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**Getting a Handle on Stress**

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Stress is a normal reaction designed to help us cope with dangerous situations. Faced with a threat, this automatic response kicks us into gear so we can deal with the problem at hand. Although adaptive in high-pressure situations, the human body isn’t designed to withstand the physiological changes that occur over extended periods of time. Chronic stress causes wear and tear on you mentally and physically and can wind up damaging your health, relationships, and job performance.

Unfortunately, high stress seems to be ingrained in American culture. In the American Psychological Association’s Stress in America Survey, 42 percent of adults said their stress level increased over the past five years. Even though most people say stress management is important to them, few take adequate steps to address the problem and 1 in 10 report not engaging in any stress management activities at all. Here are some tips for managing your stress so that you can stay sharp when out on a call and be healthy and present with loved ones when you’re at home.

**Know yourself.**It’s important to monitor your stress level and know what types of things typically stress you out. People experience stress in different ways. You may have a hard time concentrating or making decisions, feel angry, irritable, or out of control, or experience headaches, muscle tension, or a lack of energy. You may also find that work is increasingly intruding into other aspects of your life, creating tension or conflict on the home front, or leaving you feeling isolated. Every individual has to find the right work-life fit. While some can blend work and home life, others find it important to maintain clear boundaries between these realms.

**Find healthy ways to manage stress.**Do you engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, or eating poorly to cope with your stress? Do you lose patience with your children, spouse, or fellow department members when you feel overwhelmed? Work to replace unhealthy coping strategies with healthy behaviors, like exercise, meditation, or talking with friends and family. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Take it slow and focus on changing one behavior at a time. Some behaviors are very difficult to change and may require the help of a licensed professional such as a psychologist.

**Take care of yourself.**Eat right, drink plenty of water, and engage in regular physical activity. Ensure you have a healthy mind and body through activities like taking a short walk, going to the gym, or playing sports that will enhance both your physical and mental health. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself even if it’s just simple things like reading a good book or listening to your favorite music. Stay energized and productive by taking a minute or two periodically throughout the day to stand up, stretch, breathe deeply, and shake off the accumulating tension. Short breaks between tasks can be particularly effective, helping you feel like you’ve wrapped up one thing before moving on to the next. The productivity you gain will more than make up for the time you spend taking a break.

**Get enough sleep.**Sleep problems can contribute to burnout. In fact, research suggests that having less than six hours of sleep per night is a major risk factor for burnout. Poor sleep can have negative effects on your job performance and productivity. It can lead to fatigue, decrease your motivation, make you more sensitive and reactive to stressful events, impair your mental functioning, make you more susceptible to errors and accidents, and make it harder to juggle competing life demands. Maintain a regular sleep schedule, make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark and comfortable, and avoid staring at your TV, computer, tablet, or smartphone right before bed.

**Turn off and tune in.**The world is full of distractions that prevent us from living in the moment. By learning to better focus on the present, you can improve your attention and concentration, reduce your stress level, and be more engaged in all aspects of your life. Start by putting away your smartphone for a few minutes each day and focusing on a simple activity like breathing, walking, or enjoying a meal. The skill of being able to focus purposefully on a single activity without distraction will get stronger with practice and you’ll find that you can apply it to many different aspects of your life.

**Keep a “To-Do” list.**Worried that you’ll forget something important? Constantly thinking through all the things you need to get done? Clear your head and put those thoughts on paper (or in an electronic task list) by creating a list of work and personal tasks and marking those with the highest priority. Not only will you reduce the risk of forgetting something, you’ll also be better able to focus on the task at hand.

**Ask for support.**Accepting help from supportive friends and family can improve your ability to manage stress. You can also tap into stress management resources available through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), including online information, available counseling, and referral to mental health professionals, if needed. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk to a mental health professional like a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behavior.

**Note: If you need help, the Fire/EMS Helpline is available at 1-888-731-FIRE (3473) for all firefighters, EMS providers, and their families struggling with a behavioral health issue. It is confidential and free to call. Learn more at** [**www.nvfc.org/help**](http://www.nvfc.org/help)**.**