



Managing Stress in Challenging Times

3 Quick & Easy Tools to Turn Turmoil into Tranquility

By Alice Wojcio

Welcome!

Even though it often feels like the world is falling apart at the seams, and our personal world is crumbling, there are a number of things we can do to lessen our stress.

Whether it's too much to do, and too little time, holiday stress, people problems, financial concerns, or juggling your responsibilities with aging parents and raising teenagers all at the same time, these things can be overwhelming.

I get it. Like you, I wanted less stress in my life and didn't always know how to cope. At one point, I struggled with pre-teen daughters, a supportive husband who didn't cook, a part-time college teaching job, and working on my Masters' degree in computer science. At the same time, traveling to visit my aging parents required a sometimes unpleasant five-hour drive.

I finally realized how important it was for me to be a good mother, a good teacher, a good spouse and daughter, and an adequate student, all at the same time.

As a result of my ongoing research, I've discovered and created several tools and techniques that helped me make a dent in my own challenging situations.

I hope the following pages start you on the path to less stress, and that you find the tools as useful as I have!

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Introduction

Stress is funny—no, not amusing—but it *can* be odd!

Sometimes we can move along in our daily lives, almost coasting—and then at other times stress catches up with us, almost unawares. We feel like we are running on empty—without even a warning light! Sometimes we don't even know we are stressed until we explode.

Maybe you've already tried to meditate, exercise more, and eat healthy meals, and those things have helped. But the *little things are really adding up right now*. Even though major life events can be stressful, **most of our day-to-day stress is caused by life's little annoyances.**

It's useful to know that what bothers me a lot, might seem insignificant to you, and vice versa. Maybe clutter drives you nuts, and I have a higher tolerance for seeing things in disarray. I might be able to easily change my plans for the day, and you might need to stick with your structure. Maybe you thrive on socializing, and I get twitchy if I have to spend too much time in a group.

When it comes to experiencing stress, different things will cause problems for each of us, and we will also react differently to our challenges. By the same token, in managing stress, there's no single solution that will work for everyone, either!

The three tools outlined in this ebook will help you sort your challenges into meaningful buckets, decide why you are embarking on your next task, and step back to evaluate what you really want in a moment of stress.

Yes, they will take a bit of reflection and some practice, and yes, the end result is definitely worth it!

The Stress Table

The key to this tool is your list of stressors. Once you have that, you can put them into meaningful buckets and determine how to deal with each one. You will need two sheets of paper—one for your list, and the other to divide into quadrants for your buckets. A “bucket list?” Not exactly....

First, make a list of those things that are stressful for you. It doesn't need to be comprehensive or neat, or anything special. Your list is just for you to use with this tool. Using the items on your list, ask these two questions for each item:

1. Is this something that is easy to change, or hard to change?
2. Is this very important, or less important?

Now populate the table with your stressful items.

Important Able to Change	Important Hard to Change
Less Important Able to Change	Less Important Hard to Change

After you've populated your “Stress Table,” you'll be able to decide which of your items are worth working on, and which items you can begin to ignore or re-evaluate, since they appear to be difficult to change.

For example, in one of my group stress management sessions, one woman had the death of her father on her list. Obviously, she couldn't change the fact that he had passed away, so she began to consider more carefully what exactly *was* causing her stress.

She was now more concerned about her mother living alone and managing without him. Yes, it was still stressful, and difficult to change, but now she was able to consider what she *could* do about this. Maybe hire help for yard work, or visit more often, and definitely have a conversation with her mom about the future. Knowing what she could do to help was so much better for her than worrying was.

Once we categorize our stressful items, we have a better idea of how to approach each one. Is it worth the energy to try to take care of it, or is it really not worth worrying about anymore, if it's not exactly important and also cannot be changed?

Some particularly annoying things on our lists can be fixed pretty simply. Others might require us to change how we approach them.

In terms of changing our approach, imagine that you live with an elderly family member with Alzheimer's. She points to the trees outside and talks about how she helped her father plant them a few weeks ago—and look how they've grown! You try to convince her that cannot be true because it happened years ago and in a different country. As you argue with her, both of you get more and more frustrated.

Instead of trying to bring her into your reality, you could join her in her old/new reality and learn more about her past. She feels heard and valued, instead of reprimanded, and you feel more relaxed without the arguments.

Who Says?

To Do, or To Don't?

Do you use a To Do list? Each day? Once in a while? Do you only put an item on your list after you've actually done it? Different strokes for different folks, for sure!

With or without a To Do list, as you approach a task, ask yourself:

Who says I have to do this?

Who says I have to do this?

Who says I have to do this?

Who says I have to do this now?

Does this even need to be done?

When you've already got enough on your plate, it's helpful to consider the context for the task at hand.

It's also easy for us to be our own worst enemies—pivoting quickly into something that could be delegated or done later. And then the question becomes, “Why am I pivoting?” Am I procrastinating about the thing I was already working on? Am I bored with the previous task? Am I pivoting to help someone else, putting their needs ahead of my own? Pivoting or changing focus can distract us from what needs to be done now. There's research out there about how long it can take to get back into the headspace you need for the previous task, and it's much longer than we think!

As you ask yourself these questions, you might even move the items around in your Stress Table quadrants.

Moments of Awareness

The key to this tool is that you need to recognize when you are going over the edge! When you feel that happening, you need to stop, count to the proverbial ten, step back, ask these questions, and keep yourself from doing something you might regret. This requires mindfulness and practice, because you will be using it in moments of tension and stress.

During frustrating moments, *pause and ask yourself*:

1. What is happening right now?

What am I doing right now?

What am I feeling right now?

What am I thinking right now?

2. What do I want right now? (Or...what don't I want!)

What am I trying to achieve in this situation?

3. What am I doing right now that prevents me from getting what I want?

When I first went back to work after ten years at home with the kids, I needed help with some of the chores, and everyone pitched in. After one of my more stressful days of teaching seven-year-olds, I reached into the cabinet to get out a saucepan. And it was in the wrong place! As I got ready to erupt, I stopped myself. And I actually sat there on the floor and asked myself which was more important—for all my pots and pans to be in “the right place,” or for me to have help from my family? I’m pretty sure you know how I answered that one!

Arguing with my husband one day, trying to explain even more thoroughly why my point of view was valid, he wasn’t budging. Actually, he was tuning out—he was D-U-N—done, as he says now. What did I really want? More than being “right,” or even being understood in regards to some insignificant point, I wanted harmony. No, I didn’t cave in—I backed off, and then I let it go....

Was I really caving in? No, I was honoring my need for harmony, as opposed to lingering tension and bad feelings. Was it easy to do? No, it took effort to decide what I really wanted, and what I really didn’t want!

Additional Suggestions

Frazzled in the morning? Before you leave your workspace at night, write down three priorities for the next day. I don't rank them at night. I wait until morning to decide which of the three needs to be done first, second, and so on. If I have time after I've done those things, I might add more items to my daily list.

Need a plan for the week? Sometimes we get so caught up in the daily things, we forget what we intended to accomplish by the end of the week. One friend puts her three most important items for the week on a 3x5 card and keeps it on a clip holder on her desk—it's always visible as she moves through her week.

Is time management an issue, too? You can set up a four-quadrant sheet to prioritize your To Do list, too. Just use urgent, important, not urgent, and not important to create your categories.

Still feeling overwhelmed? Break up bigger projects into smaller steps. Remember the old "How do you eat an elephant?" question. One bite at a time. Baby steps can generate small successes, and those small successes have a tendency to keep us motivated.

Are you setting yourself up for success? All too often we expect too much of ourselves and get discouraged when we don't meet our own expectations. Set **realistic goals** with concrete mini-outcomes—one step at a time.

Need language to be able to say no to requests for your time? How about, "Oh, that sounds interesting. I'm sorry I'm not able to help you with that. Thanks for asking, though." And then STOP. Don't explain why, or that you are too busy. Just stop.

Having people problems at home or at work? These can be both difficult to deal with and hard to solve. Improving communication skills and understanding personality styles can be helpful. If you can become more aware of what sets you off as well as what might trigger others, you can work on adapting your approach to those you find challenging.

Want to try journaling? Journaling, even if it isn't every day, can help us better understand ourselves, our challenges, our values and our point of view. Many people find keeping a gratitude journal very helpful. Julia Cameron's books might be a good resource.

Tired of living with clutter and chaos? Try FlyLady.net and StephanieBennett.com

Conclusion

Managing stress is such an individual process, and self-awareness is a key to doing it successfully. We all come to stress from different places and situations, and from different personalities, and we each react differently to stress, as well.

It's not, "How important is this item on my list?" It's "How important is this to me?" Only by understanding our own levels of discomfort can we decide if we want to fix it, adapt to it, or let it go—or something in between.

With practice using these tools, you'll be less frazzled, and on your way—from turmoil to tranquility!



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with Alice Wojcio

These three tools are only a sampling of techniques that have been helpful for me and for my clients.

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