



## **Tools for Managing Stress—In order of effectiveness**

### **1. Suppression (not effective)**

Although tempting, suppressing emotions is not an effective strategy. It has been linked to depression, and most experts agree that suppressed emotions find ways to “leak out” when not acknowledged and addressed in some way. We also tend to think that we can hide our emotions from others, but research shows that sitting next to someone who is upset and suppressing will raise your blood pressure (and the suppressor’s as well).

### **2. Naming the emotion**

Research shows that simply naming an emotion reduces amygdala activity. This is certainly the simplest and easiest way to manage our stress, although some people may need to build this muscle by expanding their emotional vocabulary and practicing either talking about how they *really* feel or at a minimum writing it down. (NOTE: as you are expressing how you feel, be sure that you don’t “amp it up.” Keep the venting to a minimum and move on to another strategy.)

### **3. Controlling the Environment**

This is probably the most effective strategy – nothing is better than actually removing the source of stress – however, it ranks low on the list because it is only effective in those cases where it is possible to do so. We can’t control everyone and everything in our lives, and attempting to will only create a net increase in stress. Still, where possible, this works. Look to see what you can change that will make a difference in whether or not you encounter a stressor.

### **4. Values and Life Purpose**

Research shows that reflecting on meaningful values and life purpose serves as a buffer to stress. This strategy engages the pre-frontal cortex and gives us a broader context for our lives, a container for decision-making and a map for future direction. Ask yourself what values are important (or being stepped on) in a stressful situation, and what you might be able to do or say to honor these values more.

## 5. Reframing

The act of reframing (also known as taking a new perspective or reappraisal) also activates the pre-frontal cortex, calming down our stress responses. Reappraisal has been touted by some neuroscientists as one of the most important skills a human being can develop for their mental health and life success. Ask yourself what might be another way of looking at the situation (but be careful it doesn't become an additional strategy for suppression).

## 6. Mindfulness

Mindfulness seems to be the most effective solution to any neuroscience challenge, from stress, to creativity, to improving memory, and even being more emotionally intelligent. Even just an attuned conversation with a close friend or relative (that is, one where you feel listened to and deeply heard) tends to bring people present into the moment and makes them pay attention to what is going on. Being present *right now*, rather than putting our attention on regrets from the past or worries about the future is a key stress management strategy. Additionally, developing a practice of meditation tends to build the skill and habit of being more present, and thus is a longer-term strategy for day-to-day stress management.