

More enlightened ways to cope with stress for 2019

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I want to start off addressing a slightly more serious topic than usual – mental illness.

It's a word that has a lot of negative associations for many people, strongly influenced by portrayals of mental illness in the news and media. It's shown as something frightening and dangerous. Partly as a result, there are many harmful myths surrounding the concept of mental illness – and of course its counterpart mental health. Both health and illness are on a spectrum.

These myths have huge consequences for how we approach our health and wellbeing. We live in terror of being diagnosed as mentally ill. We focus on the negatives, like avoiding "illness" instead of striving for health. One of the myths I've been thinking about is the relationship between what we call "stress" and "mental health", and how it can lead to some harmful addictions.

The role of stress in mental health

"Stress" is a euphemism for any number of mental health problems that people get diagnosed with. It was the theme of [Mental Health Awareness Week 2018](#). What we commonly label as "stress" affects almost everyone, and it's good to bring more attention to mental health and wellbeing. If someone is struggling, they might go to the doctor, who diagnoses them as suffering from stress. As long as they can keep working and socialising, most people consider themselves fine, even if they are "stressed". But I think this approach has some unintended consequences.

Stress is coming to be viewed like an illness, when it's actually just a response to how we approach our lives. Stress is also a symptom of your wellbeing – not a mental illness. Focusing too much on "stress" as an illness may actually take attention away from actual mental illnesses that have a huge impact on people's lives.

Many mental health issues in general can be invisible. Even highly-functioning, successful people can feel like they are breaking down inside.

The difference is, you don't know what will be the straw that breaks the camel's back with highly-functioning people. Labelling mental health issues as "stress" means we blame mental health problems on outside factors, instead of looking at deeper problems within a person. I think it also leads people to use destructive substances as coping mechanisms to make themselves feel better.

How I react to stress

When I'm "stressed", I sometimes turn to substances like cigarettes, alcohol, and even caffeine. I might compulsively work or socialise.

If the stress escalates and my primary coping strategies don't work, I tend to get extremely paranoid. I find it hard to trust people and I do things to push them away, like seeing their intentions as hostile. I become extremely judgmental to protect myself from harm. This is a secondary coping mechanism designed to keep me safe, but it's not helpful either.

I also tend to suffer from extreme anxiety and panic attacks. Small, seemingly insignificant things can set me off and I'll become an emotional wreck for a few hours or days.

Unfortunately none of my coping strategies are constructive, and my problems don't go away. These coping mechanisms usually just help me avoid my problems, while simultaneously making me feel bad about myself for not living up to my ideals. Luckily, I know how to manage these experiences when they occur, and I know to quickly curb my use of addictive substances.

However, I can see how someone's natural coping mechanisms might develop into a severe addiction. All mental health issues are on a spectrum and any one of us can find ourselves in a similar situation.

Becoming addicted

Alcohol and other substances can initially be used as stress relievers, but you run the risk of them turning into harmful addictions.

Professional psychotherapist [Pete Walker](#) also highlights process addictions like work, relationships, television and exercise. [1] Even though you can argue some of these things are good for mental wellbeing, like anything if you use them for control they can become destructive. You can literally be addicted to anything.

Unfortunately, highly addictive substances like alcohol or drugs always carry a strong risk that you won't be able to control your intake of them.

Constructive and destructive energies

Everyone has drives and energy. If my energy is not being put to constructive or creative uses, then it can become destructive. Engaging in risky behaviours is one use of our mental energy, and relying on addictive substances as a coping mechanism is a destructive use of my energy.

It's also a way of avoiding my problems.

If any activity or a habit becomes a method of control or avoiding real problems (really, aren't they the same thing) then it slips from being creative or constructive to *destructive*.

This of course is on a spectrum.

That's why we should make sure we channel our energy into constructive or creative activities (remember, **everyone is creative**) instead.

What are some constructive or creative uses of energy?

- **Put your efforts into genuinely helping others**
- **Work hard to build an exciting career or business**
- **Produce **creative works of art** like poetry, novels, paintings**
- **Learn a difficult new skill like a musical instrument, new language, or technical skill**
- **Develop a healthy relationship with a significant other**
- **Create and nurture a family or even a tribe**
- **Embark on a personal project like redecorating your house**
- **Plan a dream trip to a foreign country**

Developing your own self and identity is also a creative use of energy. You are really nurturing your own spirit.

Avoid becoming addicted

Of course, you can avoid the most addictive substances in the first place, but most people (like me) want to experiment. It's safe to assume that people will experiment with dangerous substances until the end of time.

Instead, you can practice **self-awareness and self-reflection**. Be honest with yourself and make enough time to truly feel and process your emotions. Then, you'll be unable to miss the destructive effects of some of your coping mechanisms.

These days, I have developed other – much more effective coping mechanisms – for dealing with stress. We all have problems and these will never go away. No one's life is perfect, despite what social media suggests.

Some things that really help me are:

- **Meditating** for half an hour every morning and evening – helps me get in touch with my body and how I'm feeling, stops me launching straight into worrying. The [Headspace meditation app](#) is a great way to get started.
- **Gentle exercise** a few times a week – makes me feel healthier also helps me come back into my body instead of thinking and worrying. Check out your local [Park Run](#) for a low-cost way in to exercising.
- **Healthy food** – makes my body more efficient and produces a natural feeling of wellbeing to protect against depression. Check out the [world's healthiest foods](#) for inspiration.
- **Gratitude** every morning – going through a list of ten things I'm grateful for breaks the negative thought cycle and makes me see things more positively. Learn more about gratitude from [The Secret author Rhonda Byrne](#).
- **Positive self-talk** – to counteract all the negative things I say to myself throughout the day, I start off the day reflecting on a list of my good qualities. List 10 of your good qualities and read through them every morning.

If all these activities sounds like a lot, rest assured they aren't. These rituals makes everything else in my life more efficient, and limits the time I waste tackling problems I've created myself. These practices actually give me more time for things I want to do.

What are some ways you enjoy looking after your mental health? How do you put your creative energies to good use?

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[1] *Complex PTSD: From Surviving To Thriving*, Pete Walker, 2013. [Buy on Amazon](#).

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