



# Stress Management for Leaders Responding to a Crisis

## EVIDENCE-BASED TECHNIQUES TO HANDLE STRESS, EFFECTIVELY LEAD

Leaders face pressure on a regular basis, and COVID-19 has intensified the stress surrounding them. Whether in business, non-profits, or government, leaders are juggling additional demands on their time, attention, and focus. Effective leaders learn to manage stress when making decisions and motivating others, but even the most effective may feel emotionally and physically worn down during the pandemic.

### **Stress takes a toll on a leader's personal well-being and effectiveness:**

**Decision making.** The pressure of time constraints can reduce concentration, limit creativity, and make it difficult to process information. People may also default to thinking in extremes. Leaders facing a crisis without the skills to manage the additional stress may thus narrow their focus on the immediate situation without thinking about the future or bigger picture. This can lead to missing opportunities for innovation or failing to message hope and optimism to keep people focused.

**Over-control of the situation.** A sense of control is a stress buffer for leaders, and when they feel a loss of it in a crisis, they can react by becoming rigid and trying to control the crisis response on their own. They may shut out the perspectives of those they typically trust and take on extra demands that get in the way of managing home life or personal care, which in turn adds to their stress levels.

**Isolation.** Stress can cause abruptness, irritability, and impatience with other people. This negatively affects professional relationships, dampening people's desire to speak up or provide information to those in charge. Shutting out other people and relying only on their own counsel reduces trust and narrows leader's perspective.

**Sleep deprivation.** Lack of sleep affects people physically and mentally, making it difficult to perform at their best. Research shows that people who are sleep deprived are less cooperative and more selfish. They may also be less aware of how their lack of sleep is affecting their behavior toward others, unwittingly reducing confidence and damaging relationships.

**Negative mood.** Research shows that people want leaders with a calm demeanor and positive outlook. Unmanaged stress can lead to displays of negative emotions such as anger and irritability, which can reduce trust and confidence among the leaders.

**Although crises can seem overwhelming, it is possible to learn to cope with and lead through the circumstances. These techniques offered by psychologists can help leaders manage their stress while managing high-pressure situations:**

### **Recognize the physical warning signs of stress.**

Everyone has different physical reactions to stress, such as stiff muscles, a headache, teeth grinding, and stomachaches. Pay attention to the physical symptoms to recognize stress. The physical signs are reminders to take time out for self-care.

### **Pause before making decisions, public announcements.**

It's easy for leaders to get sucked into the frenetic nature of a crisis, feeling they always need to be fully responsive. However, pausing to reset and focus can contribute to better reception of a message or critical update. Leaders can adopt a routine of 5-10 minute breaks each hour to assess stress signals and emotional needs. Leadership communication requires messages delivered with calm confidence, and a few minutes is enough for leaders to take a break, take some breaths, and consider next steps.

**Prioritize self-care.** To perform at their best for an extended time, leaders need to recharge, recover, and stay fueled. Research shows the importance of movement and exercise for improving mood and physical well-being. Leaders should prioritize restorative activities such as exercise, outdoor recreation, talking to friends and family, meditation or prayer, practicing deep breathing, supporting household activities like homework and meal preparation, and maintaining a proper diet.

**Sleep.** With extended working hours, more demands, and increased worries, proper sleep becomes hard. Even for those who can function with less sleep, eventually, everyone hits a breaking point. Sleep quality also matters. Leaders can practice a pre-bedtime, wind-down routine that includes turning off computers or smartphones and refraining from email or news updates. Taking a warm shower before bed can help cool the body's temperature, physically preparing it for sleep.

**Build time into the daily schedule for breaks, connection.** Having a sense of control helps people cope with uncertainty and anxiety. When it feels impossible to manage every response or action during a crisis, leaders can focus more on controlling their day and routine. Leaders can block time to check in with individuals who may need extra care or attention, such as struggling employees or family and friends. Equally important is scheduling breaks for self-care and attending to personal and family needs.

### **Have trusted professional relationships, support.**

When leaders can rely on staff or delegates to take on responsibilities, they get the headspace to look ahead and think strategically. Managing stress also helps keep moods and outlooks positive, which helps maintain relationships, communication, transparency, and trust.

### **Celebrate small wins and larger victories.**

Leaders facing a crisis and feeling stressed may fixate on the negative aspect. But even in challenging situations, there are markers of success. Acknowledge and celebrate small wins and how leadership is making a difference. Recognizing the positive can boost mood, which can help leaders improve their flexibility, open-mindedness, and creativity.

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