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Changing Habits for Life Success

## Healthy & Effective Coping with Stress

By **Christopher Stankovich, Ph.D.**  
[www.drstankovich.com](http://www.drstankovich.com)

Stay tuned for next months article on Staleness, Burnout & Coping

This month's newsletter is designed to help you become better acquainted with stress coping mechanisms. It will also explore some of the reasons that we often turn to bad habits (i.e. over-eating or drinking) and other unhealthy ways to deal with stress.

### **Liquid Lunches, Binge Eating, and Other Risky Behaviors...**

When we get "stressed out" in life, we are ultimately left to face the classic dilemma of "fight or flight." In some cases, we roll up our sleeves, take a deep breath, and courageously tackle (or "fight") the stressor head on with great enthusiasm. While this is the textbook response we would love to employ on a regular basis, we also know that it isn't always that easy – and that in some instances the issues and problems we face in life cause us to want to take a break from the stressor (the "flight" option) and do other, more pleasurable things rather than fight the stressor. It is these compensatory actions we do (i.e. over-eat, drink, etc.) instead of taking on stressors that oftentimes makes situations worse and prevents us from becoming our best.

For most adults, having a cocktail is sure better than completing an arduous work task; and over-indulging in good food is a lot more enjoyable than having to pay bills or resolve interpersonal disagreements amongst co-workers. In fact, over-eating, drinking, smoking, and all other unhealthy coping mechanisms *are actually effective* when it comes to stress response! The reason these coping mechanisms are effective is because they do (temporarily) allow us to forget about our stress and keep our sanity, showing that these responses do "work" as far as short-term stress-relief goes. The problem is **these types of responses are not healthy** – for one, they often lead to even bigger problems (i.e. obesity, alcoholism, etc.) and secondly they prohibit us from actually working on the stressor (and, consequently, reducing our level of stress!).

### **Effective & Healthy Stress Response**

Remaining in a chronically stressful environment is never a good thing, and over time will almost certainly lead to cognitive, emotional, and physical breakdowns. In fact, Dr. Hans Selye in his General Adaptation Syndrome theory on stress, discusses how the body will go through an alarm, resistance, and exhaustion pattern when exposed to ongoing stress. Using this model, it can be argued that for us to not only survive, but also thrive in life, we must find ways to take a break from the stressors we face – especially the really tough stressors. It is what we do in these moments of "life timeouts" that makes all the difference in the world, and separates healthy and effective people from unhealthy and ineffective people.

As I mentioned earlier, just about anything you do in response to stress is effective if it allows you to get away from the stressful situation. As crazy as it sounds, getting drunk is effective in that it momentarily allows you to not think about the stress in your life. However, even though getting drunk provides a temporary escape, *it is an unhealthy way to cope* with stress, and in the long run will likely only make things worse. The key, then, is to develop coping mechanisms that are **both effective and healthy**, allowing you to take a quick "timeout" from the stressor, while at the same time helping you stay positive, focused, and determined to come back fighting once you end your short break from the stressor.

#### **More Information**

Each month Dr. Chris Stankovich writes a newsletter for the Educational Council of Franklin County along the topics of balance, wellness, and life success. To learn more about his products, counseling services, or professional consultation, please visit [www.drstankovich.com](http://www.drstankovich.com) or email [chris@drstankovich.com](mailto:chris@drstankovich.com)

## ***So What Types of Coping Mechanisms are We Talking About?***

While it's easy to come up with all the bad ways we cope with stress, it's important to discuss some of the good things we should be doing. The funny thing is, there really are no surefire healthy coping mechanisms, nor are there "one-size-fits-all" ways for all people to deal with stress. For example, while exercise is certainly a good thing for us to do on a regular basis, people who over-indulge in exercise may end up battling body image and vanity issues, eating disorders, or even complications with performance supplements if they are using them. On the other hand, while over-indulging in alcohol is obviously a risky endeavor; some studies have shown that a single glass of wine may in fact help the circulatory system. The truth is, there is no one single perfect way to deal with stress, but if you ask yourself the following two questions you should be in relatively good shape when it comes to coping with stress:

1. Is this an effective mechanism that allows me to have a short break from the stressor without causing more problems?
2. Is this a healthy behavior that won't lead to even bigger problems – emotionally, financially, physically, or otherwise?

### **Tips & Strategies**

- Take a close look at how you typically respond to stress – are your behaviors effective? Are they healthy?
- Taking a break from your stress is not a bad thing. In fact, Dr. Seyle's model would suggest it is imperative that you do take breaks in order to avoid complete breakdowns. It's what you do during your break that can make (or break) what happens next in your life.
- Try to come up with at least five things you can consider doing in times of stress that are both effective and healthy. Once you have these ideas jotted down, be sure to consider using them during times of stress.

### **Additional Links**

<http://www.brainconnection.com/topics/?main=fa/selye> (Seyle - General Adaptation Syndrome)

Educational Council  
1929 Kenny Road  
Suite 300  
Columbus, Ohio 43210

Phone: 614.292.7744  
Fax: 614.292.7775