



# 10 Best stress busters

By Christine Crosbie

Sometimes those of us who are still working look at the 60-plus set and think, “I can’t wait to retire and get away from all this stress.” We imagine leisurely days of golfing, travel and walks on the beach. As some folks find out all, however, not all of life’s challenges disappear with retirement. Older adults may suffer from new or different kinds of stress, which

they need to work out how to control.

The great news is that some “senior” or “retirement” stress can be alleviated by planning ahead, changing thinking patterns, asking for professional help or participating in a range of physical and social activities. Here are 10 tips on ways to “get a handle” on situations that cause stress.

## 1 Are you healthy?

It can be worrying to discover new symptoms or changes in your health. In addition, keeping track of doctors' appointments, going for medical tests and waiting for the results can all cause tension and worry. There's no question that a serious illness can't be wished away by positive thinking, but having an optimistic outlook and hoping for the best can help get you through some rough spots.

Pay attention to the thoughts that run through your mind throughout the day, also known as "self-talk." Sometimes negative thoughts come from misinformation and at other times they're just automatic. Try to be aware of pessimistic thoughts, self-pity and assuming the worst. Don't overreact and try not to believe everything you read or hear.

Talk to your doctor about sources of reliable information. Get as much information as you can about your illness, and find out what you can do to take control and improve your situation. Sometimes working with a health professional, such as a physiotherapist, can help relieve those aches and pains. Ask a nutritionist for diet advice and be sure that you aren't experiencing medication side effects.

## 2 Losing friends or loved ones

The death of a spouse, close friend or family member is probably the most stressful event in a person's life. There is no set time period for accepting and coping with a loss. For some people it takes months—for others, years.

Find opportunities to talk about your feelings, whether with family or others facing a similar loss. Support groups can give you the chance to share your what's going on and perhaps receive and provide comfort to others in a similar situation.

If you find yourself unable to get out of bed and participate in your usual activities for weeks at a time then consider seeking professional help from a counsellor or psychologist. Losing weight and experiencing constant anxiety or sleeplessness are other signs that you may need extra support.

## 3 Reducing caregiver stress

A recent study of 130,000 seniors by the Canadian Institute for Health Information found that most family members taking care of seniors at home experience severe stress. This was especially true for those who were coping with loved ones suffering from Alzheimer's disease or other forms of cognitive impairment.

In the study, 55 per cent of the caregivers were spouses. Of the remaining subjects who were not married, 75 per cent received care from adult children. Spouses are often reluctant to take time off from caregiving and, when they do get a break, spend the time running errands such as grocery shopping.

If you're caring for a loved one at home, don't be afraid to ask for help. Contact your local Community Care Access Centre, home healthcare centre, nursing agency or Veterans Affairs office. Ask about assistance programs for seniors at home. Seek out programs that are available to provide home visits from care workers.

"The only difference between a diamond and coal? The diamond had a little more pressure put on it."

Anonymous

## ✓ Stress check

If you're unsure of how you may be coping, visit [www.heartand-stroke.ca](http://www.heartand-stroke.ca) to take their "5-Minute Stress Test." You'll also find this "G-E-T-S-T-R-E-S-S F-I-T" plan that is a list of ways to live a healthier and more enjoyable life:

**G**ive yourself a break. Go for a walk; get a good night's sleep; get away from it all.

**E**at a healthy diet.

**T**alk it out.

**S**pend time with family and friends.

**T**ake a course—for fun or self-improvement.

**R**elax...with a good book, a great movie or your favourite music.

**E**xercise: walk, jog, swim, dance, go to the gym.

**S**et priorities.

**S**chedule your time.

**F**ind alternative sources of satisfaction.

**I**ncrease your awareness of what causes you stress.

**T**ake action! Address the person or situation that's causing your stress. And, if you're still not sure how to manage, talk to your health care professional.

Source: *The Heart and Stroke Foundation*



#### 4 *Dealing with finances*

The average life expectancy in Canada is almost 80 years. That's eight years longer than in the early 1960s. The retirement age is still considered to be 65 years (CPP kicks in at 60 years), although many people now work longer. After the last recession everyone was anxious about their investments, but those approaching retirement or living on a fixed income were especially affected.

If you have money worries, and especially if they are causing you ill health, talk to your children about your situation. A consultation with a financial planner may help ease your worries. Visit the Canadian Benefits website ([www.canadabenefits.gc.ca](http://www.canadabenefits.gc.ca)) to see if you are eligible for government programs such as Home Adaptations for Seniors' Independence, or drug benefit programs. If you or your loved one is a veteran, visit Veterans Affairs Canada at [www.veterans.gc.ca](http://www.veterans.gc.ca) or call toll-free on 1-866-522-2122.

#### 5 *Time to relocate?*

Have you ever heard of RSS: relocation stress syndrome? Yes, it's an official diagnosis! RSS refers to the anxiety that people, especially the

elderly and children, can suffer when moving to a new home. Moving ranks third on the stress scale, after death and divorce!

Our home is usually our biggest asset, filled with our belongings and memories. It can be traumatic to give it up. When it's time to move, try to start planning at least two months before the actual moving date. Take some time to visit your new neighbourhood, whether you're moving to a seniors' apartment building or care home.

When you are making arrangements for someone else, it's important to give your loved ones as much involvement in the process as possible. This will give them the chance to make choices and feel a sense of control over what's happening. Specialty moving companies exist that are dedicated to helping seniors downsize, pack and unpack. Think about giving one of them a call.

#### 6 *Staying safe*

Reading the paper and watching the news often create uneasy feelings for many of us. Reports of car accidents, disasters and local crime can make you think twice before heading out the door. While the truly dramatic stories end up on the news, the truth is that older people are at a much greater risk of falling or having an accident in their own home than of being the victim of crime.

To be on the safe side, ask a qualified professional to undertake a safety audit. Watch for loose rugs that might be tripped over, sharp edges on tables and clutter on the stairs. Are there grab bars and anti-slip surfaces in the bathroom? Be proactive. Make changes now, before an accident happens.

#### 7 *Maintaining independence*

While some people can drive well into their eighties, many have to give up driving before then. Losing your licence can be like having your wings clipped—especially for those who don't live close to public transit or within walking distance of stores and services.

Try to make errands a social event: find a friend or two, plan a trip to the store and share a cab. Recruit a younger driver for a regular weekend car ride with friends. Ask about volunteers who might help you get to

“Success is a great deodorant. It takes away all your past smells.”

*Elizabeth Taylor*

medical appointments. If you're new to public transit, get a map and plan trips in non-peak times if possible. Think of being out and about as an adventure, rather than cause for anxiety.

## 8 Coping with memory loss

Do you ever panic when you can't find your keys...again? Or when you have just walked into a room and forgotten why you went there? People joke about how they can remember what they wore to their prom, but can't think what they had for breakfast. Occasional lapses in memory are a normal part of aging (or of a busy lifestyle). Try not to panic and worry that these moments of forgetfulness are a sign of dementia and decline.

Give yourself a helping hand by keeping lists and organizing your life. Concentrate on one thing at a time, avoiding distractions. Staying active and getting regular exercise can also keep you from becoming anxious and help you maintain your independence. If you have serious concerns about how your lack of memory is impairing your daily life or putting you at risk, ask your doctor for an assessment.

## 9 Avoiding stressful people

Friends and family are essential to our well-being. They give us joy, support, care and companionship. Sometimes, however, we have "toxic" or difficult relationships that actually increase our levels of stress. Some people in our lives constantly focus on the "empty glass," criticize others and complain. Prolonged negativity can be contagious, so it helps to try and make a grumpy person understand how their attitude affects you. They will either make an effort to change or you can limit your time with them.

Family members can also be a source of stress. Remember, it's okay to say "no" to relatives who keep asking to borrow money and children who think you're an on-call babysitter. You may also consider avoiding relatives who want to involve you in family

spats. Refuse to take sides and don't be drawn into others' disputes.

## 10 Look for good stress

Stress gives us a boost of both cortisol and adrenaline, which trigger our "fight or flight" mechanism when we feel threatened. They also keep us sharp when we're navigating a busy street or facing other day-to-day challenges. Scientists are even looking into how brief bursts of these stress chemicals might strengthen the immune system and protect against dementia by keeping brain cells working at their peak.

One popular mantra these days is "do something that scares you every day." This suggests that it's okay to get your adrenalin pumping by taking small risks from time to time. Think about taking up the challenge by trying a new activity, going to a new place or signing up for a course at the local college, even if there is an exam or presentation involved. Scientists are looking into how brief bursts of these chemicals might strengthen the immune system and protect against dementia by keeping brain cells working at peak. ●

*Christine Crosbie is a freelance writer based in Toronto, ON.*

## Hobbies reduce stress

Hobbies are often thought of as activities for people who lead quiet, relaxed lives. However people with full, active lives may need hobbies even more than the average person because they provide:

- A slice of work-free, responsibility-free time
- Purpose and excitement
- The chance for fun
- An opportunity to be social and meet others
- A way to stave off burnout

*Source: About.com*

