

THE ABCS OF STRESS

This time of year is filled with holidays, joy, and a lot of stress. Still, you can learn to manage your stress and boost your awareness of how your thoughts impact your feelings and actions with stress “ABCs.” Without this awareness, your thoughts, moods, signals from your body, and behavior can come together to form the “perfect storm” of stress, which can impact you and those around you.

The good news is there are ways to slow down the storm and have more influence over what you do and how you react to things. In the following examples, notice how **awareness of ABCs** can help you figure out where you might grab a bit of control over how you feel and respond to stressful situations.

A: Activating Events

Not all stressors are created equal, but sometimes your brain is unable to tell the difference between a real threat versus something that’s safer. Remember your stress-response system activates similarly, regardless of the seriousness of the threat.

Try this: Activities such as the “Identifying Your Stressors worksheet” in the **Manage Stress Workbook** (p. 5) can help you better distinguish between actual versus imagined stressors, and they raise your awareness about the kinds of events that tend to get you worked up.

B: Beliefs

How you interpret stressful situations drives how you react to and handle those events, for better or for worse. For example, you got very angry and blew up at your son on the way to school because he forgot his lunch. When you reflect on what happened, you realize you were thinking, “He’s so irresponsible! Now I’m going to be late to my work meeting!” In that moment, your thoughts drove reactions that probably weren’t very helpful. Yelling at your son might have harmed your relationship, and both he (and you) started off the day upset.

Try this: You have the power to influence your thoughts. Try using the **ABCs of Optimal Performance worksheet** to help reframe your beliefs. How might you shift your thoughts about what happened from a “threat” to an “opportunity”? What kinds of feelings and reactions would you have experienced if you instead believed, “Here’s an opportunity for me to teach him about the importance of being responsible”? Perhaps that belief might have enabled you to engage your son in productive conversation and start your day with a different tone.

C: Consequences

In some stressful situations, your emotions and sensations you feel in your body can get in the way of you staying composed. If you've ever gone to a job interview or stood in front of a promotion board, you're likely aware of how the butterflies in your stomach and anxiety can lead you to think you aren't prepared, or worse, become a new activating event!

Try this: Take a tactical pause with box breathing. Calming your nervous system and activating your **relaxation response** can help your brain and body manage stress by regulating breathing and reducing heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Start by sitting in a comfortable position and slowly exhaling all of the air from your lungs, then:

1. **Inhale** slowly for a count of 1...2...3, filling your abdomen with air first, then your lungs, and then your chest.
2. **Hold** for a count of 1...2...3.
3. **Exhale** through your nose, releasing the air from your chest, lungs, and abdomen for 3...2...1.
4. **Hold** for a count of 1...2...3.
5. Repeat steps 1–4 at your own rhythm for 2 minutes.

Bottom line

You can probably think back to stressful situations in your life and realize that you could have handled them better. Stress is unavoidable, but the way you manage it can affect your relationships, performance, and well-being. Stress ABCs can help **make stress your ally**. They can help you handle tough situations with greater composure and leverage stress to your advantage too.

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