



MODULE FOURTEEN

Manage Stress and Find Support



How do I manage stress?

Stress is a common part of life. Everyone experiences periods of high stress. Prolonged high stress can cause high blood pressure, a weakened immune system, heart disease, and digestive problems. Headaches, depression, irritability, and low energy are other common symptoms. While stress is a natural response that serves us well in the short term, there are things we can do to help our bodies recover.

“I feel better, think more clearly, and have less stress. And I’m having much more fun than I did before—I’m getting out, going to the movies, meeting friends, and laughing a lot.”

– Henry, lost 74 pounds

You can learn ways to manage your stress more effectively. Techniques like relaxation practice, increasing physical activity, or changing your thoughts in response to stress can help you lower your stress and improve your readiness to respond in stressful situations. You can learn to deal with stress more easily when it arises. It might help to remember that you cannot always control the causes of stress, but you can control the way you react to it.

In This Module You Will:

1. Think about stressful situations and plan how to cope with them.
2. Learn how to practice a variety of stress management techniques.
3. Recognize how to find and ask for support.

Progress Check-In



I met my previous healthy eating goal

I met my previous physical activity goal

My weight today is _____ pounds.

Reflect on how well you met your goals from the last module.

What successes did you have?

What challenges did you encounter?

What helped you address those challenges?



Even the Smallest Changes Can Make a Big Difference

What benefits did you notice from your weight-loss efforts this past week?

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Better sleep | <input type="checkbox"/> More energy | <input type="checkbox"/> Fewer prescription medications |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Better check-up | <input type="checkbox"/> Less joint pain | <input type="checkbox"/> Better blood pressure control |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improved memory | <input type="checkbox"/> Better mood | <input type="checkbox"/> Better blood sugar control |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clothes fit better | <input type="checkbox"/> Improved cooking | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stress relief | <input type="checkbox"/> Greater confidence | _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> More endurance | <input type="checkbox"/> More organized | _____ |

Keys to Managing Your Stress

1. *Track Your Stress*

Stress affects everybody differently. By regularly monitoring and tracking your stress, you raise your awareness of the ways you experience stress and get a better sense of your natural stress level. Knowing how your body reacts to stress will help alert you when your stress level is rising.



2. *Identify the Sources of Your Stress*

Knowing the sources of your stress is critical. After you have an idea of the things that cause your stress, you can develop a plan for dealing with each of them.

3. *Practice Mindfulness Regularly*

Mindfulness is a way to be fully aware in the present moment of physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts, but without judging them. Regular daily practice of stress management techniques will allow you to deal with your stress in a healthier way. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction techniques have been proven to reduce stress and stress-related conditions in Veterans. They can reduce anxiety, improve attention and memory, and help manage chronic pain. These techniques center on being fully aware in the present moment without judgment.

4. *Be Physically Active*

Physical activity is one of the most effective stress management techniques. Physical activity increases endorphins, improves sleep, raises self-esteem, and releases muscle tension. While moderate physical activity is good for stress management, overly vigorous activity can actually contribute to stress levels. If you are going to exercise to help relieve stress, do so at an intensity level that is comfortable for you.

5. *Practice Deep Breathing*

It's one of the fastest ways to deal with stress in the moment. Use deep breathing to gain control over stress, anxiety, and panic. It is also effective for managing depression and emotional responses, and can even be helpful for some medical conditions.

6. *Plan Pleasant Activities*

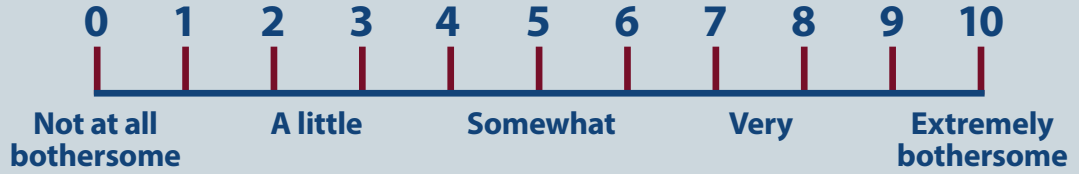
Research has shown that the things we do affect the way we feel. When you spend time in activities that you find relaxing, enjoyable, or just plain fun, you tend to feel less distressed and happier. For many people, life demands seem to replace pleasant activities. If you notice this happening to you, it's time to plan for positive time.

Tracking My Stress

Rate your stress level regularly by choosing a number between 0-10, where 0 means not bothersome, 5 means somewhat bothersome, and 10 means very bothersome. Tracking your stress will help you identify patterns in your stress.



On a scale of 0 to 10, how bothersome has your stress been?



Date & Time	Stress Level (0-10)	What was I doing?	What was I thinking?

What Are My Stressors?

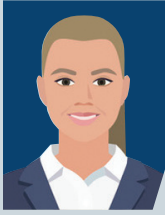
Use this activity to identify your current stressors. Here are some examples of things that may cause stress. **Check off the ones that apply to you or write your own on the blank lines.**

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Changing jobs/promotion | <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic to/from work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conflict with family | <input type="checkbox"/> Travel/vacation/holidays |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Keeping healthy | <input type="checkbox"/> Upcoming wedding |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of confidence | <input type="checkbox"/> Climate change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loneliness | <input type="checkbox"/> World economy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Money worries | <input type="checkbox"/> War/terrorism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pain/fatigue | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Planning for retirement | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> _____ |

Now, review your list of stressors, and for each item indicate whether or not you have control over it by listing it in the appropriate box.

Control	Do Not Control

1. Take some time to address the stressors that you feel **you do have** at least some control over.
2. Practice stress management techniques for the stressors that **you do not** control. You might also avoid these stressors or limit exposure to them. If you can't avoid them, practicing deep breathing when you interact with them may limit your stress response.



Hannah's How-To *Deep Breathing Exercise*

1. Start by sitting down in a comfortable place that's free from distraction. Uncross your legs, put both feet on the floor, and rest your hands in your lap. Pay attention to how this position feels and let your mind and body just "be" for a few moments.
2. Close your eyes and notice the pattern of your breath as you inhale and exhale. It may be soft or loud, slow or quick, or shallow or deep. Make a mental note of your breath before you start relaxing with deep breathing. Just breathe naturally for a few moments, taking slow and deep breaths in through your nose and then breathing out through your mouth.
3. Now hold your breath for 5 seconds after you inhale, and for another 5 seconds after you exhale. Continue breathing in this rhythm for a few moments.
4. Breathe naturally for a moment. Now place both of your hands on top of your stomach and notice how your belly rises with each inhale and falls with each exhale. Notice your breath moving in and out again from your belly, to your chest, and gently out through your mouth. Continue breathing naturally.
5. This time say, "Relax" silently or aloud after each time you exhale.
6. Repeat this exercise for 1 to 5 minutes."

Mindfulness

Mindfulness means being fully aware of what is going on within and around you at any given moment. Mindfulness can be applied to many aspects of life. Being mindful of your eating may help with weight management. Being mindful involves being aware of yourself and your surroundings physically, emotionally, and mentally. It means paying attention each changing moment.



Teresa's Tips

"Mindful eating takes the concept of mindfulness and applies it to what, where, when, why, and how you eat. This means being aware of the physical and emotional feelings connected to eating.

- Observe your body. Notice hunger and fullness signals that guide you to start and stop eating.
- Don't judge yourself or your reaction to food.
- Notice your reaction to food. What do you like, what don't you like?
- Savor your food. While eating, notice all of the colors, smells, flavors, and textures of food. Slow down while you eat.

Mindfulness may help you to avoid overeating. First bites may be the most satisfying and additional bites may not be as pleasurable. This can help with portion control."

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Techniques

Here are six different techniques you can practice to help reduce your stress.

Mindfulness Meditation

The intention of Mindfulness Meditation is to be fully aware of what is going on in the present moment without any judgment.

Compassion Meditation

This meditation can lower stress and stress hormone levels and raise self-esteem. You can improve self-compassion by working on rethinking unhelpful thoughts and by practicing this meditation.

Body Scan Meditation

This meditation is deeply relaxing and can help you become more accepting of areas of pain or discomfort.

Mindful Eating Exercise

This exercise helps you to practice mindfulness with something you do every day: eating. You will learn how to increase your awareness while eating, which can increase mindfulness and improve your eating habits overall.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise can help you become aware of muscle tension so you can release it when needed.

Mindfulness Circle

This image will help you return to mindful awareness throughout your day.

Which of these six techniques sound interesting to you and like something you might try?

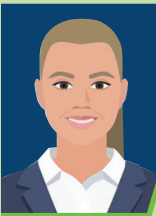


Hannah's How-To *Mindfulness Meditation*

"To anchor yourself in the present, focus on your breath as you inhale and exhale. Breathing mindfully does not involve a conscious changing of your breath."

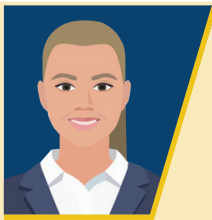
1. Set aside a 1- to 5-minute period of time, and tell yourself that you will not engage your thoughts during that time. As thoughts pop up, just notice them and let them go.
2. As you notice your mind thinking about things, try to let those thoughts go without judging them and return your attention to the experience of breathing. The point is not to stop having thoughts. The point of this meditation is to become more aware of your thoughts without automatically engaging them.

If focusing on your breath does not work to bring you into the present moment, you can focus on anything in the present, such as sounds, a picture you like, or a candle flame, so long as you don't have to think about it."



Hannah's How-To *Compassion Meditation*

1. First, take a few deep, cleansing breaths and ground yourself in the present.
2. As you breathe deeply, focus on your heart and visualize softness, warmth, and compassion glowing in your chest. Repeat these phrases to yourself: *"May I be happy. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease."*
3. After a minute or two, visualize extending this energy to include somebody you care deeply about. Now repeat the phrases, filling in the person's name. For example, *"May my spouse be happy. May my spouse be well. May my spouse . . ."*
4. Next, visualize extending the energy to somebody you feel neutrally about. Repeat the phrases with his or her name. For example, *"May the cashier at the store be happy. May the cashier be well. May the cashier . . ."*
5. Now extend the energy to somebody for whom you have negative feelings. Repeat the phrases with his or her name.
6. Finally, visualize extending this energy to the rest of the world.
7. As you become comfortable with this practice, try extending the length of time you spend at each stage, increasing the overall time spent on the meditation."



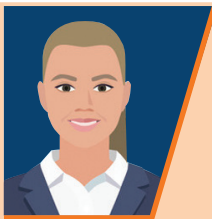
Hannah's How-To Body Scan Meditation

"The Body Scan Meditation can help you become more accepting of areas of pain or discomfort and not tense in response to them, which can make the discomfort worse."

To practice the Body Scan Meditation, get into a comfortable position. You might lie down on the floor or in bed with a pillow under your head. Take a few deep, grounding breaths and gently bring your awareness to the present.

1. Pay attention to a specific body part, such as your left foot. As you breathe deeply, scan that part of your body for sensations. Notice these sensations, but try not to get lost in thought. Gradually let your focus move to different body parts — each leg, your hips, stomach, chest, hands, arms, and head.
2. Practice mindfulness meditation with your focus on your body. Become aware of your mind's tendency to get lost in thought. When you notice this happening, just let the thought go and gently redirect your attention back to your body. Try not to engage in the content of the thoughts.

If you have any pain or discomfort, just notice it, accept it, and continue scanning. Continue to scan each part of your body in this way until you have scanned your whole body."



Hannah's How-To Mindful Eating Exercise

"Mindful eating is an ongoing practice, but it starts with three simple steps."

1. Become aware of the physical characteristics of food. Make each bite a mindful bite. Think of your mouth as being a magnifying glass, able to zoom in. Imagine magnifying each bite 100%. Pay close attention to your senses. Use your tongue to feel the texture of your food. Take a whiff of the aroma. Ask yourself, *"How does it really taste? Is this something I really want? Does it satisfy my taste buds? Is my mind truly present when I take a bite so that I experience it fully?"*
2. Become aware of repetitive habits and the process of eating. Notice how you eat. Fast? Slow? Do you put your fork down between bites? Are you stuck in any mindless habits, such as eating a snack at the same time each day, multi-tasking while you eat, or eating the same foods over and over? Ask yourself the following questions: *"Do I have any ingrained habits concerning how I snack? When I pick up my fork, what stands in the way of eating wisely?"*
3. Become aware of mindless eating triggers. Look for specific cues that prompt you to start and stop eating. Is your kitchen a hot spot for snacking? Do feelings such as stress, discomfort, or boredom lead to a food binge? Become an expert on the emotional buttons that trigger you to eat when you aren't physically hungry. Ask yourself, *"What am I feeling right before I mindlessly snack? Is my environment, emotional state, or dining companion helping or hurting my efforts to eat wisely?"*



Hannah's How-To Progressive Muscle Relaxation

“Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercises can help you recognize when your muscles are tense and teach you how to return your muscles to a relaxed state.”

1. Breathe normally and let your body just “be.” Take note of how your body feels from your toes to your head. Does any of your body feel tense, stiff, or achy?
2. Close your eyes and notice how your toes feel. Tightly curl your toes to the point where you feel tension, as if trying to squeeze a small ball between your toes and the ball of your feet. Hold this toe curl for 10 seconds. Release your curl and let your toes spread. Notice how your toes feel when they are free from tension.
3. Next, repeat this cycle of tensing and relaxing with your calves. Next, do your thighs. Move up the body. Repeat with your hands, then arms, and then the muscles of your upper back and shoulders. Finally, tense and relax your neck and face
4. After you complete tensing and relaxing each muscle in the body, breathe in through your nose and hold your breath for 5 seconds. Slowly and gently breathe out through your mouth. Open your eyes and notice how your muscles—your feet, calves, thighs, fists, arms, upper back, neck, and face—feel when relaxed.”

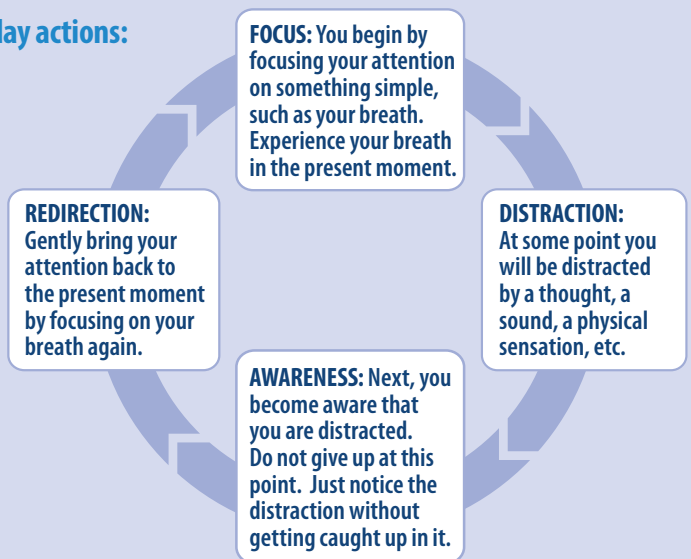


Hannah's How-To Mindfulness Circle

“Mindfulness practice doesn’t have to be limited to focusing on your breath. You can do almost anything mindfully. Try practicing mindfulness with one of the activities below or one of your own. Be aware of your breath, senses, thoughts, and feelings as you perform the activity. Consider your posture, your mood, how quickly you move, what is going on around you, and your level of tension.”

Try being mindful while doing these everyday actions:

- Washing hands
- Stopping at a red light
- Looking at a clock or your watch
- Washing dishes
- Brushing your teeth
- Taking a shower
- Dressing and undressing
- Walking”



Maximize Your Support System



Tom's Toolkit

“Social Support is a great tool to use for weight loss. Share your successes as well as your struggles with your support team. Letting other people know your goals can help keep you accountable for meeting them. Friends and family members can help keep you motivated or assist you during tempting situations like social gatherings. It may also be important to share your weight-loss journey and the things you learn with those that live with you. For example, if you know late-night snacking is a concern for you, and you would rather not have snacks in the house, share this with the person who does the household grocery shopping. This way it can be a team effort and everyone can start to eat healthier together.”

Who Could Support Me?

Surround yourself with positive people and ask them for encouragement. Choose people that will act as good cheerleaders during this process. Be sure to let them know how important their support is for your success.

How Can I Ask for Support?

Your supporters care about you and want you to be well. Tell your supporters what they can do to help and be specific. For example, “Every week or so, ask me how I am doing,” or “Please don’t offer me junk food.” Also, consider sharing some of the information you have learned in MOVE! so they can eat healthy and be active with you.

Who Could Support Me?	How Could They Support Me?

“Everyone has helped me stay on track—VA staff, family, friends. It amazed me each week how many people wanted to read my weekly status reports on social media. I was amazed how many words of encouragement I received...the response was tremendous.”

– John, lost 213 pounds



Goal-Setting Check-Out

Goals for Next Week

Set one new healthy eating and physical activity goal to work on over the next week. Remember to make it SMART (see Module 1).

Healthy Eating:

I will _____

Physical Activity:

I will _____

If you had trouble meeting your goals from last week, what will you do differently this week?

Reasons for participating in a weight management program can change over time. Reflect on why you started the MOVE! Program and write down what matters most to you now?



“One of the hardest things for me to do was to slow down when eating and enjoy every bite. I feel good now and don’t want to gain the weight back—and that keeps me moving.”

– James, lost 43 pounds

Module Summary

Managing Stress

Stress is a normal part of living, but you can reduce the stress you feel by recognizing your stressors and responding in a positive way. There are many healthy living activities that can help you better manage your stress. Eating wisely and being physically active are great ways to prevent or reduce stress. Also, practice your problem-solving skills to develop resilience (see Module 8). Rethinking unhelpful thoughts is another way to manage your reaction to stressful situations (see Module 6).

“The biggest take away from the MOVE! program is that you aren’t alone. There are lots of Veterans who have the same struggle, and it doesn’t make us weak or less of a person to ask for help.”

– Amber, lost 92 pounds

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

Practice mindfulness by bringing yourself fully into the present to experience each situation. Use the six stress-reduction techniques described in this module at least once a day. Practicing mindfulness is like building a muscle; you must exercise it regularly to see growth.

Social Support

Support from family and friends is an integral part of the weight-loss process. Having someone in your corner can help keep you motivated, stick to your goals, and manage the lifestyle changes you are making in MOVE! Consider who in your life could support you during this process, what kind of support they could provide, and how you might ask them for it.

Module To-Do:

1. Set two new weekly SMART goals in your Module Check-Out.
2. Record in your *Food and Activity Log* every day.
3. Consider ways you can manage stress during your weight-loss journey. Practice the relaxation and stress reduction techniques.
4. Review additional resources:
 - a. Manage Stress Healthy Living Message: https://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy_Living/Manage_Stress.asp
 - b. Managing Stress Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15GaKTP0gFE>
5. Review Module 15 in preparation for your next meeting.