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**2nd Edition**

# **Stress Management**

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## **Learn to:**

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- Identify stress triggers and cut them down to size
- Master stress management techniques and regain control of your life
- Adopt a stress-resilient lifestyle

**Allen Elkin, PhD**

*Director, The Stress Management & Counseling Center, New York City*



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**by Allen Elkin, PhD**

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He is the author of two other books on stress, *Urban Ease: Stress-Free Living in the Big City* (Penguin Books), and *Relax in the City Week by Week*, (Duncan Baird). He is also a coauthor of *Thriving in the Workplace All-in-One For Dummies* (Wiley).

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# *Dedication*

To my wife, Beth, my best friend, and our children, Josh and Katy, who bring us great joy.

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# Introduction

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**J**ust about everyone feels they have too much stress in their lives. Daily, I hear people complaining that stress is getting to them, robbing them of many of life's pleasures and depriving them of life's satisfactions. And that's not just from the people who walk into my office or show up at one of my stress-management workshops — stress seems to be everywhere. Just take a look at your local newsstand. You're bound to see more than a few cover stories on stress, warning you of its dangers and telling you what you can do about it. These days more and more people are signing up for stress-management workshops, taking yoga classes, and learning how to meditate, massage their bodies, and quiet their psyches.

You may think that modern advances in science and technology should have resulted in lower stress levels. Clearly, this hasn't happened — for anybody. Life has become more stressful, not less stressful. Your stressors may take the form of work pressures, financial worries, time constraints, or the demands that come with being part of a family. You may have more specific stress triggers — illness, unemployment, a new baby, or a new mortgage.

Whatever the source of your stress, having a guide would be helpful, right? Unfortunately, life doesn't come with an instruction booklet or a user's manual. You need to find your own help. Your stress *can* be managed. And in fact, much of your stress can be eliminated. You just need the right stress-reducing tools. In fact, you need an entire toolbox filled with a wide variety of stress-management techniques, strategies, and tactics. This book was written to give you these tools.

## About This Book

*Stress Management For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, is your guide, helping you navigate the often-confusing array of stress-management options. It gives you the skills and expertise you need to effectively manage and minimize the stress in your life. Virtually every important aspect of stress management is covered in these pages. The book helps you understand where your stress comes from, how it affects you, and most importantly, what you can do about it. It shows you how to relax your body, quiet your mind, and let go of the tension that comes with too much stress. It shows you how you can control your anger, worry less, and create a lifestyle that is stress resistant.

In these pages, I have been careful to ensure that your stress-management program doesn't add to the stress in your life. I try to be practical and realistic, recognizing that you may not be able to meditate for 20 minutes twice a day and still keep your job. And, although I recognize that having a chauffeur, owning a fabulous house in the country, or having live-in help can lower your stress level, I also realize that this may not be an option for you (or for me, either!).

No one single idea or technique can magically relieve all your stress; nor does every technique or approach work equally well for everyone. You need to put together a package of ideas and methods that you can integrate into the various aspects of your life. It extends from caring about what goes into your mouth to thinking about the kind of chair you sit in, from monitoring how much sleep you get to knowing how to turn off your racing mind. Effective stress management really comes down to effective lifestyle management. That's why, in these pages, you can find a variety of stress-management approaches. You fill up your stress toolbox with the techniques in this book, and then you can take out the tool you need, when you need it.

If you can find someone — a friend, family member, or coworker — to whom you can teach your newly mastered skills, that's great. Most people learn best when they can teach someone else. If you can find someone to work with you on your stress-management program, even better. Having a stress buddy can help keep you interested and motivated. Most importantly, see your involvement with this book as an ongoing journey that will take some time — and some effort — but that is well worth the trip. Good luck!

## *Conventions Used in This Book*

I use a few conventions in this book to help your reading go smoothly:

- ✓ *Italics* emphasize and highlight new words and terms that I define.
- ✓ **Boldfaced** text indicates keywords in bulleted lists and highlights the action parts of numbered steps.
- ✓ When I want to make a topic more easily understood, I break the essential points down into bulleted lists (like this one), so you can follow them easily without being confused by too many words.

## *What You're Not to Read*

You don't have to read everything in this book. I have sprinkled in sidebars (the text in gray boxes), which offer extra information, such as interesting bits of trivia and examples that hopefully amuse and inform you. They are designed to spice up the book. If you're short of time, skip them and come back to them later when you have more time.

## *Foolish Assumptions*

When I wrote this book, I made a few assumptions about who you, the reader, are:

- ✓ You want less stress in your life, and you're willing to devote a little of your valuable time to achieve this.
- ✓ You already know a lot about stress but welcome additional methods and strategies for coping with your stress.
- ✓ Your time is valuable and limited, and you want realistic and practical ways of reducing stress that can be easily integrated into your schedule and lifestyle.
- ✓ You're willing to try some ideas and approaches that are new to you and may require some openness and experimentation.

## *How This Book Is Organized*

I've organized *Stress Management For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, into five parts. Each part covers a range of ideas and approaches that, when put together, give you a comprehensive understanding of what stress is and what you can do to manage, reduce, and even at times eliminate much of the stress in your life. Here's how the structure of this book breaks down:

## ***Part I: Getting Started with Stress Management***

I open the book by talking about what stress is and how it can affect you mentally, physically, and emotionally. I then discuss various techniques that you can use to get a rough measure of just how much stress you may be experiencing.

## ***Part II: Mastering the Basics***

What do I mean by “the basics”? This part presents common-sense ways for you to deal with stress. I show you how to treat the physical symptoms of stress, quiet your mind, and deal with day-to-day issues that may be causing stress: Maybe you aren’t as organized as you’d like to be, or maybe your career is taking time away from your family, or maybe you’re not eating right. I can help.

## ***Part III: The Secrets of Stress-Effective Thinking***

Think of this part as preventive medicine. It covers more advanced techniques that you can use to decrease the amount of stress in your life. If you make minor changes in the way you think when put in potentially stressful situations, you can actually reduce and perhaps eliminate stress.

## ***Part IV: Managing Your Stress in Real Life***

This part helps you develop day-to-day habits for home and work that will ultimately help you live a less stressful life. For example, the simple act of taking a break and doing a few stretches can really reduce the effects of stress at work. And has it occurred to you that if you do more fun things in life — hang out with friends or spend time on a hobby — you’ll be better able to deal with stress?



## *Part V: The Part of Tens*

This part presents some brief top-ten chapters. Find out the ten habits of effective stress managers and the ten most stressful life events.

### *Icons Used in This Book*



This book has lots of little round pictures in the margins, calling your attention to various details in the text. Here's what these icons mean:

I use this icon to flag a particularly good idea that you should consider.



When presenting a concept that I feel you shouldn't forget, I use this icon.



When I need to give you a word of caution, I toss this icon your way.



This icon indicates that I'm about to present a specific technique for dealing with stress.



Throughout the book, I ask you to evaluate your situation — determine your stress level, examine how you react in given situations, and so on. When I give you one of these quizzes, I use this icon.



This icon flags anecdotes and trivia that you're likely to find interesting.

## *Where to Go from Here*

Although it's possible to read this book sequentially, you don't have to do that. You can dip into any part that interests you. Most of the material stands alone and isn't dependent on the other chapters — with one exception. The chapters that show you how to relax your body and quiet your mind, Chapters 4 and 5, are particularly important, and they are central and pertinent to several other chapters. Try to read these chapters earlier on.

Don't try to master all of the material presented in one shot. Or even two shots. It takes time and practice to learn how to become comfortable with, and competent in, many of the exercises described. Don't rush yourself. After all, it took years to develop many of your stress-producing habits, so you can't expect to get rid of them in a flash. Every day, allow yourself at least some time to devote to some aspect of your stress-management program. It may only be a few minutes, but those minutes add up and can result in some impressive stress-management skills.

## Part I

# Getting Started with Stress Management



*For Dummies* can help you get started with lots of subjects. Visit [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) to learn more and do more with *For Dummies*.

## ***In this part . . .***

- ✔ Get a handle on your stress by finding out where stress comes from, how it affects you, and how certain kinds of stress can actually be good for you.
- ✔ Discover what, exactly, stress is and the function it was meant to serve. Identify symptoms that tell you when your stress level is getting out of control. Find out that understanding stress is as simple as ABC.
- ✔ Become familiar with stress-management tools, such as a stress gauge and stress journal, so that you can measure your stress, identify your triggers, and come up with effective ways to cope.

## Chapter 1

# Stressed Out? Welcome to the Club!

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Figuring out why you feel more stressed
  - ▶ Determining where your stress comes from
  - ▶ Understanding how stress affects you
  - ▶ Looking at the good kinds of stress
- 

**A**re you feeling more tired lately than you used to? Is your fuse a little shorter than normal? Are you worrying more? Enjoying life less? If you feel more stress in your life these days, you aren't alone. Count yourself among the ranks of the overstressed. Most people feel that their lives have too much stress. Your stress may come from your job or lack thereof, your money worries, your personal life, or simply not having enough time to do everything you have to do — or want to do. You could use some help. Thankfully, you can eliminate or at least minimize much of the stress in your life and better manage the stress that remains. This chapter helps you get started.

## *Experiencing a Stress Epidemic?*

You probably can't make it through a single day without seeing or hearing the word stress someplace. Just glance at any magazine stand and you'll find numerous cover stories all about stress. In most larger bookstores, an entire section is devoted to books on stress. TV and radio talk shows regularly feature stories documenting the negative effects of stress in our lives. Why all the fuss? Hasn't stress been around forever? Wasn't it stress that Adam felt when he was caught red-handed with little bits of apple stuck between his teeth? Is all of this just media hype, or are people really experiencing more stress today?



## Less leisure time?

In her insightful book *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, economist Juliet Schor points out that, in spite of all the new innovations and contraptions that could make our lives easier, we still need about the same amount of time to do what has to be done at home. In the 1910s, a full-time housewife spent about 52 hours a week on housework. Sixty years later, in the 1970s, the

figure was about the same. Yes, some activities did become less time consuming. Food preparation fell almost 10 hours a week, but this was offset by an increase in the time spent shopping and taking care of the home and kids. Contrary to everyone's predicted expectations, we have less leisure time now than we did 50 years ago.

One good way of finding out how much stress people are experiencing is to ask them about the stress in their lives. Here are some findings from recent polls and surveys that did just that:

- ✓ A 2010 study published by the American Psychological Association found that 44 percent of Americans said that their stress levels had increased over the past five years.
- ✓ That same study reported that one in five American adults (22 percent) believe themselves to be in fair or poor health, and this group reports higher levels of stress than those in better health.
- ✓ A Harris Interactive survey of more than 1,550 Americans found that 46 percent reported that their stress level is higher than it was five years ago. Eighty percent said they experienced medium or high stress levels at work. Sixty percent said they experienced these same levels at home.

Our lives, it seems, have indeed become far more stressful. But why? The next section provides some reasons.

## Understanding Where All This Stress Is Coming From

In his prophetic book *Future Shock* (originally published in 1984), Alvin Toffler observed that people experience more stress whenever they are subjected to a lot of change in a short span of time. If anything characterizes our lives these days, it's an excess of change. We're in a continual state of flux. We have less control over our lives, we live with more uncertainty, and