Out of control: how to accept the things you can't change and live a less stressed life



Maybe you're dealing with a frustrating financial picture caused by market fluctuations. Or a demanding and underhanded boss who seems bent on making your life difficult. Perhaps the cause of your angst is as simple as standstill traffic during your morning commute. Or maybe your situation is as complicated as surviving a devastating tornado. While these are very different stressful scenarios, they all share a common trait: a feeling that you don't have any control over the situation.

In fact, more than a third of people who took our last poll responded to the statement, *"When my plans don't work out exactly as I envisioned,"* with the answer, *"I feel stressed because I don't have control over the situation."*

The truth is, when you feel a situation is powerless or out of your control, stress levels rise because there is nothing you can do about it. And while you may not be able to control every situation, there are active steps you can take to manage the scene and reduce your angst in the here and now.

Take responsibility for what you *can* do. You can't change the infuriating habits of your two-year-old or your manipulative co-worker, but you can change *how you respond to them*. It's tough not to get sucked in to bad behaviour. When you see it coming on, take a moment to regroup, breathe in and respond as calmly and objectively as you can. What is the person actually trying to achieve? Your two-year old may just be looking for you to offer her some choices, while that co-worker could be intentionally trying to increase his own feelings of importance by making you feel insecure. Instead of getting angry or frustrated, work on understanding the root cause of the behaviour and then either ignore it or directly address it. In certain situations it might actually be less stressful to stand up for yourself. Be thoughtful, polite and direct (but truthful), focusing the conversation on how the action or event made you feel rather than laying blame or pointing fingers.

Remember: perception is reality. Often we convince ourselves that we have no control over a situation whatsoever, when the reality is far from that. You may be stressed about your relationship with your spouse without ever having opened up and explained your feelings. Or perhaps you see a goal of promotion as insurmountable, when continuing your education could provide you with the new opportunities you're looking for. While it's important not to have unrealistic expectations, it's also crucial to maintain a positive attitude and set goals. Do this by: visualizing your goals and success; pushing negative thoughts away and replacing them with positive words; being honest with yourself as to why something didn't work out and focusing on gratitude for all that you do have.

Learning to say "no." Often we feel that we simply can't say no. But are you being realistic about what you can deliver? This is especially true in the workplace, where many slip into "people pleaser" mode rather than being honest about how much they can balance on their already-full plate. Saying "no" upfront may seem stressful at the time, but it pales into comparison to the anxiety of a missed deadline, or worse, skipping a meeting or not delivering a result at all because you're paralyzed by stress.

Stop taking yourself so darn seriously. Remember how much fun it was to lose yourself in a game of hopscotch or giggle over a good joke when you were a kid? Adulthood brings on more responsibility and somehow these new roles leave many people feeling sober, serious and disconnected from their funny bone. In times of adversity, learning to laugh at yourself—or at least at the ridiculousness of the situation—will help you put a good spin on a bad situation and lower your stress levels. Recent research out of Oxford University suggests that a hearty laugh releases endorphins that can actually increase tolerance for pain. Other studies show that laughter can reduce stress hormones and boost blood flow. Take time out to watch funny movies or read that novel from your favourite comedian. Better still, rediscover the fine art of play: join a sports team, improv group or simply take your kids to the park and join in on the fun. Your body and mind will thank you.

Take the deathbed challenge. People who are wrapped up a stressful situation, often get so consumed by the conflict or problem, they can't see the situation for what it really is—insignificant in the grand scheme of life. Ask yourself this: if you were on your deathbed, would this stress or feeling of being "wronged" be something you'd remember? In most cases the answer is, probably not. In moment of high-stress or angst, remind yourself of this and then make a concerted effort to move past it.

Use cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) techniques. CBT is often used to treat anxiety disorders. The underlying theory is that our thought patterns, rather than outside events, affect our feelings and responses in certain situations. The basic technique includes:

1. Picking out the negative thoughts your internal dialogue is telling you. E.g., "*I'll look like a complete fool when I present this at the meeting next week."*
2. Making a conscious effort to challenge these negative statements by going through the pros and cons of them, or examining the validity of what your brain is telling you. E.g., *"I've got a degree in this field, and several years experience. Would my boss have given me the presentation if she didn't think I could do it?"*
3. Replacing negative thought patterns with affirming or positive statements. They could be specific to the situation or a general statement you use when you feel your angst rising. E.g., "*I am strong and confident and speak well."*

You can try these simple techniques on your own. However, if you feel you stress has taken hold of your life and its effects are interfering with day-to-day activities, it may be time to seek support from your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or another professional who can work through the sources of your stress and provide you with coping strategies specific to your situation.