and plans that focus beyond the present stressors.
- **View mistakes and failures positively.** Resilient people know that failures and mistakes are not dead-ends. They're a part of life. Expect them and accept them as learning experiences.
- **Examine your values.** Another way to gain perspective and become more resilient is to ask yourself what your values are and why you do what you do.
- **Know and develop key aspects of resilience.** Try improving these resilience traits, if needed:
 - Learn to like change and be willing to try new things.
 - Take care of yourself physically and emotionally.
 - Build your self-esteem.
 - Create a network of friends, peers and co-workers.
 - Have a sense of humor.
 - Practice a healthy detachment—distance yourself emotionally and physically from sources of stress and trouble.
 - Persevere—push ahead even when you don't feel like it.
 - Develop initiative—take charge of your problems.
 - Be resourceful—use your imagination and express yourself creatively.
 - Improve your insight—identify and own your contribution to problems.
 - Get into the solution—choose a course of action and engage in it.



9. My Action Plan

As you move forward in your efforts to manage stress, take some time to develop a plan of action. Keeping in mind the information in this handbook, what steps can you take to overcome stress overload and achieve a healthy stress level?

I usually react to stress...	Instead I will...
I have neglected these stress-busting health habits...	I will improve my health habits by...
These are signs that I may be neglecting my need for relaxation...	I will put these relaxation methods into practice...
These are resilience traits that are strong in me...	These are resilience traits that I will work to improve...

10. Resources

Non-medical Counseling and Health and Wellness Coaching

Individuals who are eligible for the Military OneSource program have access to free telephonic and online sessions with a Military OneSource non-medical counselor and/or health and wellness coach. A counselor or coach can partner with you in your efforts to manage stress.

For more information call Military OneSource at 800-342-9647 or visit the website:
www.militaryonesource.mil.



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