Manage Your Stress, Lose More Weight

In this session, we’ll help you pinpoint your sources of stress (which are not always obvious) and suggest techniques to manage them.
The Connection Between Stress and the Scale

You’re changing lanes on a highway when you spot a truck bearing down on you in your rear view mirror—it came out of nowhere! You swerve back into your lane, narrowly missing an accident. Your heart’s pounding, your breathing quickens and you’re shaken up. This is your “fight or flight” response—a reaction to stress that’s caused by a rush of hormones and other brain chemicals that instantly prepare your body to combat or flee from an enemy.

Although there’s no need to flee or fight the “enemy” in this situation—the trucker who’s long gone—you still experience all the same responses inherited from our primitive ancestors, which helped them fend off animal attacks and other dangers. You may also have the same reaction while sitting in your office, feeling frazzled after a bad review. Or at your kitchen table, as your kids fight with each other. As you can see, most stressful situations don’t have anything to do with fighting or fleeing.

That’s a problem because high levels of stress hormones, which should prompt you to take action, end up going unused. When this happens frequently, the result can be downright damaging—chronic stress can lead to weight gain, high blood pressure, heart disease and other illnesses.

This is what happens to people who are consistently stressed due to money worries, toxic relationships or other issues. In fact, they may be so used to the stress response that they don’t even realize how stressed they are.

How Feeling Frazzled Affects Your Figure

Women with higher waist-to-hip ratios (bigger waist in proportion to hips) reacted more poorly to stressful situations and secreted more of the stress hormone cortisol than women with lower waist-to-hip ratios, according to a study at the University of California in San Francisco.
Here’s How Stress Packs on the Pounds

Chronic stress and weight gain are closely linked. A survey that tracked people in midlife for nine years found that as stress levels rose—especially among overweight or obese people—so did body weight.

It directs fat to your belly.
Cortisol, a hormone secreted in response to stress, directs the body to deposit fat deep in the belly, surrounding the liver and other organs. (The body interprets stress as possible food scarcity, and wants that fat in reserve as fuel.) This deep “visceral” fat promotes chronic inflammation in the body, which is one of the causes of heart disease, cancer and type 2 diabetes. Even among thin people, those with larger waistlines tend to have higher cortisol levels.

It triggers your appetite.
You’re overwhelmed at work and reach for the candy bar or at the end of a stressful day, you find yourself in front of the TV with a bag of cookies. If you were munching on celery or oranges, it wouldn’t be a problem. But when you’re out of sorts, it’s cookies, fries, and other fatty, sugary and/or salty foods that do the trick (temporarily, of course). Cortisol whets your appetite for these types of foods.

It throws a wrench in your schedule.
It could be smooth sailing for you and then—wham—your father has a stroke, or you start traveling for work, or another stressor hits. Suddenly, your schedule’s thrown off. For example, you’re caretaking instead of food shopping, or on an airplane instead of taking your morning walk. Without the time (and energy and focus) you once had, it can be tough to keep healthy habits up.

It disrupts sleep.
Stress is a well-known sleep saboteur, and lack of shut-eye disrupts appetite hormones, making you hungrier. Plus, when you’re tired, it’s hard to gather up the motivation to exercise—or do much of anything, really!
So... What’s Stressing You Out?

If you’re like the majority of Americans, then you feel stressed out on a regular basis. According to a recent American Psychological Association (APA) survey, 67 percent of people report emotional stress, such as irritability, anger or anxiety. And 72 percent say it affects them physically, with symptoms such as fatigue or upset stomach.

As you read this, you might be wondering, “How stressed am I?” Stress doesn’t always manifest itself in the same way, as you can see in the “Signs of Stress” box. Answer this quick question to check your stress level.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your stress level the past month?

____________________

If you answered “3” or less, you have little stress. Answer 8 or higher, your stress level is high. If you fall in the 4-to-7-range, you’re about average.

What’s Stressing You Out?

It could be any one of the following triggers, which are the top stressors, according to American Psychological Association surveys. Put a check mark next to your particular stressor(s)—this info will come in handy when making your Commitment Contract.

- **Money.** Not having enough to pay bills, mortgage, rent or health insurance, or in other ways feeling over your head financially is a classic source of stress.
- **Work.** A busy job with lots of responsibilities can be rewarding—even exhilarating—as long as you enjoy it. Sure, you may have some stress, but it’s not the damaging type. On the other hand, jobs that leave you feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, unappreciated and/or unrewarded can wear you down.
- **The economy.** The aftermath of the recession has left a lot of people out of work, insecure about their jobs, stuck in lower status/lower wage jobs and, sometimes, more socially isolated.
- **Family responsibilities.** Whether it’s your partner, kids, aging parents, disabled family members or all of the above, family obligations can be stressful!
- **Relationships.** While supportive, loving relationships help buffer you from stress, hostile and unstable ones do just the opposite.
- **Personal health concerns.** Managing diabetes, depression or another disease or chronic condition is tough enough, but if it impacts your ability to work, you have a double whammy.

### Warning! Signs of Stress

Stress shows up in both physical and psychological ways. Here are the top signs (ranked from most common to least), according to American Psychological Association surveys:

- Irritability or anger
- Fatigue
- Lack of interest, motivation or energy
- Feeling nervous or anxious
- Headache
- Feeling depressed or sad
- Feeling as if you could cry
- Upset stomach or indigestion
- Muscular tension
- Change in appetite
- Teeth grinding
- Change in sex drive
- Tightness in the chest
- Change in menstrual cycle
- Feeling faint or dizzy
- Erectile dysfunction
Getting a Grip On It

Stress isn’t always a bad thing. For example, you could be taking a class you enjoy, but still find the challenging material stressful. On balance, the experience is enriching and positive. A certain amount of stress can light a fire under us, spurring achievement.

Often, it’s not the stressor that’s the problem, but the way you react to it. For example, your coworker doesn’t let your unpleasant boss get to him, but you suffer terribly from his rants.

Sometimes, it’s the sheer number of stressful events. You shrugged off your car’s breakdown (and waiting over an hour for the tow truck and being late to work). But when you got that call to pick up your sick child—with what car?—and neither your spouse nor your mother could be found, now you’re officially stressed.

There’s no way around it: Stress is simply a part of life. The goal is not to eliminate it, but to better manage it. To help you, here are nine of the most effective stress-busting strategies.

Boost Your Confidence

Say you’re diagnosed with pre-diabetes. After the initial shock wears off, you:

a) Read up on the condition and begin taking the necessary diet and exercise steps to lower your blood sugar.

b) Feel so overwhelmed that you can’t take any steps towards treating the condition.

c) Figure you don’t have the skills to deal with the situation and don’t do anything about it.

Which option best describes how you would handle the situation? If it’s “a,” then you have the self-confidence to meet challenges head-on; that belief in your competency is associated with lower levels of stress. If your reaction is closer to “b” or “c,” then you could use some help in the coping department!

How to Boost Self-Confidence and Competency

- Set realistic and specific goals. Going back to the example above, you might tell yourself: “Today, I’ll search for 15 minutes to find books on managing pre-diabetes.” “Tomorrow, I’ll order a book.” Once you get the book, you might plan to read one chapter every three days. Then you might plan on implementing one or two diet changes per week, and so on.

- Make a list of past accomplishments. Did you graduate from high school or college or complete another type of training? Perhaps you organized a party, meeting, or other event. Maybe you’re a good parent or friend. List some of your past accomplishments and review them whenever you feel you can’t deal with an issue.

- Seek support. Maybe you have some—but not all—of the skills it takes to tackle a problem. That’s OK! Ask your coach, a fellow Real Appeal participant, co-worker, or another trusted person for help, read up on a subject or find a mentor to help fill in any gaps.
Sweat It Out

As you become more physically fit, you become more mentally fit too, especially when it comes to stress. Exercise offers a number of stress-busting perks, from protection against depression to improved sleep.

How to Get More Active

Hopefully, you’ve increased your activity with the Real Moves workouts, the Walk It Off! Walking program, or DIY exercise program. Or, maybe you’ve joined a kickball, softball or other team.

Keep in mind, both aerobic exercise and strength training ease stress. In fact, now that you’re moving your body more, take note: Do you feel less stressed? Or better able to cope with it?

People who are more physically active

• Are less likely to be anxious.
• Are less likely to be depressed.
• Are more resilient to stressful situations and other stressors.
• Have lower levels of stress hormones, inflammatory compounds and DNA-damaging compounds called free radicals, all of which increase stress and depression.
• Have a more muted response to stress because there’s a smaller increase in heart rate and blood pressure, and levels return to normal more quickly.
• Tend to produce endorphins while working out; these feel-good chemicals remain elevated for hours after exercising.
• Are less likely to be obese, which can be a trigger for stress and depression.
• Tend to get better quality sleep, which can lower stress levels.

Make YOU a #1 Priority

Chowing down on mashed potatoes, pizza, ice cream and other comfort foods to assuage anxiety only leads to bloating, sluggishness, guilt, and eventually weight gain, which will leave you more stressed.

If you’re also staying up late web-surfing or watching TV to escape your troubles, you may be cutting into your sleep time; lack of sleep disrupts your nervous system in a variety of ways (including raising cortisol and adrenaline, another stress hormone). The result: Mood plummets and you feel more overwhelmed.

How to Prioritize Yourself

Eat healthfully (the Real Appeal nutrition guidelines and meal plans should be helping with that). Turn off the TV, shut down the computer, or do whatever it takes to get eight hours of sleep a night. (Find more sleep tips in Session 11, Volume Two.)

How to Expand Your Social Circle

• If you’ve let friendships lapse, try to reconnect with your more supportive friends. (Skip those who stress you out.)
• Meet new people by joining a softball team, knitting circle, charity or other group activity.
• Recruit someone from your Real Appeal online support group to be your virtual “support buddy.” Who better to lean on than someone sharing a similar experience?
• Be a supportive friend yourself, taking time to listen, plan fun get-togethers and be giving in other ways. (But not too giving, as explained under Stress Buster #7, page 140)
Chill Out!

If you’ve never meditated or taken a yoga or tai chi class, you may be thinking, “that New Age-y stuff isn’t for me!” But this New Age-y stuff (which dates back more than 2,500 years) can really help ease stress!

How to Relax

- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** This practice involves tensing one specific muscle group at a time, then relaxing it. You can try it at home—you can find audio guides online, or written instructions such as the one by the American Medical Student Association ([http://www.amsa.org/healingthehealer/musclerelaxation.cfm](http://www.amsa.org/healingthehealer/musclerelaxation.cfm)).

- **Meditation.** While the goal and technique vary depending on the type of meditation, most have the following in common:
  - You learn to focus your attention.
  - You put judgment aside.
  - You let distractions come and go without getting upset—you gently return to focusing.
  - You meditate in a comfortable position whether it’s sitting, lying down, standing or walking.
  - It calms you down.

These two types have good scientific support

- **Mindfulness meditation** involves focusing on the present moment and observing what unfolds with acceptance and openness. Just a 5-minute meditation can reap significant well-being rewards. Try downloading a meditation app for your smartphone or computer to get started.

- **Transcendental meditation,** which, ideally, is practiced for 20 minutes per session, twice daily, takes you to the quieter, calmer regions of your mind.

- **Yoga.** This ancient Indian practice has a number of different “schools” or styles. Hatha yoga, which is the most popular type in the U.S., combines moving postures, stretches and breathing exercises, which all relax muscles. Try the yoga-based Real Flex 2 workout for the perfect way to put this “practice” into practice. Or, find yoga classes in your area by searching the web or through word of mouth.

Clear the Clutter

You’re late for an appointment because you can’t find the keys and once you finally do, you realize your gas tank is empty and have to stop at a gas station. Getting organized can go a long way toward alleviating stress.

How to Get Organized

- **Clear distracting thoughts from your mind,** perhaps by tucking them into the “for later” part of your brain.

- **Organize and clean your work space.** Throw, file, clean and create a system for incoming paper or other items.

- **Organize and clean your home.** This might take weeks, but dedicate time for it every day. You might go room by room, or try just 10 minutes at a time. Part with stuff you don’t use or need, and set up a system for dealing with incoming groceries, mail, and other items.

- **Stop buying stuff you don’t need.** You’ll save money, space, and reduce your carbon footprint.

- **Get help if needed.** Professional organizers don’t come cheap, but they can work wonders. One place to find an organizer is www.napo.net (The National Association of Professional Organizers).

- **Boost your confidence**
- **Sweat it out**
- **Make you a #1 priority**
- **Help from friends**
- **Chill out!**
- **Clear the clutter**
While it’s wonderful to be a giving person, too much of a good thing can wear you down. Spread yourself too thin at work, with friends and family, with other responsibilities, and you could wind up overworked, overwhelmed, and stressed out. Plus, all that saying “yes” might mean you’ve left no time for exercising, food shopping and preparing meals. Steve Jobs said it well: “It’s only by saying ‘No’ that you can concentrate on the things that are really important.”

**How to Say No**

1. Check your calendar for the next week.
2. Circle all events you can get out of without causing harm to yourself or anyone else.
3. Drop one or more of them.
4. Next, think beyond the next seven days. Are there long-term responsibilities or activities you can drop? How about TV shows—can you give some up to free up time? Any other ways to save time?

Lightening up your schedule might mean saying “no” to someone. Hard to do? Just be honest. Let the person know that you’ve become overscheduled and that you’re trying to lower your stress levels and become healthier.

**Give Yourself Permission to Say No**

**Make Time for the Things You Love**

Do you make time to do things you truly enjoy? It might be listening to music, playing an instrument, reading a novel, or catching up with a friend. Go back to your schedule and try to find time to do something pleasurable daily, even if it’s just for 15 minutes. And then schedule in longer events, like a movie, concert, or going out dancing at least once a week.

**Seek Outside Help**

Sometimes, your issues are more than you can handle alone, or even talk out with your Real Appeal coach or friends. You might need professional counseling from a licensed psychologist, social worker or psychiatrist. To find one, ask friends or your primary healthcare provider, or try [www.findapsychologist.org](http://www.findapsychologist.org) or [locator.apa.org](http://locator.apa.org)

**“Let’s be real”**

**Beat Stress with Booze?**

While it may be tempting to relieve your stress with alcohol, doing so can backfire: After the buzz wears off, mood can plummet leaving you even more depressed or anxious. You should be especially careful if you have an anxiety disorder, as National Institutes of Health surveys show that you’re about twice as likely as the general population to develop an alcohol dependency. And, let’s face it: Most of us aren’t firing on all cylinders when under the influence or hung over. So, the myth that alcohol relieves stress? Busted!
Commitment Contract

I’ll lower my stress levels to look better and feel better.

This week, I’ll:

- **Make a list of my top stressors** using the chart on the facing page (refer back to page 133 for examples of common stressors). I will examine all aspects, such as money issues, relationships, and my emotional state. I’ll continue to add new stressors to the list as I uncover them. **Note:** Be specific; for example instead of “job” you might say “dealing with angry customers.”

- **Brainstorm healthy ways to cope**, and ask my coach to review my strategies. I’ll write down those “stressbusters” on the chart in the facing page. **Note:** Again, be specific, as in “I’ll ask my colleague to take on half the angry customers.”

- **Avoid unhealthy outlets** to cope with stress, such as (examples: junk food, alcohol, drugs, excessive TV watching)

- Meanwhile, I’ll **continue my other healthy habits** (weighing in, tracking, staying within my calorie range, etc.) to the best of my ability.

- It’s time for **my monthly check in**! I will take my Week 8 photo, track my weight, BMI, and assess my progress using the Real Snapshot overview on RealAppeal.com.

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My signature: ______________________________
Goals & Motivation

What are your hopes and dreams for yourself and your body? Do you want to lose 30 pounds by the end of 16 weeks? Do you want to be able to shop in the “regular” size section at the store? Or, maybe you want to get and stay healthy so you can be more active with your family—and your future grandkids? Whatever your motivation is, it’s important to get crystal-clear on what is going to help keep you going throughout this transformation journey. The more personal, specific and well-planned you are about your goals, the better you will be at staying focused and motivated towards the end result.

Look at the Real Appeal program as a “Choose Your Own Adventure” experience. Some weeks might seem like a breeze, and you’ll lose two or more pounds easily. Sometimes you might try something that doesn’t work, and your weight loss might stall. Or, you might go through a phase when life seems too hectic and your workouts fall by the wayside. It’s OK if things don’t go perfectly 100% of the time. In fact, that’s life—it’s bound to happen! But if you write down your goals and motivators here, you’ll have your “rock”—the touchstone of your individual program—and you can come back time and time again to remind yourself why you are doing this. And whenever you could use some help setting or sticking with your goals, don’t forget—you always have your trusty coach to lend a hand!

You are so worth it. So, dream big! As long as you set attainable, relevant, and well-defined goals, you will be successful!

Set Your Goals

What are the goals you would like to reach with the Real Appeal program?

**Short-term:**
- I want to lose 8 lbs in the first 30 days of the program.
- I want to exercise 5 days a week.
- I want to fit into my jeans comfortably within the first 2 months of the program.

**Long-term:**
- I want to lose 50 lbs by the end of the year.
- I want to be able to play in the backyard with the kids for an hour without getting winded.
- I want to have a “healthy” yearly physical check-up at the doctor.

Now, fill in your own short-term and long-term goals in the space below. Be specific. And, don’t forget to refer back to them at any point during the program.

**SHORT-TERM GOALS**


**LONG-TERM GOALS**


BMI Chart

Body Mass Index (BMI) Chart for Adults

The Body Mass Index (BMI) comes from a simple formula, based on your height and weight, that provides a good indication of body fat and your weight status. Generally speaking, the higher the BMI, the more body fat.

In addition to this chart, you can find your BMI by using the BMI calculator on RealAppeal.com. (It’s particularly handy if you fall in between the heights on this chart (for instance, if you’re 5’3 ½”, or if you’re taller than 6-foot-4-inches.)

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