

STREE REDUCTION EXERCISES

Most of us draw on a few coping strategies for stress: We share our feelings or experiences with others, we keep them bottled up inside, or we deny their existence altogether.* Unfortunately, often these approaches can impact others through what researchers call “tension spillover,” in which stress is contagious, both when it’s articulated and when it’s not. The exercises below are designed to reduce the impact of stress-contagion on personal relationship systems, like couples and families, and professional ones, too, like business teams.

The Stresseptacle:

Get a basket or other container, something to dub your “Stresseptacle,” “Stress Basket” or another fun, silly name. Find a handy place to keep it.

When stress is “in the air,” select any of the following tactics alone or with others to reduce the intensity of your stress and ensure you do not pass or dump it onto others:

- In lieu of ranting to yourself, or directing your stress at someone else, like your spouse, share your frustrations with the Stresseptable. That’s right, talk to it out loud.
- Jot your stressful feelings/experiences on a scrap of paper, roll it into a ball and toss the paper into the Stresseptacle with the intention of throwing your stress away.
- Close your eyes and imagine molding your stress into a ball—consider what color the ball becomes, its size, texture, and temperature. Once your stress-ball takes shape in your imagination, open your eyes, and pretend to toss it into the Stresseptacle.

Burn, Shred, or Smash Stress:

Other strategies for adults—and most kids—that help release stress *without* directing it at others include:

- Jot your feelings and experiences on paper and burn it in your fireplace or firepit.
- In lieu of burning, shred the paper into miniscule pieces that you then recycle.
- Head outside, grab a tree branch, and smash your note to smithereens (that you then toss) or imagine your stressors on the ground or in a rock that you strike repeatedly.

There’s no hard and fast rule about how often to express your stress, only that completing the emotional stress cycle helps reduce the negative impact of it on you and on those you communicate with (such as loved ones), *and* prevents burnout.^

Stress Plan:

Create a Stress Plan for your relationship or as a family. Together, consider these questions:

- What are some signs that stress is becoming contagious in our home?
- How can we work together to reduce stress and tension in our home?
- What’s a fun daily or weekly way for us to release stress?
- What can I try individually to diffuse my stress?

Once your stress is reduced or released, feel free to discuss it with those you love. The goal is to diffuse its intensity, not forbid you from sharing it with others, as sharing can be a powerful way to deepen mutual understanding and connection.

*Suppression—ignoring or refusing to discuss stress—is the least effective coping strategy and can generate health risks. More effective strategies include exercise, creativity and mindfulness practices, with the latter considered the most effective.

^For a great research-based book on how to better release stress, see Emily & Amelia Nagoski’s *Burnout*.