

A monthly newsletter published by Interface EAP

## Stress Journals—Identifying Causes of Short Term Stress

Whether stress is caused by rush-hour traffic, a heavy workload, difficult customers, or unpleasant news, many of us experience it in some form during the day. The problem is that if stress goes unchecked, it can affect our productivity and our overall health. Using a Stress Journal, you record information about the stresses you're experiencing so that you can analyze these stresses and then manage them. Stress Journals can help you to understand:

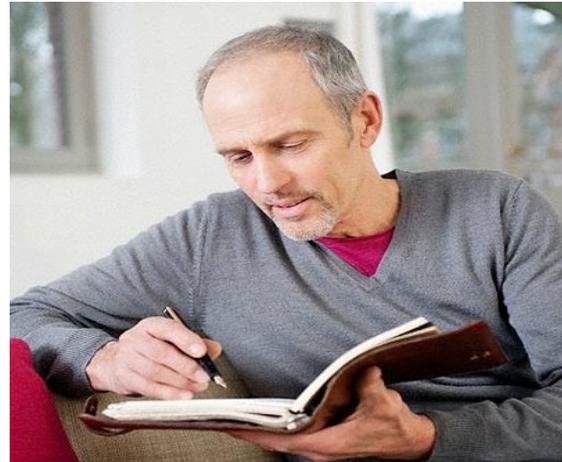
- The causes of stress in more detail.
- The levels of pressure at which you operate most effectively.
- How you may be able to improve the way you manage stress.

To get started, make regular entries in your Stress Journal (for example, every hour). If you have any difficulty remembering to do this, set an alarm to remind you to make your next diary entry. Also, make an entry in your diary after any stressful incidents. Every time you make an entry, record the following information:

- The date and time of the entry.
- The most recent stressful event you experienced.
- How happy you feel now, using a subjective assessment on a scale of -10 (unhappy) to +10 (happy). As well as this, write down the mood you're feeling.
- How effectively you're working now using a subjective assessment, on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 as ineffective and 10 as greatly effective.
- The fundamental cause of the stress (being as honest and objective as possible).

You may also want to note:

- The symptoms you felt ("butterflies in the stomach," anger, headache, raised pulse rate, sweaty palms, and so on).
- How well you handled the event: Did your reaction help solve the problem, or did it actually make things worse?



Once you've kept a Stress Diary for a number of days, you can analyze it and take action on it:

- First, look at the different stresses you experienced during the time you kept your diary. Highlight the most frequent stresses, and also the ones that were most unpleasant.
- Working through the stresses you've highlighted, look at your assessments of their underlying causes, and your appraisal of how well you handled the stressful event. Do these highlight problems that need to be fixed? If so, list these areas.
- Next, look through your diary at the situations that cause you stress. List ways in which you can change these situations for the better.
- Finally, look at how you felt when you were under pressure, and explore how it affected your happiness and your effectiveness. Was there a middle level of pressure at which you were happiest and performed best?

Having analyzed your diary, you should have more understanding about what the most important and frequent sources of stress are in your life, and you should appreciate the levels of pressure at which you are happiest. You should also know the sort of situations that cause you stress, so that you can prepare for them and manage them well.



# Living with Grief: How Can You Help Yourself?

When someone you love dies, your world changes forever. You must go on living and adjust to a world without the physical presence of your loved one. It is important to treat yourself with compassion as you go through the grieving process.

Here are some ways to care for yourself during this difficult time:

**Remember that your way of grieving is yours alone.** There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Everyone affected by your loved one's death will grieve in his or her own way. Other members of your family may have ways of grieving that differ from yours. Many factors affect how you grieve, such as your relationship with the person who has died, your family responsibilities, and how your loved one's death affects your plans for the future.

**Honor your feelings.** You can expect to have many emotional ups and downs as you grieve. Grief is often described as an emotional roller coaster. As you think about your loved one, and as your life goes on without him or her, many reactions may emerge. Rest assured that this is normal. Allow yourself to feel what you feel without judging your emotions.

**Give yourself special time to think about your loved one.** Grief can appear when you least expect it and be overwhelming. One strategy that may help is to set aside special times to think about your loved one. By doing this, you may find that your feelings of grief are less likely to disrupt your daily routines.

**Take care of your health.** Grief can leave you feeling tired and weak. Focusing on your own needs is an important part of grief. It is important to get plenty of rest, eat regularly, and stay active. Consider seeing your family doctor for a check-up. He or she may be able to help you understand and cope with the physical effects of grief.

**Tell others how to help you.** Friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers, and others who know you want to find ways to help. Let them assist with practical tasks that you may find hard to manage on your own. For example, ask for help with making phone calls, preparing meals, picking up your children from school, and so on.

**Become informed.** Many books and web sites offer information about coping with grief and recovering from the loss of a loved one. You may find it helpful to read what others have written about these experiences.

**Wait to make major life-changing decisions.** While you are grieving, it is hard to bring clear judgment to major life decisions. If you can, wait to make these kinds of decisions until your feelings of grief are less intense.

**Plan ahead for how to cope on special days.** Think about how you would like to honor your loved one on a birthday, anniversary or holiday. Give yourself permission to try something new. Be aware that the dread you may feel while thinking about upcoming special days may be harder to cope with than the days themselves.

**Seek support.** Talk with a therapist or counselor who understands the special needs of people who are grieving. This may help you find new ways of coping with your grief. Attending a support group with others who have lost a loved one can help you feel less alone. It can also give you a safe place to talk with people who understand what you are going through.

*Contact your EAP for additional information or assistance with grief counseling.*



# 5 Daily Brain Exercises



Many people are devoted to exercise to keep in shape, but the phrase “use it or lose it” applies to more than just the muscles in our bodies -- it also applies to the neural pathways and connections in our brains. There are a variety of exercises and activities that can successfully work each of the brain’s five major cognitive functions on a daily basis.

**Our minds consist of five main cognitive functions:**

**Memory    Attention    Language    Visual-Spatial Skills    Executive Function**

It’s important to challenge, stimulate and effectively exercise all five areas to stay mentally sharp as our brains age. Here are 5 daily brain exercises that can help you do this.

**Memory**—Memory plays a crucial role in all cognitive activities, including reading, reasoning and mental calculation. These are the cognitive skills we may notice most when they begin to fail. Listen to music, but choose a song you don’t know. By memorizing the lyrics, you boost the level of acetylcholine, the chemical that helps build your brain, and improve your memory skills. Challenge yourself even more by getting dressed in the dark or using your opposite hand to brush your teeth. These challenges help build new associations between different neural connections of the brain.

**Attention**—Good attention enables you to maintain concentration despite noise and distractions and to focus on several activities at once. We can improve our attention by simply changing our routines. Change your route to work or reorganize your desk -- both will force your brain to wake up from habits and pay attention again. As we age, our attention span can decrease, making us more susceptible to distraction and less efficient at multitasking. By combining activities like listening to an audio book with jogging forces your brain to work at doing more in the same amount of time.

**Language**—Language activities will challenge our ability to recognize, remember and understand words. They also exercise our fluency, grammatical skills and vocabulary. For example, if you usually only thoroughly read the sports section, try reading a few in-depth business articles. You’ll be exposed to new words, which are easier to understand when read in context or easier to look up on a dictionary site if you are reading the news online.

**Visual-Spatial**—We live in a colorful, three-dimensional world. Analyzing visual information is necessary to be able to act within your environment. To work this cognitive function, try walking into a room and picking out five items and their locations. When you exit the room, try to recall all five items and where they were located. Too easy? Wait two hours and try to remember those items and their locations. The next time you’re waiting on your coworker or friend to arrive, try this mental exercise. Look straight ahead and note everything you can see both in front of you and in your peripheral vision. Challenge yourself to recall everything and write it down. This will force you to use your memory and train your brain to focus on your surroundings.

**Executive Function**—Without even realizing it, you use your logic and reasoning skills on a daily basis to make decisions, build up hypotheses and consider the possible consequences of your actions. Engaging in a brief visit with a friend boosts your intellectual performance by requiring you to consider possible responses and desired outcomes. Video games require strategy and problem-solving to reach a desired outcome -- like making it to the final level. “It’s not just a game, honey; I’m exercising my executive brain functions!”

As we age, it’s important to flex our mental muscles as well as our physiques. Now that you’re aware of the five main cognitive functions and how to exercise them, it will be easy to find daily activities that will help you break a mental sweat and keep your brain in shape.

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<b>Stress</b>	For free and confidential assistance, call your	<b>Marital Problems</b>
<b>Financial</b>	Employee Assistance Program and speak with a Care Coordinator:	<b>Family Problems</b>
<b>Legal</b>	(713) 781-3364                      Se Habla Español	<b>Alcohol/Drug Problems</b>
<b>Depression</b>	(800) 324-4327                      (800) 324-2490	<b>Other Referrals</b>
<b>www.4eap.com</b>		

Your employer has contracted with Interface EAP to provide you an Employee Assistance Program.