

Complex Risk

SYMPOSIUM • 2023
JUNE 7-8 • ST. LOUIS, MO



8 Proven Ways to Reduce Stress

Stress is unavoidable. The stress created by difficult situations is a physiological condition that motivates us to address challenges and threats in our lives.

Dr. Eric Potterat, author of *Learned Excellence*, which is due to be released by HarperCollins in Feb 2024, has witnessed first-hand how the elite performers of the world manage stress both on and off the field. He suggests that the popular belief in a fight or flight response isn't really accurate. According to Potterat, there are actually three responses to stress: fight, flight, or freeze. Of the three, which is your most common response to stress? And is that response the best option?

Uncertainty is the new normal, but Potterat believes we can learn to manage our human stress response with these practices:

1. **Pre-/post-performance routines.** Create a ritual that sets your mood with music, clothing, meals, meditation, or mantras.
2. **Goal setting.** What are the measurable steps to achieving your goal?
3. **Stress control.** Inhaling for 4 seconds through your nose and exhaling for 6 seconds through your mouth over the course of 4 minutes calms your breathing, which in turn calms your heart rate.
4. **Visualization:** Before sleep, relive your joys and successes of the day.
5. **Positive self-talk.** 94% of the time, we react based on irrational beliefs. Can you frame what has happened and what may happen with more optimism?
6. **Contingency planning.** Neutralize stress response by developing multiple backup plans. Consider worst case scenarios and have a plan for each.
7. **Compartmentalization.** The ability to move on and not dwell on failure. Or as Ted Lasso says, “Be a goldfish.” Goldfish have a ten second memory. Dwell for ten seconds and then move on.
8. **Self-awareness.** Be aware of your strengths and challenges. Also, be aware and monitor those things that we know negatively affect our ability to perform optimally (life events, stress, mood, substance use, etc.). Ask others you trust to give you feedback that helps you grow.

Potterat also believes that improving our sleep is critical to managing stress. One sure way to improve sleep? Avoid alcohol before bedtime. While alcohol does make us fall asleep faster, it also inhibits deep, quality sleep. Instead of alcohol, Potterat suggests drinking tart cherry juice, which researchers have discovered helps us maintain deeper sleep for longer periods.

Another practice that helps to manage stress is sensory deprivation. Floating tanks that omit all sensory input may help us calm and reboot our minds. While this novel approach to managing stress may not be for everyone, Potterat points to research that shows great potential in this stress reducing practice.

AI body monitoring devices may also help us manage stress. Knowing our pulse and heart rate may help us more effectively manage our stress responses, and though AI can't yet measure the stress hormone cortisol, new at-home cortisol tests are available.

Finally, Potterat notes that perhaps the best way to manage stress may be as simple as going outdoors. Walking in nature for 15 minutes each day has been shown to lower blood pressure and enhance creativity. Walking outside for work-related endeavors is also productive. Consider asking colleagues to walk outside for meetings instead of sitting indoors.

Beyond the question of managing stress, Potterat believes that every life needs balance. Consider how your work, relationships, health, hobbies, spirituality, and legacy define you. Are these crucial elements of your life in balance? His book, *Learned Excellence*, isn't simply about improving performance. It's about living fully and well.

Which of Potterat's stress management suggestions resonate most with you? And which do you think will help you manage your stress more effectively?