

Introduction

Do you get stressed out at work, at home, in social situations, or in other areas of your life? Maybe your doctor has warned you about potentially serious medical consequences if you don't learn ways of reducing stress. Maybe you're starting to notice that stress is robbing you of energy and focus, giving you a recurring headache or stiff neck, or harming your important relationships as you struggle to keep irritability and exhaustion out of your interactions with family, coworkers, friends, and even strangers. You may have picked up this book because you know you can't go on like this much longer. But you may also be worried about what you might be getting yourself into. A *workbook*? Isn't more work likely to just *add* to your stress?

The answer to that critical question is no. The book you're about to read involves work mainly in the sense that it allows you to work your way through identifying and resolving or reducing the stresses in your life one simple step at a time. One of the ironies of being overstressed is that it's easy to make things worse as you lose valuable sleep trying to figure out what you need to do to relieve the pressure. Before you know it, you're tangled up in stress imposed not just from the outside but from the inside too, as you try in vain to come up with solutions and then berate yourself when you can't.

This book offers an alternative: a *stress-less* way out of the trap so many of us find ourselves in. Not only will it help you accurately identify what's really exerting the pressure, but it will help you then chart a realistic course toward *less* stress. I won't promise you'll end up with *no* stress (which is unrealistic and also unwise since some stress is necessary to get us to important goals), but you will end up with less—so that you can reclaim your health, your productivity, and your enjoyment of all the best things life has to offer. That's because besides giving you a wealth of strategies to choose from, this book also shows you how to apply them in the typically stressful situations that we all encounter at some time or another. Let's face it: There are stressors you can eliminate and stressors you're stuck with. This book will help you reduce the negative impact of both.

Working through this book should be a fulfilling yet challenging experience. *Ful-*

filling because the skills you learn will probably help you improve many areas of your life. Imagine reducing your risk of heart attack or stroke, sleeping better, being able to manage your time more effectively, having fewer anger outbursts, and feeling confident about solving problems. Imagine less pressure at holiday time and feeling like you're relaxed and able to live in the moment. Sounds nice, doesn't it?

This workbook will also be *challenging* because learning the skills to achieve these goals requires practice. Have you tried stress management programs before? Maybe you didn't get the results you wanted. Are you currently seeing a professional? Maybe it's difficult to find someone who really knows how to help you deal with the stressful situations in your life. Perhaps you've thought about getting help but haven't actually done so. Many people never recognize how stressed out they are until it's too late—the damage has been done—which is one of the main reasons I've written this book.

This may be your first attempt to do anything about stress. Whatever the case may be, by picking up this workbook you've chosen a program that has plenty of scientific research behind it. I've worked with hundreds of people to help them manage their stress. So I understand the nature of stress and how to treat it. In writing this book I've drawn on my knowledge of the research literature, as well as my clinical expertise, to make the most effective techniques for stress accessible to you in the most user-friendly format available. Basically, I have taken the strategies that are proven to be useful in therapy and adapted them in a self-help format for you. I will be your coach—teaching you all the tricks of the trade to help you overcome this problem. I will also be your cheerleader—giving you the encouragement you need to persevere.

WHO AM I?

Like most people, I'm no stranger to experiencing stress—after all, I survived 4 years of college, 7 years of graduate school and postgraduate training, and now I have a wife and two daughters! But when I was working as a psychologist at the Mayo Clinic (from 2000 through 2006), I got to observe firsthand how too much stress plays a role in problems such as obesity, cancer, heart disease, and other serious ailments. The physicians at Mayo understood this too, and they routinely referred their patients to our team for psychological evaluation. When we developed a stress management program, these physicians were eager to have us work with their patients; and they frequently told us how much our program contributed to helping patients manage and overcome their medical problems.

I am now Professor and Associate Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill. I'm also director of the UNC Anxiety and Stress Disorders Clinic—an outpatient program that provides state-of-the-art psychological treatments for people with these problems. In addition to doing therapy with my own patients, I train and supervise PhD students—the psychologists of tomorrow—in how to understand, study, and use effective treatments for stress and anxiety. Our team also conducts research on prevention and treatment so that we can minimize the physical and mental suffering associated with these problems.

I love my work, but what's most rewarding to me is helping people like you apply the principles and techniques illustrated in this workbook to reduce the negative influence of stress and anxiety in their lives—whether it's to help treat or prevent a medical or psychological problem or just improve your quality of life. Given my interest in and love of this work, and the extraordinary training and experience I've been so fortunate to have as a clinician and a scientist, writing *The Stress Less Workbook* seemed like the obvious thing to do for all the people that I can't work with face to face. I hope you'll find that this book contains everything that our field has to offer.

HOW CAN THIS WORKBOOK HELP YOU?

In my work with patients and in my research, one thing has become very clear: each of us responds a little differently to stressful situations. That's why I'll teach you many different techniques for managing stress. You'll probably find that some work better for you than others; but most of them fall under the broad category of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is an active, hands-on, skills-based approach to making changes in your life. I encourage you to have a pencil or pen handy as you read and to make copies of the blank worksheets and forms for your personal use so you can continue to use them even after you've completed reading the book.

This is a self-help book—meaning it's designed for you to use on your own—but it's not intended to *replace* treatment by a qualified mental health practitioner should you need professional help. You can use this book in any of these ways:

- *As a supplement to working with a therapist.* In fact, one of my motives for writing this book was to have a good resource for my own patients and clients to use as they progress through treatment. If you've tried therapy without much success, it may be that your therapist is not a specialist in the treatment of stress. If you've found a clinician that you like and trust—a critical ingredient in effective therapy—you may want to share this book to enrich the therapeutic relationship, giving you and your therapist a common language and common goals. As a companion to your treatment, this workbook can move your therapy forward and give it some structure.
- *For help with stress that does not require ongoing professional care.* One reason that many people do not get professional help for problems with stress is that they've found ways to live with it. That doesn't mean, however, that their lives aren't impaired—or that they could not benefit from improvement. In the chapters of Part I I'll help you get a feel for the severity of your stress, how it's affecting you, and whether you should see a mental health professional for a diagnostic evaluation. If not, self-directed treatment with this workbook may very well be appropriate for you. ***If you're feeling depressed or having thoughts about suicide, of course you should see a doctor right away.***
- *If you have problems with stress and are looking for more emotional support.* The stories

and examples you will read here—composites of real people (whose identities are carefully disguised to protect their confidentiality), real symptoms, and real victories I have witnessed—will help you see that you are not alone in your struggle to gain better control over stress. The people I counsel often feel ashamed of how much—and the different ways—their lives are impacted by stress, *despite the fact that they are not to blame*. Shame and guilt are obstacles to self-improvement that get swept away the more you see that problems with stress come uninvited into innocent people’s lives.

- *To facilitate your support network.* This workbook can help your friends, family members, and mental health professionals gain a fuller knowledge of how stress affects you, better understand what you are going through, and learn some tools for helping you manage your problems.

WHAT’S INSIDE?

Do you have mixed feelings about starting a stress management program? On one hand, you feel stuck; but on the other, change can produce even more stress. You’d like to be able to deal with difficult situations in your life more effectively, but what will it take? With all of these mixed emotions, you might be feeling confused and vulnerable. The strategies in this book will empower you by helping you understand your feelings better. I’ll also help you get beyond the stress that’s probably keeping you stuck right now.

This workbook is divided into three parts. Part I, which contains Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4, will help you learn about stress, how it’s affecting you, and what you can do about it. Stress can be triggered by lots of different situations; and in Part I, I’ll help you learn more about your particular “stressors” so you can build a stress management program to meet your specific needs. Part II then teaches you the nuts and bolts of seven techniques proven to help reduce stress: problem solving (Chapter 5), effective communication (Chapter 6), time management (Chapter 7), cognitive therapy (Chapter 8), relaxation and meditation (Chapter 9), and maintaining healthy living behaviors (Chapter 10). In-depth descriptions, worksheets, and numerous examples provide you with step-by-step instructions for how to use each approach. In Part III, I then show you how to take the seven stress management techniques and apply them to three areas where it’s common to experience stress: at work (Chapter 11), in your relationships and family (Chapter 12), and when a crisis hits (Chapter 13). The final chapter in this section (Chapter 14) focuses on helping you incorporate what you’ve learned into a “stress-less lifestyle” that will increase your lifetime resilience to the effects of stressful situations.

Now that you know what’s in store, it’s time to get started. Chapter 1 begins your passage toward a “stress-less” life—one with less emotional and physical turmoil and more serenity, success, and satisfaction.