

Outwitting Stress

A Practical Guide To Conquering Stress Before You Crack

By Nancy H. Rosenberg

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Summary

It's a fact of modern-day life: No one lives without stress. In a whirlwind world of increasing work expectations, family obligations, financial strains and chronic shortages of time, stressful situations seem to lurk at every turn. Dual-income families juggle time, children and money in a never-ending high-wire act, and responsibilities for both young children and aging parents can put a tremendous strain on even the most calm and stable among us.

Consider this: the divorce rate is currently at a staggering 49 percent. While there is no shortage of hope, love or ability to commit, what is lacking is an effective way for couples and individuals to challenge and beat the stresses that are wearing them down, wearing them out, ruining their lives and their relationships with pressures and demands virtually unheard of in generations past.

Heart disease, which has been closely linked to stress, is the leading cause of death in the United States. Anxiety and depression are at an all-time high, as are physician requests for psychotropic drugs that can help blunt the effects of stress.

Not even children are immune to the effects of stress. Social pressures can be relentless, even for the very young. Health and behavioral problems can result, setting children up for a lifetime of dysfunction if they are not given the tools to handle their problems effectively.

Here, then, is the ultimate book on outwitting stress. Ideas have been culled from experts in the field, from high-level CEOs, attorneys and service-industry specialists,

from parents and grandparents, athletes and marriage therapists, coaches, bosses, clergy and cops. You'll hear advice from those who have "been there, done that," as well as suggestions from those who are still in the thick of battle, who have found practical solutions to stress and want to pass along their hard-earned wisdom.

While a world without stress is scarcely imaginable, what we can envision--and achieve--is a world where we minimize the stress we encounter, and where we deal with stress in an effective way. Practical, imaginative and occasionally unorthodox solutions to the problems of stress are offered in this book. Certain ideas will appeal to certain readers. You may love an idea or hate it, but each solution that is offered gives you another tool in your arsenal against the ravaging effects of stress. A specific idea may work for you now, or it may not be applicable to your circumstances now but will be in the future. Regardless, what this book will do is give you hundreds of practical, effective ways to deal with stress. Implement one idea or implement them all; either way, your stress level is sure to decrease. And that is what this book is all about.

Facts About Stress

- Americans spend \$11.3 billion per year to cope with stress.
- Over 90% of disease is caused or complicated by stress.
- Stress has been linked to all leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, accidents and suicide.
- Long-term stress is strongly associated with depression, heart disease, gastrointestinal disorders and weakened immune systems.
- Over 43% of adults suffer adverse health affects due to stress.
- Stress can lead to diminished sexual desire, an inability to achieve orgasm in women, and impotence in men.
- Maternal stress during pregnancy has been linked to a 50% higher risk for miscarriage.
- Percentage of adults being treated for depression: 54%
- Job stress is estimated to cost U.S. industry \$300 *billion* annually.
- Over 19 million Americans ages 18-54 have anxiety disorders.
- 1,135,000 divorces occur in the United States annually.
- Number of psychotropic drug mentions in office practice per year: 100 million.
- Up to 60% of employee absences are due to psychological problems such as stress and depression.
- The number of Americans treated for depression rose from 1.7 million in 1987 to 6.3 million in 1997, and the proportion of those receiving antidepressants doubled.
- *Estimated percentage of American adults attempting to control stress: 95%*

Facts about the market for stress-related books:

- A stress-reduction workbook with practical applications by a little-known author (available on Amazon.com) dramatically outsells more generic, "don't-worry-be-happy" books on stress by well-known authors Dale Carnegie and Richard Carlson.

- Books on stress reduction sell very well. One is #4 (Amazon ranking) in Collegeville, PA, while others are #8 in Park Ridge, IL, #10 in Roseville, CA, and #14 in Encinitas, CA.
- People who are under stress, understandably, are motivated to alleviate this uncomfortable condition, and not only that, but they usually have the drive and energy to do so (as opposed to those who suffer exclusively from depression, for example).

Outwitting Stress will answer questions such as:

- What are the signs that I'm under too much stress?
- What can I do to reduce stress in my daily life?
- Is stress preventable?
- How can I cope with the stress of illness?
- How can I alleviate stress caused by financial strain?
- How can I outwit stress associated with children and/or teenagers?
- Can I help my kids learn to outwit stress as well?
- Is there a solution to stress caused by in-laws?
- Can I do anything about the stress associated with traffic and commuting?
- What can I do to alleviate stress during the holidays?
- What are the most effective "cures" for stress? Least effective?
- What are the most common causes of stress, and how can they be avoided?
- Are prescription medications effective in treating the effects of stress?
- What therapies does alternative medicine offer in the treatment of the effects of stress, and are they considered effective?
- How can I reduce stress at work?
- What skills do I need to work on in order to better cope with stress?

Outwitting Stress will be the perfect solution for those who feel beaten down, out of control and fearful that stress is robbing them of joy and contentment in life. *Outwitting Stress* will sell well in stores; it will be the *only* book on the market (in a genre that sells very well) that approaches the problem of stress from a candid, humorous and practical way, that will offer easy-to-implement solutions that will both encourage and empower readers.

Each chapter of *Outwitting Stress* will start with a humorous or thought-provoking quote, and the book will be peppered with interesting anecdotes, examples and boxes filled with useful information. I will also interview high-profile executives, physicians, athletes and celebrities, to present information on stress reduction in a well-rounded yet entertaining way.

About the Author

Nancy Rosenberg is a writer and associate editor of *Health & Fitness Sports Magazine*. For eight years she worked in a high-stress environment as an editor for the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia, and she has written over 200 articles and essays that have been published both online and in magazines, including *Cigar Aficionado*, U.S. Airways' *Attache Magazine*, *Texas Highways*, CBSHealthWatch.com and Parenthood.com. She now lives virtually stress-free with her husband and two daughters in Woodinville, Washington, where she routinely practices the advice she touts in her book.

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How To Outwit Your Body's Physiological Response to Stress

When Stress Can Be Good for You

Self Test: How Much Stress Are You Under?

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Developing a healthy mental response to stress

Eliminating unnecessary stress in your life

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Chapter 1. Identifying the Problem

Being "under stress" is not like having a broken leg.

There is no one certain, defining moment when one can say, "Ah, here it is. Now I'm feeling stress." Rather, stress is more likely to be an accumulation of small, manageable, but nonetheless anxiety-provoking situations that gradually balloon.

Your boss asks you to take on an additional assignment for which you feel inadequately prepared. You and your spouse are bickering more than usual. The grass needs to be mowed, your child has the flu, then the dog chews up your favorite pair of shoes. All of a sudden you feel like Michael Douglas in *Falling Down*, where one good bout of white-knuckle traffic on the way home from a bad day at the office suddenly has the potential to turn you into a raving lunatic.

Much like the problem of stress, the solution to stress likewise is not a one-time shot, a cure-all that will solve the problem with one easy motion. Rather, just as stress tends to compound and accumulate, the solutions to stress are also found in small, measured actions and responses that collectively reduce the amount of stress you feel.

Before you can undertake reducing stress in your life, it helps to understand what exactly this uncomfortable sensation we call *stress* actually is, why we have it, what it's good for, and when it can be unhealthy or even dangerous.

How Chronic Stress Affects Your Body

How To Outwit Your Body's Physiological Response to Stress

When Stress Can Be Good for You

Self Test: How Much Stress Are You Under?

Chapter 2. Practical Ways To Outwit Stress

As much as we'd all love a knight in white to gallantly assume our burdens and carry us off to a castle in the hills, the truth is that the responsibility for reducing the

amount of stress in your life falls directly on only one set of shoulders: yours. Whether or not you take the time you need for yourself, get that much-needed massage or take that much-needed vacation depends on no one but *you*. Understanding that the amount of stress in your life will not diminish one whit unless you change certain behaviors is key; in fact, if you do nothing, the amount of stress you feel is likely to escalate. It usually does.

Armed with this knowledge, then, what practical steps can you take to protect yourself, your sanity, your peace of mind, your mental and physical well-being? Here's a list, but remember, it's not enough just to read these ideas. You have to actually *do* them if you really want relief.

Effective Ways To Outwit Stress

- Physical exertion. How and why physical exertion relieves stress.
- Relaxation techniques. Different techniques, how they can be learned, and where they can be utilized.
- Developing a healthy mental response to stress. How to prepare yourself for stressful situations ahead of time.
- Eliminating unnecessary stress in your life. Practical ways to reduce your everyday level of stress, including the importance of ending relationships that do nothing but cause you sorrow and pain.

Chapter 3. Stress in the Workplace

So your boss is an overpaid bully? You work with a pack of nattering ninnies? Workplace stress can have a ripple effect that effects every area of your life... if you let it.

The Alpha, Beta or Gamma Response

Personality types can roughly be divided into three categories: Alphas (ruthless leaders), Betas (sniveling followers) and Gammas (those who are task-oriented and who tend to not even notice the cliquish shenanigans of the surrounding Alphas and Betas).

How to develop a Gamma response.

How to outwit an overly demanding boss. (Have a frank discussion, take your grievance to a higher authority, cultivate a friendship with a key player in the office, or hone your skills outside the workplace and find a new job.)

The Art of Balance

Learn to balance a high-stress environment at work with periods of rest and relaxation at home. If you are going through a stressful period at work, this may not be the best time to remodel the house, for example.

Create a Haven at Work

Surrounding yourself with small, gentle reminders of the world outside your cubicle can do wonders for bringing a sense of calm and perspective into a high-stress work environment. Pictures, plants, candles and low music can make your workspace feel like an extension of yourself.

An editor friend of mine used to come into her office every morning, turn off the harsh, overhead florescent lights, light a scented candle, turn on some small lamps, plug in a small waterfall she set on the corner of her desk, and pop a classical music CD into a player she kept under her desk. Voila! Even though she had a very stressful job filled with looming deadlines and pages and pages of copy to read, write and edit, she did it all on her own terms, in her own space, and most of the time she was a study in calmness and serenity.

Chapter 4. Stress, Sex and Dating

The Dating Game

No doubt about it: stress is an integral part of dating. Uncertainty, sexual tension and an atmosphere laden with *what ifs* tend to bring out the anxiety in us all.

From "*Does she like me?*" to "*Do I look fat in this dress?*"... the realities of seeing and being seen as potential mate material can be a little unsettling.

But wait. It doesn't have to be this way.

The key to releasing tension and anxiety in a dating situation is to take a step back and look at the relationship with objectivity.

"Does she like me?" Well, chances are good that she does or she wouldn't be giving you the time of day. If you approach the relationship with an aura of confidence you will deflate the stress of anxiety.

"Does this dress make me look fat?" Maybe it does. If you aren't sure, find a dress that makes you feel more comfortable. Find something black and stretchy and wear a thong underneath. (You won't have panty lines *and* you'll feel sexy.) If you're worried about your appearance all night it certainly won't do much to enhance the spark-flying.

Whatever it is you feel anxious or inadequate about, taking steps to remedy it will enhance both your confidence and--likely--your desirability. For example, if you are overweight, join Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig. If you feel insecure about your level of education, then sign up for continuing-education courses at a local college. If you are worried about a lack of social graces, sign up for an etiquette course.

The added benefit of taking steps to address your perceived deficiencies is that you will meet others with similar goals. You may meet someone with date potential, or you may make a new friend.

Expectations, Body Image and Cellulite

Chapter 5. Stressbusters for Marriage

Outwitting common marriage woes. Strategies for improving communication. Learning to focus on the strengths of your spouse and accepting his or her limitations. (Ben Franklin's advice: The secret to a happy marriage is keeping both eyes open before the wedding and one eye closed afterwards.)

Your White Bucket of Paint

In her book, *The Image of Loveliness*, author Joanne Wallace describes every individual as possessing an imaginary bucket of white paint. You are given this bucket of white paint at birth, and it's yours to carry through life.

Every time someone makes a negative comment or says or does something to hurt your feelings, they are putting a drop of black paint in your bucket. As a result, some of us are gray by 20!

It takes four drops of white paint, or four positive comments or strokes, to negate every one drop of black paint.

Here, then, is the key: *As much as possible, at every opportunity, stop allowing people, including your spouse, to put black paint into your white bucket!*

Help! I married the wrong guy... The wisdom of Ann Landers

What to do if you truly think you made a marital mistake. Options include couples therapy, a trial separation or divorce. Staying in a dead-end relationship, doing nothing, will *not* reduce the amount of stress you feel.

Columnist Ann Landers offers a rule of thumb in helping to determine if you've made a mistake in marriage: How do you answer this question: "Am I better off with or without my spouse?" If the answer is clear that you are better off with him (or her), then you need to make some adjustments, possibly including therapy for one or both of you, and change some behavior patterns and methods of communication. However, if the answer is a resounding, "I clearly am better off without him (or her)," then--if you want to reduce your stress and improve your life--you need to consider a divorce.

In-laws

Breaking the cycle of stress with in-laws is easy... *if* you are willing to change some preconceived notions and behavior patterns that have likely contributed to the stress you now feel in their presence. Of course, if the problem with your in-laws includes verbal, physical or substance abuse, then the solution is simple: eliminate all contact with them until they can prove to you that abuse will no longer be a facet of your relationship.

If the problem with your in-laws is less severe and instead involves chronic misunderstandings and a series of behavior patterns that drive you clear around the bend, the solutions are less dramatic.

One friend describes her in-laws as a very sweet bunch of couch potatoes who sit around, watch TV, discuss bodily functions in minute detail and drink straight from the

milk carton. While none of these activities is illegal, they do serve to frustrate my friend to the point where she can scarcely function in their presence.

What does she do? She plans outings that she thinks will appeal to them when they come to visit. She stocks the refrigerator (including half-pint, single-serving milk cartons). And, if her attempts to drag them off the couch are unsuccessful and she starts to feel her blood pressure rise, my friend shifts her thinking and takes advantage of the free babysitting. She leaves the kids with the inert visiting family members and escapes for a manicure or a massage.

Additional In-law Scenarios

Chapter 6. Stress and Parenting

Two-year-olds and teenagers: coping with stress when there is little you can do to change the players in your situation.

Everyone knows it: toddlers and teenagers can be difficult. They can set your nerves on edge, make you rend your garments and gnash your teeth, then in the next moment they morph into compliant darlings with nary a hint of tarnish on their sparkling little halos. But you know better. Here, then, are strategies to outwit the stress of parenting:

Babies, Colic and Bumps in the Night

Small children can be difficult. They can be demanding, yet their ability to communicate often can't keep up with the sentiments they apparently want and need to express. How to decipher what it is your small child needs (or wants). Outwitting common problems of infancy, including sleep issues and common food woes. How to reassure a small child who's afraid of the dark, without ending up with a third party in your bed. Outwitting a whiny child.

Preteens and 'Tweens and Teens, Oh My!

What the experts say on how to deal with common difficulties of kids this age. How to prevent difficulties before they arise. Letting kids learn the hard way; the

importance of setting reasonable parameters and expectations. Tying desired behavior to desired rewards. What to do if you don't approve of your child's friends. Strategies to help teach consequences to a child who is flirting with real trouble.

This section will include examples of stress-inducing situations and recommended courses of action.

Chapter 7. Stress and Finances

Financial stress is the number-one cause of marriage strain, and plenty of those who aren't married face major financial challenges as well. We've all heard stories of Wall Street financiers who chose to leap to their deaths in 1928 rather than face the consequences of financial ruin. While stressful finances can definitely take their toll, there are lots of practical steps you can take to alleviate financial stress, including:

- Sound financial planning;
- Eliminating credit card debt;
- Reducing spending;
- Including children and teenagers in financial decisions;
- Recognizing and eliminating senseless spending;
- Cost-cutting strategies for the home.

Chapter 8. Outwitting Traffic and Other Nasty Forms of Potential Auto Stress

Don't just suffer through traffic; instead, use these creative ideas to make the time productive and even satisfying. Check out books on tape or foreign-language tapes at your local library. While others fume and sneer at the miles of tail lights ahead, you'll be learning French.

Get rid of high-maintenance cars that only cause you grief. In many cases a newer, more reliable car, even though the payments are regular, will end up costing you less due to greatly diminished maintenance and repair costs--and the peace of mind is worth a lot, as well.

Considering alternative modes of transportation can be a great way to reduce or eliminate the aggravation associated with traffic and commuting. One couple I know who work and commute together has turned down job advances and other opportunities over

the years just because the enjoyment they derive from driving to and from work together adds so much to their lives; they simply are unwilling to give it up. Any job that strips them of that benefit is simply not considered.

Develop an alternative way of getting to and from work whether you need it immediately or not. Find coworkers who live nearby; even if you don't want to set up a regular carpool, they will be a great resource in the future should your car need to spend time in the repair shop.

Consider carpooling one or two days a week. You'll save gas, wear and tear on your car, behind-the-wheel aggravation, and you just might make a new friend or two.

"The Smartest Man in Seattle"

An anonymous man in Seattle who is widely viewed as the smartest man in the city traded in his fancy foreign car for a 10-speed bike. Now he pedals to work, where he arrives happy, relaxed, and, amazingly, he has no problem with his weight.

A Special Type of Aggravation: the Family Vacation

You're so excited! You're leaving town for the weekend, just a short little getaway with the dog and the kids, nothing too fancy, but it will be so nice to just get away from it all for a little while. The campground is just three hours away. You'll arrive and have a picnic! You'll be there in no time!

You round the bend in the highway and are greeted by miles... and miles... and miles of red taillights ahead. This could take hours! The kids moan, begin to bicker, then the dog begins to bark. You feel your blood pressure begin to rise, and it dawns on you that you'll arrive at the campsite well after dark, thanks to this unanticipated descent into highway hell.

Your spouse begins to mutter through clenched teeth. The dog throws up. And what is this on the windshield? It's beginning to rain.

The two-fold key to outwitting stress in these scenarios is simple in theory but more difficult in practice: you have to be willing to *modify your expectations*, and you have to be willing to *modify your plans*.

For example, in the above scenario, if you tenaciously hold to the original plan, muscle through the traffic, and arrive at the campsite after dark, you are likely to arrive with everyone hungry and in a foul mood.

However, if you are willing to modify the original plan, then you can take into account the traffic and realize that there is nothing but precious vacation time to be wasted by sitting there in gridlock. You can exit, find a new restaurant, and enjoy a nice, hot dinner while you wait for the traffic to clear. Let the kids order something special, like a chocolate shake or a Shirley Temple. You have to be willing to forego the planned (and even much anticipated) picnic, but the change in plans (and expectations) has the potential to yield an even-greater reward. The family goes somewhere new together, checks out a new restaurant, and everyone stays in a good mood and the "vacation" is still enjoyable. You've outwitted the stress.

Traveling with Tots

If you can't beat 'em, *outwit 'em*. Strategies to keep kids entertained on long car rides and in flight. Travel during nap time, the value of food as an entertainment device, the importance of being well-stocked with new (or favorite) books and toys. Consider driving or flying at night, or even taking the train.

Chapter 9. Outwitting Unexpected Delays

You're on your way home from a long day at the office and just need to pop into the store to pick up a few provisions for dinner. You grab a jar of pasta sauce, a pound of spaghetti, a loaf of French bread, but wait! What's this? The butcher counter is out of ground beef.

You are presented with a choice. You can stomp your feet in frustration, restock your items and grab a box of cereal in a huff, or you can quietly take stock of the situation and use your noggin. Can you make meatballs with an alternative ingredient, instead? What about pork, prepackaged meatloaf, or frozen meatballs?

You head to the checkout line--you can use the Express Lane since you only have a few items--and are met by the ultimate in arrogance, the consummate frustration, the egghead who thinks he'll slip into the Express Lane with 34 items and no one will notice.

Once again, you have a choice. You can glare, fume, cough and stomp. You can say something to the offender, though this tactic can be risky since you never know the circumstances behind the offense. Maybe his wife is sick and he's hurrying to take her medicine. Or maybe he's a borderline schizophrenic and one retort from you is all it will take for him to have a complete psychotic episode right there by the Juicy Fruit and Junior Mints.

Or, you can choose to outwit the stress. Remind yourself that letting this arrogant, offensive oaf go unimpeded will probably cost you no more than five minutes. You can use the time to check out the current magazines. You can find out why the calf born with three eyes is an incredible boon to science, why Oprah's new diet will work for you, what your horoscope says, and how to declutter your house in three easy steps. And you can do it all with a serene expression, considering your refusal to be irritated as a gift to the universe, as my New Agey friend puts it.

Restaurant Stress

Here it is, my pet peeve, but I've learned to outwit it, so I know you can, too.

You've put the date on your calendar, hired a sitter, dressed to the nines, and you've finally escaped the clutches of your normal routine for a night on the town. You'll start with a nice meal--nothing too fancy, but it's your special night out, you're not having to cook, and you're really psyched about being pampered, for a change.

And then you see her. The Waitress From Hell.

She's chewing gum. She's slow. She introduces herself as Tammy then tells you, giggling, that she forgot the special of the day. She doesn't know wine from shinola and can't begin to pronounce bouillabaisse. And you are at her mercy. (I don't want to sound sexist here; I've endured this scenario with both waiters and waitresses alike.)

Here is what you do:

First, tell her you think you met the manager a few nights ago and would love to speak to them again (be sure to use the word "them" if you don't know if it's a man or a woman). Have her send him over. Then explain that you really would prefer another waitress, someone who is a bit more knowledgeable about the wine and the food.

That's it. Now it's his problem, and the worst that can happen is that, in the future, the waitstaff will be a little bit better prepared.

Another solution is to ask to be given another seat. The idea here is to escape the offending server, but you don't want to be rude. Spot another area in the restaurant, far from where you are currently seated, and ask to be relocated. You may have to wait a bit longer until another table is ready, but the wait will be well worth the aggravation you'll be spared.

Finally, if you think there's hope, send the waitress back into the kitchen to refresh her memory. Ask for the specials, and ask her to find out what the chef recommends.

Remember that you are the one paying here. If you bite your tongue and say nothing, then your frustration level is likely to rise and the evening will have unnecessarily gotten off to a bad start.

An added benefit of starting off the meal with standards set high is that the waiter or waitress will be more likely to view you as a high-maintenance patron. They know you have high expectations, and they know that their tip (or lack of it) is riding on your level of satisfaction. Let some other poor schmuck grin and bear it. This is one case when speaking up will likely pay dividends.

Airport Stress

Unfortunately, airport searches and delays have become routine in our post 9/11 world. Know that any trip, business or pleasure, that will cause you to enter an airport will also probably cause you stress. If you let it.

Here are some ways to avoid airport stress: Arrive early, travel light, mark your bag or bags well, take along plenty of reading material or a laptop computer. If you travel often, consider joining one of the frequent flyer programs offered by most major airlines that allow you to use the lounges, which are virtual ports in the storm should you be forced into a long flight delay or cancellation.

Be aware that flights into New York or Washington, D.C., often originate out of specially designated, high-security areas of most airports, so allow extra time if you are flying to or through either of these destinations.

Chapter 10. Outwitting Holiday Stress

Identifying the major causes of stress during the holidays.

Holiday stress begins innocently enough. Cheerful music plays in the stores, where tinsel and ever-more-grandiose holiday displays are installed while you are passed out in an annual Thanksgiving food coma. The season is bright, filled with the promise of family reunions, wonderful meals, brightly wrapped gifts and greeting cards sent and received.

Then the jungle drums begin to beat. You overhear a woman yapping on a cell phone, bragging that her holiday shopping has been done for *weeks*. Yikes! You've only just begun, and you still have 49 presents to buy, wrap and deliver. There are cookies to bake, cards to write, a house (and yard) to decorate, then your kids announce that they'll be needing gifts for their teachers. That's another 15 gifts, and you are already perilously close to maxing out your credit cards.

Ahh, the holidays.

This year, before the madness begins, take stock of your typical holiday approach. What works? What doesn't work? What was your favorite aspect of last year's festivities? Least favorite?

Do you tend to spend too much? Eat too much? Procrastinate and then end up settling on inappropriate gifts?

Having a plan and approaching the holidays with a strategy can make all the difference between whether you enjoy or suffer through the season.

Outwitting the Martha Stewart Syndrome

Understanding that a perfect place setting, perfect menu or perfectly trimmed tree really has very little to do with whether or not your family enjoys the holidays. If the house is perfect but you're a nervous wreck, then you've totally missed the point of the season.

Instead of spending a fortune to purchase and prepare a gourmet meal for 10 (or 20, or 30), sit down with a clean sheet of paper and get organized. Delegate. Have everyone bring a dish--and have them bring it in a disposable, aluminum container that

can be easily stored or thrown away afterwards. Consider having the meal catered, or purchase a prepared dinner from a local grocer or restaurant. The point is to spend time with your family, not to enslave one or two family members in the kitchen so the rest can watch football on TV.

Creative, Inexpensive Gift Ideas

Kids Too Materialistic? Try This.

Chapter 11. Outwitting the Stress of Illness

Dealing with stress when you are sick.

When someone you love is sick.

Coping with the care of someone who is terminally ill.

Stress and dying.

Because many of the issues in this chapter deal with larger themes of life and death, I will rely heavily on advice from nurses, physicians and clergy in writing this chapter.

Chapter 12. How To Deal with Living in a Sometimes-Ugly World

No one has been left unchanged by the searing attacks of September 11, 2001. Headlines routinely induce involuntary cringes and shudders of disbelief in us all. (Remember Steve Martin walking by a newspaper vending machine, getting a paper, glancing at the headline, shrieking in horror, then tossing the paper back into the machine and continuing along with his jaunty walk in *L. A. Story*?)

Bad things happen in this world, really awful, horrific things, sometimes involving children or other innocents. Focusing on the horrific can rapidly cause you to lose your sense of balance. Whenever I start to feel overwhelmed by the terrible things that I see on the news or read about in the paper, my husband has to remind me that this is not an overly barbaric society. This isn't ancient Rome, where watching people being fed to lions or crucifixions is considered popular entertainment. But the media is such a constant presence and the really awful stories are given so much ink that it can soon start to seem as though we live in a world gone bad.

Whenever you start to feel that "the world is too much with us," take a step back. Go on a news fast, to give your heart and mind a break from the rape, murder and pillaging. Give up Steven King or Patricia Cornwell novels for a few months. Anything that makes you shudder or cringe, give it up, at least for a while, until you begin to feel more positive about the world around you.

Other ways to outwit this sometimes-ugly world: volunteer a few hours a week at a soup kitchen. (Stay away from animal shelters or domestic-abuse shelters, at least until you regain your footing.) Read only uplifting, positive books and magazines. Reconnect with a few long-lost friends. Go on a weekend getaway. Write a letter. Try a new recipe. Get outside and take a walk in the fresh air. Have a massage. Invite a new friend over for coffee.

The point is to cultivate relationships and pasttimes that bring you joy, that are relaxing and uplifting, and to avoid people or events--even something as mundane as reading the morning paper--that cause stress and angst.

Ideas for Volunteering

Volunteering to help whatever cause that upsets you the most can be especially beneficial. For example, if you have been traumatized by hearing about abused children, then volunteering to read to kids at a local area hospital can give you a sense of helping, of doing something tangible instead of just fretting about *how awful it is*.

Tips for Restoring Serenity

The Importance of Cultivating Uplifting Relationships

Chapter 13. Can Medicine Help?

Stress and Medical Intervention... What Works?

While medication can certainly alleviate the symptoms of stress, relying on medication without solving the underlying issues is, at best, a short-term fix. In the long run it is best to resolve the issues that are causing you stress, modify your approach, and learn to respond effectively to stress-inducing factors in your life.

That said, there are many types of medication that do alleviate the symptoms of stress. If used judiciously, under medical supervision, they can help calm frazzled nerves and restore a sense of calm and balance. Here's what's available....

Getting Back to Nature, or, Alternative Remedies for Stress

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Suggested Reading and Recommended Websites

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