

Managing Stress



In a Nutshell

Poorly managed stress can lead to **poor decision making, illness, time off work, unproductive time at work, pessimism, poor listening, poor problem solving, and interpersonal conflict**. Strategies for coping with stress include stressor-focused coping and self-focused coping. Stressor-focused coping means solving the problems that are causing the stress. Stressor-focused coping is great, but sometimes self-focused coping is more useful. This *LeaderLetter* addresses self-focused coping. Self-focused coping strategies can help us **relax**, bring down our heart rates and blood pressure, and **build confidence**.

In This Issue

- [About the Photo](#)
- [Stress and Stress Management Strategies](#)
- [Practicing This Management Skill](#)
- [About the Newsletter and Subscriptions](#)
- [Good, Clean Joke](#)
- [LeaderLetter Web Site](#)

About the Photo

Indiana University announced today that they would suspend their men's basketball coach, Mike Davis (above), for one game after his emotional outburst at the end of a close game against the University of Kentucky on December 21. In the last three seconds of the Kentucky game, Davis thought the officials failed to call a foul on a Kentucky player at a critical juncture. He reacted by running out onto the court to yell at the official. The official penalized Indiana, but Davis did not leave the court and continued to hound the official. The official was forced to penalize Indiana again and eject Davis.

Davis appears to be handling the pressure of his job very poorly. Two years ago, he replaced a controversial but popular coach at Indiana. He will have to produce exceptional results as Indiana's coach in order to satisfy many of their fans. Davis' results *were* exceptional last year as he coached the team all the way to the national championship game. However, he still seems to be experiencing a lot of stress. It shows on his face. I was not surprised by Davis' outburst on December 21.

Pressure *can* help us produce our best performances, but Davis' team is suffering as a result of his difficulties with managing stress. Indiana had been undefeated prior to the Kentucky game, but Davis' outburst assured their defeat in that game. Indiana also lost the next game they played, and will have to take on a tough in-state opponent tomorrow without Davis as the coach. Pressure is often unavoidable and can be positive as long as the stress it creates is managed well. Effective stress management is essential for leaders. (AP Photo/George Widman: e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*; news.yahoo.com.)

[back to the top](#)

Stress and Stress Management Strategies

Stressors and stress. Before launching into a discussion of stress management, I need to explain what "stress" means to me. ***Stress*** is what we experience in reaction to something we perceive as a ***stressor***, such as an approaching deadline or being laid off. That is, stressors are external forces that cause stress, and stress is what we experience. The high expectations of Indiana basketball fans are a stressor. The way in which the

coach responds to that pressure is stress.

We experience stress when we perceive threats or opportunities that we fear we cannot handle effectively. Note the use of the terms "perceive" and "opportunities." First, our stress is a function of our perceptions, and different people often perceive the same phenomenon in different ways. Sometimes managing perceptions is the key to managing stress. Second, opportunities can cause stress; not just threats. Imagine being invited to discuss an entrepreneurial idea you have with someone who has the power to implement that idea. Since you would want that meeting to go well, you might experience some stress.

The good and the bad. Stress can be energizing. During the "alarm" stage of stress, heart rate, blood pressure, and mental alertness increase. The body becomes ready for "fight or flight" approaches to dealing with stressors, and we can give extra effort. However, when not properly managed, the experience of stress over extended periods of time can also cause cardiovascular disease, heart attacks, and more. In addition, surges of energy can actually be counterproductive during performances, such as when a nervous public speaker speaks too fast. Stress also makes us less patient and more irritable. The pressure Mike Davis put himself under to maintain his team's winning streak and beat a formidable Kentucky team made him very irritable.

Stress also affects our attention. When we're under stress, our attention is drawn to the stressor. Just as physiological reactions to stress can be either functional or dysfunctional, so can the psychological reactions. Sometimes it's helpful to give extra attention to a problem that is a source of stress. Managers, athletic coaches, drill sergeants, teachers and parents have been known to create stressful situations (often through yelling or intimidation) to get other's attention, and it can be an effective tactic. However, using stress to boost attention and motivation can also be negative if creativity is needed, or if attention is drawn away from other important things. During times of stress, our thoughts tend to be less creative and more rigid. We can become fixated on a problem and fail to think divergently about possible solutions to it. Ironically, activities that take our minds off those problems can allow us to realize their solutions. (These steps in the creative problem solving process are often called "incubation" and "illumination.") Another problem with our tendency to devote extra attention to stressors is that we might ignore other important people, opportunities or impending crises. We find it difficult to listen, learn and be helpful when we experience high levels of stress.

In summary, poorly managed stress can result in health problems, irritability, difficulty paying attention, and poor problem solving. In the workplace, poor stress management contributes to time off work due to illness, unproductive time at work, poor judgment and interpersonal conflict. But I'm "preaching to the choir," right? We've all had firsthand experiences with stress.

Stress management. Effective stress management doesn't mean getting to a point where we never experience stress. On the contrary, it's better that we challenge ourselves, and as we push ourselves to continuously improve and exploit our potential, we will cause some stress. Effective stress management means keeping our stress levels from exceeding the level where it's energizing and productive for us.

Coping strategies. Coining my own terms here, think of stress management strategies as having two categories; stressor-focused coping and self-focused coping. Stressor-focused coping is solving the problem that the stressor presents¹. There are obviously many advantages to stressor-focused coping, but this *LeaderLetter* focuses on self-focused coping. Sometimes self-focused coping strategies are more useful than stressor-focused coping strategies. First, not all stressors can be eliminated. If the root cause of your stress is the possibility of terrorist attacks, there's very little you can do to eliminate the stressor. Maybe you can think of a creative way to reduce your risk of being a victim of a terrorist attack, but it's difficult to think creatively when you're experiencing stress. Accordingly, a second reason why self-focused coping strategies are often more useful than stressor-focused coping is that self-focused coping can help us unlock our problem-solving skills.

Self-focused coping. Self-focused coping strategies include short-term and long-term strategies that help us avoid the negative personal consequences that can result from encountering stressors². Self-focused coping strategies can be further divided into proactive strategies and reactive strategies. Proactive strategies are the things we can do before we experience stress to build up our resiliency. Reactive strategies are the things we can do when we experience stress to reduce some of the negative consequences and prepare us for creative problem solving.

[back to the top](#)

Practicing This Management Skill

Proactive strategies. Proactive strategies are the things we can do to make us more resilient. They help

limit the severity and duration of the physical consequences of stress. The proactive strategies also help us develop the skills required by some of the reactive strategies.

- Cardiovascular conditioning--aerobic exercise for 20-30 minutes (like a two-mile brisk walk) at least every 48 hours
- Proper diet--consuming nutritious foods, and minimizing alcohol and caffeine intake
- Optimism--adopt the mindset of a resourceful, creative problem-solver who likes a challenge
- Meditation--make a habit of saying meditative prayers or doing deep relaxation exercises daily
- Social support network--mentors and peers can support us when we encounter stressors

Reactive strategies. Reactive strategies are the things we can do after the onset of stress to relax us and clear our heads so that we can solve the problems posed by the stressors. These strategies can be combined for extra benefit.

- Muscle relaxation--tighten a muscle group of the body (e.g., fists), hold for 5-10 seconds, then release; repeat this for several muscle groups (e.g., arms, shoulders, chest, abdomen, etc.)
- Deep breathing--slowly take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, exhale completely; repeat several times
- Reframing the problem--think of the stressor as a puzzle that you can creatively solve
- Focusing on "small wins"--mentally break down the problem posed by the stressor into many small challenges and think about how you can solve them one at a time
- [Mental rehearsal](#)--mentally practice successfully coping with the stressor
- Clinical counseling--unlike our mentors and peers, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists are professionally trained to help us cope with stress

[back to the top](#)

Notes

1. Stressor-focused coping is like the enactive strategies described by Whetten and Cameron (2002), and the problem-focused coping described by Folkman & Lazarus (1985).
2. Self-focused coping is like the proactive and reactive strategies described by Whetten and Cameron (2002), and the emotion-focused coping described by Folkman & Lazarus (1985).

Sources

Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1985). If it changes it must be a process: Study of emotion and coping during three stages of a college examination. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 48(1): 150-170.

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Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills*, (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

[back to the top](#)

About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sojn College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

[back to the top](#)

E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Good, Clean Joke

Try this diet during times of high stress:

BREAKFAST

1/2 grapefruit
1 slice whole wheat toast
8 oz. skim milk

LUNCH

4 oz. lean broiled chicken breast
1 cup steamed spinach
1 cup herbal tea
1 Oreo cookie

MIDAFTERNOON SNACK

1 medium apple
Remaining Oreos in the package
2 pints of rocky road ice cream
1 jar hot fudge sauce
Nuts, cherries, whipped cream

DINNER

2 loaves garlic bread with parmesan cheese
1 large sausage, mushroom and cheese pizza
4 cans or 1 large pitcher of beer
3 Milky Way or Snickers candy bars

LATE EVENING SNACK

Entire frozen
cheesecake eaten
directly from freezer

RULES FOR THIS DIET

1. If you eat something and no one sees you eat it, it has no calories.
2. If you drink a diet soda with a candy bar, the calories in the candy bar are canceled out by the diet soda.
3. When you eat with someone else, calories don't count if you eat less than they do.
4. Food used for medicinal purposes, such as hot chocolate, hot toddies and Sara Lee Cheesecake, never count.
5. If you fatten up everyone else around you, you look thinner.
6. Foods consumed at the movies, such as Milk Duds, buttered popcorn, Junior Mints, Red Hots and Tootsie Rolls, do not have calories because they are part of the entire entertainment package and not one's personal fuel.
7. Cookie pieces contain no calories. The process of breaking causes calorie leakage.
8. Food prepared by your mother and/or your best friend, and eaten in her presence, contains no calories.
9. Things licked off knives and spoons have no calories if you are in the process of preparing something. Examples: Peanut butter on a knife making a sandwich; ice cream on a spoon making a sundae.
10. Foods that have the same color have the same number of calories. Examples: Spinach and pistachio ice cream; mushrooms and white chocolate. NOTE: Chocolate is a universal color and may be substituted for any other food color.

[back to the top](#)

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