



COPING WITH STRESS

Tips for High Stress Helping Professionals in 2024

Know that you have choices in life. Choosing this career requires that you take the extra steps to manage the stressors that come with this work. You can't take care of others if you aren't taking care of yourself. It's not selfish to prioritize your own needs.

- Expect that you may experience more stress than is typically encountered in most other occupations. Emergency response work involves witnessing and responding to the worst days of others' lives. Prioritizing your self-care enables you to be more compassionate and effective on the job.
- Comparative suffering is a trap. We each have our own struggles in life. Some people may seem to have it better while others may seem to have it worse. Comparing our current state or condition to that of others isn't helpful. We each need to deal with what we are experiencing without judging ourselves or others.
- Life doesn't have inherent meaning or purpose. It's up to each of us to create our own. When life experiences challenge our beliefs, it's up to each of us to recreate our concept of meaning and purpose.
- Make sure your meaning and purpose in life align with your personal values. Dissonance here can disrupt the foundation of your wellbeing.
- Hope is essential to thriving on the job and in life. Hope comes from having a goal, seeing a pathway to obtain it (path), and knowing that you can attain it (agency).
Hope = Goal + Path + Agency
- Studies show the biggest determinant of our quality of life is the quality of our personal relationships. As humans, we are social beings. Build and maintain a healthy social circle so that you can remain connected in good times and in bad.
- Keep a diverse circle of friends, not just those who work in the same field or share the same worldview.
- Recognize that dark humor is often used in our profession as a coping mechanism. When used in the moment with others to cope and bond, it can be a very healthy response. When weaponized and used to drive others away, it becomes maladaptive and unhelpful.
- Manage your time well. Often, we think we don't have time for the important things when we really just don't realize how much time we are spending on less important things (social media, video games, movies, TV, random scrolling...)
- Prioritize things that make you feel healthy, supported, connected, and recharged (sleep, family time, social activities, workouts, movement, reading, healthy eating...)



Eat, sleep, move is a simple reminder of the foundations for wellbeing.

- **Eat:** note which foods work for your body and which don't. Different diets or eating plans work for different people. Whether you prefer eating vegan, keto, carnivore, omnivore, vegetarian, or other, try to avoid processed foods. Foods made with excess sugar, caffeine, unhealthy fats, or other additives tend to decrease energy and contribute to indigestion and poor nutrition. Aim to eat "healthy" at least 80% of the time.
- **Sleep:** sleep isn't just a dormant period. It's an absolute necessity for humans. Our bodies recover during sleep: recharging our batteries, filtering out toxins, repairing cellular damage, clearing the brain, and processing memories. Sleep is essential to our physical and mental wellbeing. See our Sleep Tips fact sheet on the GMR Life webpage for more details.
- **Move:** our bodies are designed to move. Stress increases muscle tension as part of the fight or flight response. Unless countered by relaxation, stretching, and movement, this muscle tension can become chronic pain. Any movement (from yoga to intense workouts to walking) is helpful, even in small increments throughout the day.

Excess stress can lead to rigidity in thinking. When you find yourself becoming argumentative or offended, acknowledge what you can change and what you can't control. Save your energy for the things that really matter and that you can impact.

Do things you enjoy every day. This can be as simple as watching sunset, calling a loved one, playing with your kids, reading, or walking your dog. Enjoyment can help shift your focus from negative to positive things.

As humans, we are spiritual beings. What you encounter on the job can cause spiritual distress or moral injury. Nurture and strengthen your spirituality. You may express it through multiple ways including religion, meditative practices, personal philosophy, art, music, reading, or time in nature. Keeping touch with your spiritual beliefs and integrating your experiences into them can increase resilience and decrease stress.

WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS

- Movement- incorporate movement into your day as much as you can. Physical exercise helps burn off stress hormones and relax the body. This can be as simple as walking, taking the stairs, stretching throughout the day, doing a few air squats or push-ups, or carrying groceries instead of using a cart.
- Eat regular, nutritious meals that sustain you and balance your energy. Eat as though you are in training. Mealtime should be as stress-free as possible.
- Write reminders for yourself - memory is adversely affected by stress. Reminders can help reduce frustration.
- Prepare for morning the night before - put things you need to take with you by the door. Decide what you're going to wear and be sure it's ready.
- Get up 15 minutes early - this gives you time for yourself or to handle unexpected disruptions to your day.
- Anticipate your needs - gas in your vehicle, meal prep, errands. Planning these can prevent frustrating delays.
- Allow extra time to get where you need to go when possible. When you experience unexpected delays, you can relax rather than stressing.
- Walk everywhere you can - it's good exercise and helps clear your mind.
- Schedule quiet times - especially helpful is quiet just before bed and first thing in the morning. This can keep your stress levels in check.
- Keep your sense of humor - humor helps us maintain perspective and relax.
- Give yourself (and others) some grace - everything doesn't need to be done perfectly.
- Find a serene place of your own where you can let your guard down and relax.
- Change your perspective - will this matter in 5 minutes, 5 hours, 5 days, or 5 years? When we are stressed, small things can seem to be much more important that they are.
- Take advantage of your body rhythms - schedule your most difficult tasks for your peak hours and less difficult tasks for other times.
- Say "no" more often. We all sometimes have to do things we would prefer not to, but we also often say "yes" to things we don't really need to do. Choose the activities that help recharge you and skip the ones that don't.
- Have fun - physically, chemically, and mentally, fun counters stress.