THE DESTRESSOR

"Develop positive rituals to bring it all together"

At this point in your Life Upgrade progress, you're beginning to experience some redundancy, particularly about mindfulness. Reinforcing techniques that involve practice is a good thing. In other cases, about topics covered elsewhere, such as diet and exercise, it's less necessary to reiterate what's straightforwardly informational or readily known and available.

The purpose here with The Destressor is to focus exclusively on new and complementary techniques and ideas not elsewhere in Life Upgrade learning. It's important to have a variety of stress relief tools at your disposal. Then, you'll be able to pick a strategy that works best for your current circumstances. Beyond self-kindness is self-devotion.

From minor challenges to major crises, stress is part of life. And while you can't always control your circumstances, you can control how you respond to them. Stress management is a bit of a moving target. There's no one size fits all, but it is important to identify and practice techniques – essentially coping skills – that you find effective in most every situation. If you're at the office, you're less likely to be able to hit the gym. The best short-term strategies are those that can be performed anywhere, take very little practice to master, provide immediate relief and, ideally, are free.

Of course, first and foremost is to recognize our stressors, which is easier said than done. Many of us become complacent and accept stress as a normal part of everyday life. And, while there's some obvious truth to that, the difference is whether we're mindful and proactive about managing stress rather than let it manage us. In addition to habituating stress is the challenge to recognize what's below the surface and to confront it.

Who or what is the first thing on your mind when you awake? What about as you're drifting off to sleep or as your thoughts free flow in shower? Who or what do you dream about? Are your dreams stressful? Most of all, who or what is keeping you up at night or jarring you out of sleep? These questions may seem redundant, but they're not. They represent a progressing stress meter in tandem with your subconscious mind. And, like it or not, as much as a conscious effort we ever make to assert control over our lives, it's our subconscious that does most of the work. Tune into your subconscious thoughts, flag your stressors and take whatever actions possible to assert sensible control.

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THE FOUR A'S

As with the official symptoms listed about Mood Health, the source of following stress management techniques is The Mayo Clinic* - for which we are most grateful.

They point to four overarching strategies to cope with stress called: The Four A's.

AVOID: Plan ahead, rearrange your surroundings and reap the benefits of a lighter load.

- **Take control of your surroundings** (travel, lines, noise, news, electronics, etc.)
- **People who bother you** (coworkers, family and the like)
- **Learn to say no** (know the line between being charitable and foolish to give of your time)
- **Prioritize your to-do list** (Use 1-2-3 and scratch the 3's on hectic days)

ALTER: Take inventory, then attempt to change your situation for the better.

- **Respectfully ask others to change their behavior** (keep problems small)
- **Communicate your feelings openly** (Use "I" statements: "I feel…" and propose alternatives)
- **Manage your time better** (group tasks like calls, errands and computer work)
- **State limits in advance** (politely start conversations and convey your time limit**)**

ACCEPT: Sometimes we may have no choice but to accept things the way they are.

- **Talk with someone** (Process your feelings with an understanding person)
- **Forgive** (Free yourself from anger and negative energy)
- **Practice positive self-talk** (stay objective and don't let negative thoughts spiral)
- **Learn from your mistakes** (recognize "teachable moments" to do better next time)

ADAPT: Changing your standards or expectations can be most helpful in dealing with stress.

- **Adjust your standards** (redefine success instead of striving for perfection)
- **Practice thought stopping** (refuse to replay stressful situations)
- **Reframe the issue** (find a new vantage point by looking on the bright side of things)
- **Adopt a mantra** (when the going gets tough, repeat a saying like, "I can handle this" and repeat)
- **Create an assets column** (write down what brings you joy as a go-to list when stress arises)
- **Look at the big picture** (Ask yourself, "Will this matter in a year or five years?")

* www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/

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Let's talk about anger. It's certainly overlaps with stress but is bigger. We're going to sidestep going through a formal anger management workshop here. Of course, this also relates to self-kindness and forgiveness, but – while on topic – let's consider a few basic questions. Do you identify with being an angry person? Have others brought "anger issues" to your attention? Are you angry about anything now? Are you angry with anyone? If so, why are you angry? How is your anger helping you? What will it take to rid your soul of anger? How do you differentiate anger and stress?

However, and to whatever degree you're willing to do some sort of anger inventory, what's the harm? That question may be better posed to yourself. In the interest of thoroughness, and in no particular order, are the following additional options and technique to consider adding to your stress management toolbox: hypnosis, reading, journaling, biofeedback, laugh therapy, acts of kindness, aromatherapy, arts and crafts or guided imagery (among the many other mindfulness activities covered). Though obvious, another consideration is to expand your "Safety Net" of friends and family with whom there is a stated understanding to support one another.

ACTIVITY 1: TAKE A STRESS SOURCE INVENTORY (TIME: 10-15 MINUTES)

Rely on the information above to pinpoint common stressors, be those present circumstances or typical ones. It also may help to write down your daily activities and assign a value from 1 to 3, with 1 being "a little stressful" and 3 being "most stressful." Next, describe how you usually respond to these stressors mentally, physically and behaviorally. Consider the degree to which these items drain your energy. For example, you recognize that you're routinely arguing with certain individuals and find it drains your motivation to exercise or energy to do household chores and so forth.

Note: It may also be helpful to revisit your responses to the external Perception Snapshot.

ACTIVITY 2: LIST YOUR TOP 10-15 STRESS REDUCERS (TIME: 10-15 MINUTES)

These, in essence, are your go-to coping strategies. Review the techniques just reviewed and add any items you find appealing. Lastly, consider any actions you can take to reduce to avoid stress per the suggestions above.

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