

Effective Stress Management

Doreen Orion, M.D., has been a practicing psychiatrist in Boulder, Colo., since 1989. One day, her husband, Timothy Justice, M.D., also a psychiatrist, came home from work and announced that he wanted to take a long break from his job and travel with her around the country.

“He was working not only as a psychiatrist in private practice but also as the chief medical officer at a psychiatric hospital,”

“We started realizing that we were putting things off to work hard so we could have a great house and car—for me it was a lot of shoes,” says Dr. Orion. She and her husband decided they were going to do things differently from then on, “even if it meant downsizing, selling our house, or living somewhere else.”

says Dr. Orion. Her husband typically worked more than 60 hours a week, was overly stressed, and just wanted out. “I literally said, ‘Why can’t you be like a normal husband with a mid-life crisis and have an affair or buy a Corvette?’ I didn’t want to [take a long break] because I was happy.”

Although Dr. Orion wasn’t crazy about the idea of traveling around the country, her husband persisted and eventually wore down her resolve. In June 2004, the couple set out to do exactly what he had proposed: they toured America in a converted bus.

During their travels, they experienced several catastrophes: a fire, a flood, and even an armed robbery. Despite these events, their long journey together helped change both the path of their careers and their perspectives.

“We were the happiest we had ever been in our lives,” she says. “It really made me examine my priorities. We started realizing that we were putting things off to work hard so we could

have a great house and car—for me it was lot of shoes.” They simply decided that they were going to do things differently from then on, “even if it meant downsizing, selling our house, or living somewhere else. We’re just not going to be working that much anymore.”

Many doctors can relate to this couple’s need to pull back. Some wait until it’s too late. They either abandon the field of medicine altogether, or find themselves in the hospital suffering from a stress-induced condition, and wondering how they ended up in this terrible situation.

Stress can result from anything large or small, from the pressure to complete a difficult task to the challenge of persuading a difficult patient to take a certain medication. It can spur the body to action when needed—but it can also cause damage to the body if not managed effectively. Even before the physical symptoms show up, the symptoms of stress overdose may become evident. These include irritability, a shortened temper, extreme anger, and persistent sadness.

Problem Physicians

State medical boards and healthcare organizations are being asked to establish a formal monitoring and prevention system for “catching problem doctors before they do further harm,” according to the article, “Problem Doctors: Is There a System Solution?,” written by Dr. Lucian Leape, an adjunct professor of health policy at Harvard School of Public Health, and Dr. John A. Fromson, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at MetroWest Medical Center. The article appeared in the Jan. 17, 2006, issue of *The Annals of Internal Medicine*.

“Performance problems are more widespread than people recognize,” says Dr. Leape. The possible causes include depression, anxiety, substance abuse, personality disorders, and physical illness, including age-related and disease-related cognitive impairment. In some cases, fatigue, stress, isolation, and easy access to drugs are contributing factors.

“Up to one-third of doctors may have a condition that impairs their performance at some time during their career, and most of them get little help for it,” says Dr. Leape.

It is estimated that up to 43 percent of adults suffer adverse health effects from stress, and perhaps as many as 75 percent of doctor's visits are due to stress-related conditions. Considering the stress endemic in health care today, physicians are not immune to these conditions—in fact, they may actually be more susceptible.

Here's another opportunity for physicians to take the lead: by managing their own stress effectively, physicians can become more effective healers for their patients and themselves. The benefits can include better health, better relationships, and a more satisfying career.

The good news is that most physicians don't need to take drastic measures like quitting medicine or setting out in a converted bus to achieve these goals. More than anything, it takes prioritizing and fitting in stress-reducing behaviors.

On-the-Go Stress Relievers

The best stress reliever in the world is enjoying what you do every day, says Dennis Goodman, M.D.

During his 4-year tenure as chief of cardiology at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, Calif., Dr. Goodman spent his days implanting pacemakers, catheters, and other devices into patients. A typical day averaged 15 hours; a typical week, almost 70 hours.

When the stress levels got too high, rather than quit, he “switched sides.”

“I wanted to spend more time preventing heart attacks and diagnosing and treating diseases early” says Dr. Goodman, who is now a cardiologist in private practice at Scripps Integrated Medicine in La Jolla. “I did a major career change—from the very stressful intervention side of cardiology into prevention and early detection.”

What he didn't change was his daily habit of swimming at an onsite pool for 45 minutes at lunchtime. He says that this daily swim has had a positive effect on how he interacts with patients and how he handles problems.

Dr. Goodman says it's important to take a break from the acute stress of patient care for at least 45 minutes a day. Whether it's 15 minutes or an hour, you need to carve out time to nourish

your body, but—equally important—to de-stress.

Take time to eat, but also set aside one-half hour for exercise, meditation, listening to music. “It can make a huge difference,” he says. Often, he adds, just the thought of swimming has helped him make it through stressful mornings. After swimming, he returns to work refreshed and feeling able to face any problem.

You don’t have to swim at noontime in order to beat stress, but if you’re a physician who works straight through your lunch hour, think again. Just find what works best for you, Dr. Goodman advises, whether it’s swimming, meeting your spouse for lunch, or talking with your children on the phone. He points out that there’s no one—physicians included—who can work 15-hour days, week after week, without compromising their health.

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He recalls the time a young man who wanted to become a physician was assigned to spend the day shadowing Dr. Goodman. He began at eight o’clock in the morning, but by lunchtime, the young man had to leave. The stress of the job was too much for him. He found the whole experience “unbelievable,” and he told Dr. Goodman that he would never again sit in a waiting room complaining that a doctor was running late.

One thing doctors can count on is that the stress of practicing medicine will always be there. So, it’s up to you to “recharge your battery on a daily basis,” says Dr. Goodman. “No patient is going to knock on the door and say, ‘Please leave now and make sure you go swimming. I’d be happy to wait.’”

Debbie Mandel, a stress management expert in Long Island, N.Y., created a half-day program designed to help medical personnel manage stress more effectively. She’s conducted the training session 25 times and says she sees consistent signs of stress among participants: marriage troubles; overeating; and physical ailments like irritable bowel syndrome, headaches, and lower back pain. Most physicians, she says, are stressed out, even burned out, without any relief in sight.

During Ms. Mandel's workshops, doctors learn stretches and exercises they can perform in their offices to clear their heads and reduce the stress response. She points out that stress makes the body release cortisol, which can cause inflammatory damage. But exercise encourages the release of endorphins, or "feel-good" chemicals. (For a list of some of her recommended exercises, see box below.)

According to Ms. Mandel, some medical personnel suffer from insomnia, which also can be stress-induced. "I teach them that exercising with large muscle groups like the chest or legs will help them sleep better at night," she says.

Wellness expert Miriam Belov points to three different coping mechanisms for managing stress. "We teach people how to relax their bodies, concentrate their minds, and rejuvenate their spirits," says Ms. Belov, founder of The Wellness Agenda and Creative Concentration in South Orange, N.J. "One of the simplest yet most important techniques that physicians need to learn is 'breakthrough breathing,'" she says.

A technique used by athletes and dancers, breakthrough breathing involves breathing deeply into the body. "As you breathe in through your nostrils, visualize your breath enter-

Re-invigorate at the Office

Listed below are some of the exercises that stress-management expert Debbie Mandel recommends for medical personnel. Remember to inhale deeply when you begin an activity, then exhale on exertion. Perform each exercise—approximately three sets of 10—every other day.

Chair squats: Sit in a chair and fold your arms in a genie position. Then stand up and sit down. The trick is to push off your heels and curl your toes so that you don't use them. (Although it is much simpler than traditional squats—which require you to bend at the knees and to drop as low as you can—she says physicians were groaning when performing this exercise.)

Wall push-ups: Lean against a wall, then push off. You can target different parts of your body based on how close your hands are as they rest against the wall. For example, a relatively strenuous exercise involves working your triceps, by placing your hands close together. (Be sure to hold in your abdomen to support your back.)

ing as light,” she says. “Expand your belly or push out your abdominal muscles to bring in the new breath. As you breathe out, pull in your abdominal muscles. Thus, when you breathe in, your belly will expand like a balloon. When you breathe out, it will contract.”

She suggests practicing this technique twice daily at the same time each day—in the morning and again at night—for five to 10 minutes. Also use it during stressful situations, such as working in the emergency room, or before delivering bad news to a patient or family. She says that breathing in oxygen helps your whole body relax.

Next comes concentration. The untrained mind jumps from idea to idea, fear to fear. This mental jumping can be especially hazardous for doctors. Ms. Below points out that during surgery, patients expect their doctor to focus on them, not on an office problem.

She suggests practicing another technique in the morning and evening for five to 10 minutes each day to help improve concentration. As you inhale, focus on an image like your favorite tree, color, or shape. As you exhale, release that image, relax, and allow other thoughts to enter and pass by, like clouds float-

Calf raises: Lean with your back against the wall. Stand on your toes, then let your feet fall flat on the floor.

Medicine ball: Start off using a three-gram or six-pound weight ball. Place it on the floor. Keep your back straight and squat down, lift up the ball, bring it to your chest, stand up, and raise your arms as if you are putting this ball high up on an imaginary shelf. She says this activity builds strength because you’re using a weighted ball. Another activity: sit on a chair and place the ball between your legs. Squeeze your thighs, pushing in, against the ball. You can perform this same activity with the ball between the palms of your hands.

If you’re having an extremely difficult day, consider performing these movements several times. She recommends that you exercise according to the intensity of your stress. If you’re feeling very stressed, a minute or two of chair squats may not be enough. Add walking for 30 minutes or another stress-reducing exercise to create a customized workout.

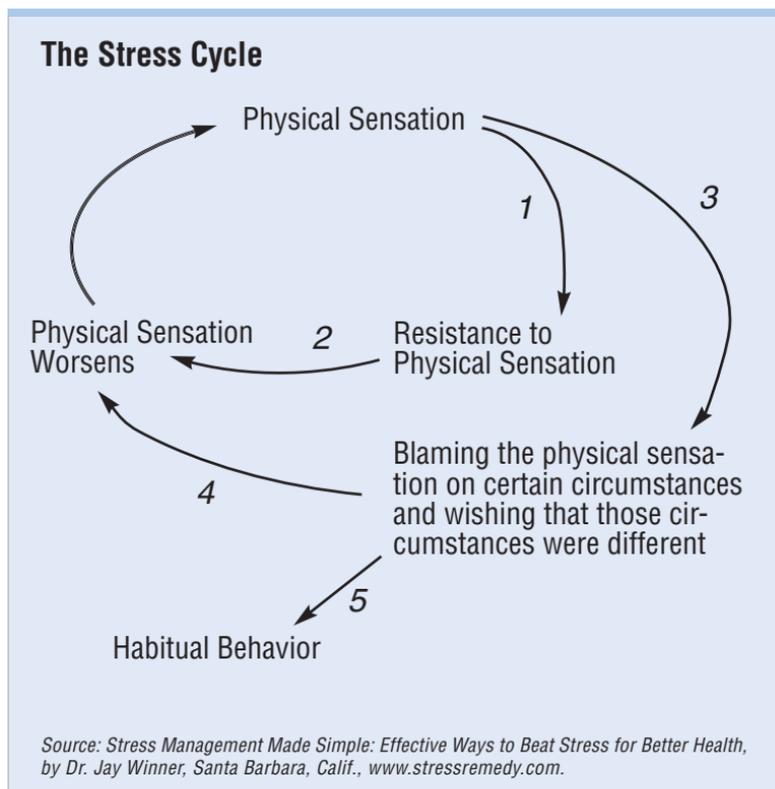
ing in the sky. When you breathe in again, visualize that same image. Try to stay focused by detaching your thoughts from all other images or feelings.

Once you've practiced this a few times, combine it with break-through breathing to amplify your concentration further.

Reframing situations

Every morning, Jay Winner, M.D., a family physician in Santa Barbara, Calif., practices a similar breathing technique that incorporates diaphragmatic breathing. He pays full attention to each breath, from the beginning of each inhalation to the end of each exhalation. With diaphragmatic breathing, the abdomen expands with each inhalation.

Whenever he does so, he explains, a variety of thoughts enter



his mind. He doesn't fight them or resist them. Instead, he lets each one drift like a branch floating by in a gentle stream, then continues paying attention to his breath. He may also relax the muscles in his body from his feet to his head.

"You can feel yourself relax your muscles as you breathe out," he says.

Dr. Winner, author of *Stress Management Made Simple: Effective Ways to Beat Stress for Better Health* (Blue Fountain Press, 2003), has taught stress management classes for the past 14 years. He suggests that doctors take a relaxation break of at least six minutes between patients or during lunch. (He has recorded six- and eight-minute relaxation exercises for this purpose on his Website, www.stressremedy.com.)

He adds that mindfulness is also becoming popular as a stress-management technique. Mindfulness involves a non-judgmental awareness of the present moment. From the time people awake, he says their thoughts jump around from one moment to the next. Some wish that they could sleep in an extra hour. Others wish that they didn't have to drive in rush-hour traffic, or that their children would behave better. It's one thought after another, always wishing that the present moment were different, regretting something about the past, or worrying about the future.

"If we look at when we're really stressed, we'll find more likely than not, we're doing one of those things." Instead, he suggests, each time your mind wanders, let these thoughts go. Focus on the present moment and other sensations like the aroma from your morning coffee or the taste of that sandwich you're eating. He says if you practice mindfulness 100 times throughout the day, then you won't get lost in stressful situations.

Dr. Winner follows his own advice. In order to become more present with his patients, he often focuses on his breath for 10 seconds before going into an exam room. He believes bringing yourself back to the present moment is one of the most important ways to manage your stress. He says practicing this has brought him closer to his patients. He also gets less annoyed with family and friends, receives more enjoyment from his practice, and overall, feels more fulfilled.

His third stress-reducing strategy involves learning how to keep things in perspective. Doctors receive so much information

that it's impossible to pay attention to all of it. As a result, he says, they tend to pay attention to what has changed instead of the important things in life that they should be grateful for, such as their families. He suggests listing those things on a sheet of paper. That list might include a beautiful sunset, your child's smile, a smooth commute to work, or even a gentle rain.

At times, he points out, doctors forget how much of a profound difference they can make in people's lives. Pay attention to that, too! Add it to your list. Then, when aggravating situations arise, such as when a nurse calls in sick, you don't blow them out of proportion.

At other times, doctors can de-stress by learning to reframe bothersome situations. Remember the last time a patient was rude and you may have become angry, annoyed, or frustrated? Next time, reframe the situation; try to look at it from a different perspective.

When Dr. Winner conducts stress management workshops, he asks participants to raise a hand if they've ever been rude. Everyone does. Then he asks them to raise a hand if, when they were rude, they were feeling happy or at their best. No hands go up.

Stress Signals

People react to stress in different ways. Here are some common symptoms:

Physical Stress:

- Dry mouth
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Muscle tension
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shakiness
- Shallow breathing
- Stomach upset
- Sweat or moist skin
- Teeth clenching/grinding

Behavioral Stress:

- Clamming up/not communicating
- Compulsive eating/gambling/sex/TV-watching

“When people are rude, they’re almost always suffering, particularly when in a doctor’s office,” he explains. “People are scared, they’re in pain. Realize that their rudeness is because of their suffering. Then you can be empathetic, and you’ll take it less personally.”

Another example of reframing is when you’re stuck in a long line at the grocery store. Instead of cursing the manager for not hiring enough cashiers, look at the situation from a different angle. Erase those negative thoughts. Think of it as a break from your busy day. Focus on your breathing or something you’re grateful for—like having enough money to buy groceries.

“The more you wish things were different and continually say, ‘If I didn’t have to do this or that,’ the more stressful those things will become.”

Look Inward

Early in his medical career, Ron Knaus, D.O., a psychiatrist in Clearwater, Fla., who is also board certified in sports medicine, began working with a tennis player who had torn his rotator cuff. Every time the player used his racquet, he would

- Excessive drinking, smoking, or drug abuse
- Facial or other tics, such as leg bouncing, pen tapping or finger drumming
- Isolating/withdrawing from family, friends, and community
- Lashing out at others/blowing up
- Sleep disturbances (unable to fall asleep, tossing and turning, waking too early, etc.)

Emotional Stress:

- Angrier than usual
- Crying more easily than usual
- Edginess
- Excessive guilt
- Feeling blue
- Feeling empty, spent
- Feeling helpless
- Feeling out of control

Source: Wellsource, Inc., Portland, Ore., www.wellsource.com.

reinjure his arm. So Dr. Knaus helped develop a specific movement for him, which was very similar to movements he'd seen used in tai chi. This piqued Dr. Knaus's curiosity, which encouraged him to learn more about the ancient Chinese practice that seemed to help his patient.

That was 17 years ago. Since then, Dr. Knaus has been practicing tai chi twice a day—while the coffee brews in the morning and outdoors at sunset each night. Tai chi is designed to work the muscles, focus concentration, and improve energy flow. He says it resembles a martial arts movement but is done very slowly. He refers to it as “meditation in motion.”

Tai chi involves stretching and strengthening the body, and it emphasizes personal connectedness, alignment, relaxation, deep breathing, balance, and concentration. He says the movements are always circular and continuous and offer you a different perspective on life.

Tai chi also relieves his back pain from sciatica, which Dr. Knaus developed while playing sports in high school and college. When practicing tai chi, he says he feels as if a string is pulling the top of his head upward so that his spine falls into alignment. Even his posture has gradually improved.

“I don't think there's any illness around that isn't stress related,” he says, adding that many physicians lose control over their professional and sometimes personal lives due to stress. Dr. Knaus, too, was once overwhelmed and stressed out. But “[tai chi] gave me the opportunity to slow down,” he says. He's seen many benefits from this activity. “Now I get my work done more appropriately. I make fewer mistakes. The tension is not nearly as pressure-oriented, and I am able to take those techniques and apply them at almost any time of the day.” As a result, he's actually able to accomplish more in less time.

Often meditation or affirmations can have a similar effect. And the more you practice, the more quickly you will learn to relax.

Health Effects of Meditation

Susan Shumsky, a stress management consultant and spiritual meditation teacher in Portland, Ore., points out that all one has to do is go online to find hundreds of studies that show the pos-

itive impact of meditation on stress-related ailments.

To meditate, all you need is five minutes at your desk, Ms. Shumsky says. During this time, you will need to cut any emotional attachments or “psychic ties” to your patients. She explains that doctors and other healers tap into their empathetic nature in trying to serve others; they tend to take on other people’s energy or to adopt their emotions. These emotional connections can be draining.

Start by taking three very deep breaths. “That will immediately calm you down,” says Ms. Shumsky, who discusses these techniques in her book, *Exploring Meditation: Master the Ancient Art of Relaxation and Enlightenment* (New Page Books, 2001). “It’s really a miracle what three deep breaths can do.”

She recommends saying the word “peace” or the phrase “Be at peace” repeatedly to yourself. Or, if you’re religious, say a prayer. Call upon the God of your belief for divine light, love, and feelings of peace or harmony.

Then say a short affirmation. Ms. Shumsky suggests the following: “I now cut any and all psychic ties between myself and my patients (or mention a specific patient’s name). These psychic ties are now lovingly cut, lifted, loved, felt, and released to go into the light of peace.”

Or you might try the self-authority affirmation: “I am in control. I am the only authority in my life. I am divinely protected by the light of my being. I close off my energy field to all but my own higher self.”

You can also create your own affirming words as long as they communicate a similar message. She says she knows of many doctors who do both affirmations on a regular basis and have achieved powerful and profound results—so much so that they even share them with their patients.

Another technique that Ms. Shumsky recommends is called brain gym, a set of very simple movements that one can do to release stress. She introduces these movements to doctors in her workshops and says they realize immediate results.

Here’s the best known of these movements; it is called the “cross crawl”: Stand up. Lift your right leg with your knee bent. Slap your thigh above the right knee with the palm of your left hand. Repeat the same movement with your left leg and right

hand. Go back and forth for several minutes. At the same time, look around the room in all fields of vision.

Although the effects of brain gym have not been clinically proven, Ms. Shumsky believes that these exercises can help integrate brain functioning. “You’re doing a movement called crossing the midline,” she explains. “It also has the effect of immediately clearing out your energy field [so] you are more energized. I have found that brain gym is one of the most powerful techniques available for releasing stress.”

Whichever stress reduction technique you use, she says the key is to turn within. Unfortunately, some doctors seek comfort elsewhere, even turning to alcohol or drugs. But by locating your center of inner peace, you can relax, be more content, and achieve greater balance in your life. Then the external strains and stresses that constantly pull you in various directions each day won’t affect you as much.

Some doctors also engage in self-hypnosis to reduce their stress. Susan Gayle, a cognitive behavioral modification specialist and hypnotist, says that some doctors don’t realize that their stress can also derive from worries about money, as well as concerns about patients and juggling schedules.

“A physician friend of mine committed suicide because of how much debt he was in,” says Ms. Gayle, who founded the New Behavior Institute in New York City. The goal of the Institute is to help people make positive behavioral changes and learn how to refocus their minds. She says some doctors take out “huge loans to furnish their offices and medical equipment. Once they put M.D. at the end of their names, everybody’s willing to loan them money. It puts a lot of stress on them.”

Physicians may sometimes feel that they have to assume a certain face in society to show they’re doing well; otherwise, people tend to trust them less as doctors, she points out. They may feel the need to drive very expensive cars or to live an expensive lifestyle.

She says physicians can feel less stressed and more positive by focusing on solutions. Usually, she explains, doctors focus on problems—problems with patients, problems with insurance companies, problems with staff. She explains that problems accentuate powerlessness, which leads to more stress. But by tar-

getting solutions, physicians can regain a feeling of empowerment because they've taken back some control, thereby reducing their stress.

"Recognize things you can actually solve," she says, pointing out that when problems seem insurmountable, it helps to hand them over to someone else, perhaps an expert in that field. "Focus on the solution, not on the fact that *you'll* find the solution," she says.

Developing a positive outlook is also important, Ms. Gayle points out. "Rather than saying you feel stressed out or nervous about X, you can say: 'I am relaxed and confident about X.'" In fact, she encourages people to repeat the phrase three or four times aloud before falling asleep. By doing so, your subconscious mind will replay this message all night long. If you prac-

Pop Quiz: Are You Burned Out?

Jone Geimer-Flanders, D.O., a cardiologist in Schertz, Tex., created this quiz to help other physicians determine their degree of burnout. Answer each question yes or no.

Do you feel any of the following:

- Tired, disillusioned, or emotionally fatigued?
- Under undue pressure to perform or be successful?
- Unappreciated or misunderstood?
- That you have more work than it is feasible to perform?
- That you do not have the time to provide high-quality care?
- That you are achieving less than you should be able to?
- Negative about your job or yourself?
- Frustrated or easily irritated by small or unimportant things?
- That you are unable to be empathetic/sympathetic to patients, colleagues, or family members?
- That there is no one you can talk to?

Scoring: Total the number of your "yes" responses, then review the key below:

0-1: No sign of burnout/stress. Continue with your balanced approach to work.

2-4: Early warning signs of a potential problem. Don't ignore them! Take appropriate action now.

5+: You are burned out and need to take action. Work toward relieving your stressors NOW!

tice this for 30 consecutive nights, then it will become your new automatic subconscious thought, she says, adding that it will help change the way you view life.

“The subconscious mind is a big warehouse of information, and it doesn’t make judgments,” says Ms. Gayle. “The voice we hear in our heads that’s always judging and analyzing, that’s the ego of the conscious mind. That’s only 10 percent of your mind. The subconscious is 90 percent. It just accepts information and acts out according to stored data. If you change your perspective, you have a whole different way of being and acting.”

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Positive Programming

Or consider post-hypnotic cues. By implanting specific cues in your subconscious mind, you can find ways to relieve stress. Consider patients who are anxious about going to the doctor. They can plant a cue in their minds that tells them to take a deep, relaxing breath at specific times when they’re being examined, such as when the blood pressure cuff wrapped around their arm releases air.

“[Post-hypnotic cues are] little signals in your everyday life that are part of your environment and that trigger a subconscious process of releasing or letting go of muscles and mental tension,” adds Peter Lambrou, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist on staff at Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, Calif. “By doing this on a regular basis, you’re programming your mind to respond to those everyday cues.”

Another powerful tool is positive self-talk. Dr. Lambrou says that using phrases like ‘I can do X,’ ‘I choose to do X,’ ‘I create X,’ or ‘I am capable of X’ not only changes the way you perceive things, but can also alter your self-concept.

Still another effective technique can be “cognitive appraisal,” or the ability to separate personal issues from the actual situation, says, Dr. Lambrou. He recalls an orthopedic surgeon who

needed a hip replacement. Because the doctor knew everything about the procedure—especially the complications that could occur—Dr. Lambrou says his anxiety and stress were off the scale. So Dr. Lambrou introduced the physician to the concept of “cognitive appraisal” and a breathing exercise referred to as “balanced breathing.”

Instead of worrying, being fearful and anxious about his operation, the surgeon used cognitive appraisal to help him examine

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the reality of the situation: He had a competent surgeon. He would be operated on in a fully equipped hospital. He would be surrounded by experienced medical staff.

The breathing exercise helped him relax even more. Dr. Lambrou says it incorporates mind-body components and helps people achieve balance psycho-

logically. Here’s how you do it: Cross your left leg over your right leg at the ankle, then cross your right arm over your left arm at the wrist. Rotate your wrists so that your thumbs point down, which places your palms together. Interlock your fingers and drop them into your lap. Now you’re in a cross-legged, cross-armed position.

While in this position, focus your thoughts on the concept of balance between your emotions and intellect. Be sure to breathe in through your nose and touch the roof of your mouth with your tongue. As you exhale through your mouth, relax your tongue. If you do this exercise for approximately two minutes, he says a very powerful relaxation effect occurs—not just from the breathing but also from the integration of the right and left hemispheres of your mind and body.

After learning this breathing technique, he says, the doctor came to feel very confident and underwent his surgery with little anxiety or stress.

It also helps to perform simple stretches that take only a minute or two, Dr. Lambrou adds. For example, try neck-and-shoulder-rolls by extending your arms straight up over your head

with your palms facing up, then pushing up as if you're holding up the ceiling. He says these types of gentle stretches throughout the day will break some of your physical tension that's associated with the buildup of stress.

He also recommends a familiar but sometimes overlooked technique: "mental imagery vacations." The next time you need a break, go to your office and close the door. Sit down in a comfortable chair. Picture one of your favorite vacation spots. Remember every detail. Maybe you sense the sand between your toes. Smell the fresh, salty ocean air or perhaps the fresh scent of pine trees. "Imagine yourself in that experience, and make it as real as possible to bring back the pleasant, positive sensations and emotions that accompany it," he explains. "You can use the same visualization over and over again. It will gather momentum, and you'll be able to get more quickly into that experience each and every time you try to relax."

Ignoring Emotions

Stress is often the result of ignored emotions—regrets about missing time with family or self-doubts about living up to patients' or employers' expectations. The key is to be emotionally attuned and to pick up on subtle signals and attend to the root of one's stress, says Toby Haslam-Hopwood, a staff psychologist for Professionals in Crisis, a treatment program at the Menninger Clinic in Houston. But, he says, this self-awareness may not come naturally to physicians and may therefore predispose them to the effects of stress.

Physicians are trained in medical school to ignore their own emotional cues and signals so they can be objective when making important clinical decisions. Over time, he says, they learn to ignore these stress signals. Downplaying feelings becomes a pattern for them, an automatic way of relating with people. But emotions are needed to form alliances with people, too, especially family and friends. Sometimes the stress takes over. It becomes so overwhelming that physicians can end up in crisis. That's when programs like Mr. Haslam-Hopwood's come into play.

The Professionals in Crisis program occupies a 26-bed unit at the Menninger Clinic. Roughly 35 percent of its patients are physicians in various disciplines. Mr. Haslam-Hopwood says the

program teaches doctors how to “mentalize” or become aware of their own and other people’s mental states. He says everyone engages in behaviors as a result of their thoughts and feelings. Hopes, wishes, and ambitions are all mental states, he explains.

What Causes Stress for Doctors?

Physicians experience stress every day. Some stressors are expected, and some seem to come out of the blue. For example, physicians have to expect to deal with life-or-death situations—and these are obviously stressful. But many of today’s stressors are situations that most physicians didn’t anticipate—or prepare for—in medical school. Some common stressors for doctors include the following:

- Government regulations
- Third-party intrusions
- Malpractice litigation
- Pressure to practice defensive medicine
- Lowered public image and respect for physicians
- Breakdown in doctor-patient relationships
- Poor support system
- Distrust from patients
- Decreased financial remuneration
- Necessity to focus on business practices
- Time—many years of preparation and study
- Lack of absolute certainty in patient care
- Continual exhaustion
- Facing life-and-death or similarly difficult issues
- Difficult, demanding or chronically ill patients
- High expectations from patients
- Maintenance of clinical knowledge and competence
- Lack of time for private life

“These stresses, if not dealt with successfully, can lead to burnout,” says Susan Gayle, cognitive behavioral modification specialist in New York City.

“The very traits that are characteristic of being an excellent practitioner also characterize high-risk people—perfectionism, rigidity in thinking, need for control, strong sense of responsibility, compulsiveness, inability to ask for help, suppression of emotions, and difficulty in self-care, such as [taking] vacation time, exercising, and healthy eating.”

“When you suggest you need to be more aware of how you feel about things, that seems ridiculous to a physician and most professionals,” he says. “Feelings just get in the way. We help them remember that feelings are a core part of themselves.”

One strategy he suggests is to write down thoughts and feelings (not the details of everyday life). Besides creating the discipline for physicians to attend to themselves, he says this helps them learn how to focus on their internal experiences.

Physicians can also trace their feelings back to their origins via an “affect bridge.” Consider a physician who feels ashamed or embarrassed about something he did. The program encourages the doctor to talk about the situation in detail. As he talks, he may feel his face flush or want to hide his face in his hands. Maybe he feels inadequate, as if he’s the world’s worst doctor, husband, or father. Looking back, he may realize that he first felt those feelings when a teacher picked on him in grade school.

This is the place where many physicians get stuck. Mr. Haslam-Hopwood says the point of this exercise is not to resolve the problem. There is no resolution. It’s about finding a way to adapt and engage in some sort of self-care or self-soothing activity.

Unfortunately, many physicians turn to external aids like drugs, alcohol, shopping, or even sex to manage their discomfort or reduce their tension. He says physicians need to internalize better coping strategies. They must learn to mentally press a pause button between the stimulus and their response. That pause button, he says, allows them to stop and consider how their own mental state may affect their reaction.

One guideline he points to is the 90-10 rule: 90 percent of the intensity that you feel in any situation is based on our own past while 10 percent is based on that particular situation. Because our brains are made up of associated networks, he says, we bring our past to bear in the present.

“Physicians have to find a way to pay attention to these subtle cues and signals that exist, that help us adapt,” Mr. Haslam-Hopwood says. “Ignoring them might be adaptive for clinical work but is not necessarily adaptive for living one’s life.”