

Handling



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by **Tim Gray**, MA, CADC

Handling Stress and Anxiety

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Honoring God Ministries

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Honoring God Ministries
16 Old L and N Turnpike
Magnolia, KY 42757

Contact information:

tim@STABLERecovery.com

<http://STABLERecovery.com>

[http://www.honoringgodmusic.com/
honoringgodministries/](http://www.honoringgodmusic.com/honoringgodministries/)

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“If you had to define stress, it would not be far off if you said it was the process of living. The process of living is the process of having stress imposed on you and reacting to it.” -STANLEY J. SARNOFF¹

Everyone has to deal with stress and anxiety. Some handle stress better than others do. There are many factors that affect the way a person handles the daily stress of life-genetic factors that effect mood and ability to deal with stress and anxiety, personality traits and characteristics, coping skills that have been developed, environmental factors, parental modeling of dealing with stress, circumstances of life, and many others. The good news is that anyone can learn and develop coping skills that will help them handle stress and anxiety more effectively.

Learning how to handle stress and anxiety can be very challenging and frustrating. Many give up and say they cannot do it or they turn to drugs, alcohol, or other compulsive behaviors. Some people feel overwhelmed in their daily lives and find they are not able to handle the pressures. Learning how to manage stress and anxiety is vital to emotional health. In this book you will find many different techniques that can help you manage your stress, anxiety, and other emotions so you will be better able to handle daily pressures in life. Many of these directly relate to managing emotions by “letting them out” or in some other way, dealing with the emotion or what causes the emotion. Other techniques you will learn here may seem

¹ STANLEY J. SARNOFF.—*Man Under Stress*, conference no. 7, University of California, San Francisco Medical Center, November 15–17, 1963, p. 100 (from www.bartleby.com)

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to have nothing to do with stress. I would encourage you to give them a try anyway as they can and will help if you let them. Not every one of these techniques will be right for you. As in most other parts of life you need to try them and see what works for you. All I ask is that you give each technique a reasonable try. You will never know if it can work for you if you don't really try it. You can probably think of several things in life that you would not want to do without now but were hesitant to try at first. Give these a try and see if they work.

If you give a technique a reasonable chance and it just doesn't work for you then, move on and don't think about it again. This list of techniques is not meant to be a complete list but rather a group of ideas to get you thinking in the right direction to come up with things that will work for you. You know yourself and the things you like to do. There is no way I could possibly produce a perfect list of techniques for you. Only you can do that. This list is a beginning point.

Probably the single most important factor that will decide how effective your progress is with learning to manage your stress and ultimately your emotional health is your personal attitude and mindset related to changing the way you deal with stress. If you begin this process with the belief that it won't really help but you will give it a try because someone else thinks you should then your belief will lead your efforts to failure. If on the other hand, you are determined to find some techniques to help you better handle stress, then, I can guarantee you will be successful in finding some things that will help you. The more determined and open-minded you are as you begin this process the more successful you will be.

There are some important guidelines to keep in mind when deciding if a technique is healthy or will be effective in helping you deal with stress without causing further problems. Be aware of your emotions related to a skill or technique. One of the symptoms of problematic behavior is that it has become a way of controlling our moods or emotions. We don't want to replace a negative behavior with another potentially harmful behavior.

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Keep in touch with those around you about the things you are doing. If you are wanting to do something but don't want to tell the people who are close to you about that behavior then you know there is possibly something unhealthy about it for you, that is why you are hesitant to tell about it.

Be honest with yourself and your motives. When things in life become difficult or seem difficult we sometimes ignore the truth and begin lie to ourselves. Often this is done unconsciously—it is a defense mechanism that can happen to any of us. Sometimes we lie to ourselves since the truth is too painful and we can't face it. In either case, we must look inside and see what is true in order to change our thoughts and behaviors.

Be aware of peace in your life. If you want to do something but are constantly nervous and anxious about it then deep down you many know that it is not right no matter how bad you want to do it. Pay attention to your gut feelings. Talk with others you trust about it. Try it a little and see what happens. Settle in on things that bring peace in your life and thoughts.

Let them out

“There are thousands of causes for stress, and one antidote to stress is self-expression.” Garson Kanin²

As mentioned earlier, “letting out emotions” is an important part of emotional healing. Much of mental health therapy is based on this important concept. Letting out emotions is described in many different ways—expressing your feelings, venting, sharing your feelings, getting it off your chest, letting go of a burden, and many others that I'm sure you hear everyday. It is a basic human need like eating, drinking, breathing, etc. We have to do it. But, the problem is our society

² Garson Kanin, *Publishers Weekly* 23 Jan 78 (found on www.bartleby.com).

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does not encourage the healthy practice of expressing our feelings. Sharing our true feelings is often discouraged. A perfect example of this is the type of statement I hear all the time from parents, “you’d better stop crying before I give you a reason to cry.” Or, “stop crying like a baby, you need to act like a big boy.” I heard that one time from a mother in a store. She was talking to a boy who couldn’t have been more than 3 years old. What lesson do you think that boy will grow up believing?

Letting out emotions is an important concept that must be developed in all of us if we expect to have emotional health. We are only able to handle so much stress, anxiety, hurt, pain, or sadness before we blow and act out. When these emotions build up too much we become irritable, angry, nervous, anxious, upset, sad, and possibly fearful. You might have noticed at some time in the past that you were feeling any all of the emotions listed above and maybe even feeling overwhelmed. At that time your ability to deal with any stressful situation was compromised and any small thing that happened could cause a large reaction of anger, depression, or relapse (a return to addictive behavior of any type). What has happened is that you have such a build up of emotions that the least little thing causes an overflow. We must learn how to let out emotions on a regular basis so that they do not build up and we end up with a short fuse.

We must learn to let these feelings or express our emotions. Expressing emotions is letting them out in a healthy way so that you don’t hurt yourself or another person. Being able to express emotions effectively is a valuable skill that you will need to use on a regular basis to stay healthy.

In addition to specific ways to express your feelings we will also discuss some ways that you can help your body handle or manage stress and anxiety better. There are many ways to help and we will look at many different options.

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There is more than one way to skin a cat (By the way, no cats were harmed in the writing of this book.)

“Variety’s the very spice of life that gives it all its flavor.” William Cowper

There are many ways to manage stress and anxiety. Many we will consider are specific things you can do to help you let out your feelings. There are other ways to help deal with stress that are not specific ways to “let out” feelings but they are equally important. Good brakes on a car do not make the engine run better but they do make driving the car better and safer. The same is true with some of the techniques in this book—they may not all “let out” emotions but they are part of many ways to improve your ability to handle stress.

I want you to think about “letting out feelings” being like water that flows through the works of a dam to keep the water behind the dam from overflowing. Some of the methods we will look at to deal with stress are like the water behind the dam being turbulent during a storm and then allowed to calm. We will talk more about this in the next section of this book.

Even though all of these methods can help with decreasing your level of stress and anxiety they don’t all decrease pent up emotions in a direct way. An example of what I’m talking about is practicing yoga which many people find very helpful for dealing with stress and anxiety but yoga is not designed to allow a person to express specific feelings like talking with someone about your feelings.

Both are helpful even though they are very different.

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Try this ... and this ... and this

“If at first you don’t succeed... try lemons they have lots of seeds.” -Mildred Gray³

You may or may not like my mother’s type of humor but there is truth in her mis-quote of this famous saying—never give up, keep trying. You automatically fail when you stop trying. Many of the clients I have worked with over the years have given up and don’t think there is any reason to keep trying. That kind of thinking usually led to problems which led to what brought them to me. Keep trying.

A former coworker used to say, “success comes in a can, failure comes in a can’t.” I completely agree with this. Many people fail simply because they believe they can’t succeed.

We are going to review a list of possible ways you can express emotions so they do not build up and become problematic. As we go through this list it is important for you to keep an open mind. You never know when you will stumble on something that will be a great help. Try some new things—you won’t know if they work for you till you try them.

Before we get to the list let’s spend some time talking about how we are like a dam.

³ Mildred Gray, 1927-1988; I heard my mother say this many times throughout my childhood and young adult life, and now I hear myself say it.

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Our Emotional Dam

“Where we have strong emotions, we're liable to fool ourselves.”

–Carl Sagan⁴

I believe a dam is good illustration to help us understand our emotions.

I used to live near an earth Dam in Buckhorn, KY that was built in the 1950s by the Army Corps of Engineers. While we lived there I had several opportunities to see how a dam works. Like any dam this dam was built to hold back water and control it's flow. What once was a river was now a lake.

The water is held back by the dam. A dam is used to control the flow of a stream or river. Dams like this are made with a way to allow the water to flow through the dam, in a controlled way, to keep the river flowing and to keep the pressure of water behind the dam from building up to a point that might damage the dam or in some way allow the water to flow around or over the dam. Somewhere in the inner workings of the dam there is a valve or some mechanism that allows the water to go through the dam. This valve controls how much water flows. This valve is vital to the proper working of the dam.

Now that we have seen how the dam works let's look at what is held back by the dam. Water!

How does the water get behind the dam? There are many ways—rain, snow, streams, and creeks that flow into the lake.

⁴ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos (Blues for a Red Planet)* US astronomer & popularizer of astronomy (1934 - 1996)

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At some times of the year the amount of water behind the dam will be much greater than at other times. When there is a large amount of water behind the dam the water puts a large amount of pressure on the dam and could even wash the dam away. At the very least the water will overflow if there is more water than the dam can hold. Water is allowed to flow through the dam in a controlled way to decrease the pressure behind the dam. The amount of water that flows through the dam depends on how much water is behind the dam. At times, the flow of water through the dam was so small the river on the other side of the dam was almost dry. Then again, there were other times when the water was very high behind the dam and the flow through the dam had to be increased.

Emotionally, we are very much like this dam. We hold in emotions and don't allow them to flow. Emotions come into our lives in many ways—stress (related to work, school, relationships, bills, etc.), disappointments, frustrations, conflicts, anger, sadness, etc. The list is endless. We let these emotions build up and we don't let them go. Many times we don't know how to let go.

We have a tendency to hold these emotions in for a variety of reasons. Maybe, we are afraid of what others will think about us. Possibly our pride keeps us from admitting that there is a problem, so we hold it in. Often, we believe that we have to make it through a problem by ourselves—like it would show weakness or inferiority if we let someone see our true feelings. We believe we would make ourselves vulnerable if we reveal what we are feeling. Sometimes we are afraid of what would happen if we shared our feelings—we might break down and cry or worse. For these and many other reasons we choose to keep our feelings bottled up. We try to contain them—to control them.

The problem is, they won't stay bottled up and neatly contained. We are constantly experiencing feelings of many different types—frustration, disappointment, stress, fear, anxiety, hurt, and sadness. All of these plus many more can grow

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and eventually become overwhelming. Pent up emotions often come out in unexpected ways—anger or rage, irritability, explosive outbursts with those we love, and many other self-defeating behaviors.

So, what is the solution? As mentioned before, we have to learn ways to let the emotions out in healthy ways that don't cause hurt in our lives or the lives of those around us. This is vital to healthy living. We must learn to let go. We must learn how to let the emotions flow out and away from us so we can decrease our stress and live a healthy life. So, let's look at the ways we can deal with stress.

Methods of Dealing with Stress

“It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.” -**Franklin D. Roosevelt**⁵

The methods described here have been shared with many clients and friends over the years. I have heard over and over again how helpful they have been in helping people deal more effectively with stress, anxiety, and other emotions. I hope you find them very helpful in your life.

A few of these techniques are directly related to “letting out” pent up emotions through expressing your feelings. The vast majority of these methods approach the issues dealing with stress in other ways. I strongly believe it is important to attack the problems of stress and anxiety through the whole person—body, mind, spirit, emotions, and social. For that reason, the methods presented here deal with all parts of a person.

⁵ **Franklin D. Roosevelt**, 32nd president of US (1882 - 1945). Quotation found on www.quotationspage.com.

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These techniques are not fancy skills that are difficult to learn. Many of these are common, everyday things, many of which you should probably be doing anyway. But, what I have learned over the years is many people ignore these things since they tend to think they don't have time to do things that might be healthy. The way I see it, life is too short already. Choosing not to learn better ways to deal with stress and anxiety will make it even shorter. Some things are worth the time.

Talk with someone about your feelings

Talking with someone else about our feelings is a fundamental need we have as humans. We need to share and associate with others as we go about our daily lives. To be able to share with someone else the thoughts and feelings that make us who we are helps us remain healthy and help us feel connected. Sometimes we don't relate to others for whatever reason—fear of their response, pride, society or cultural norms, and many others. When we don't share our feelings with others they tend to build up and they become hard to manage. Eventually, we get so full that we cannot hold them in any longer. Whatever we have been holding in will come out and when it comes it will be painful for us and for those around us. At times, we spend a lot of our time cleaning up the mess left behind by these periods of overflow.

Maybe you have experienced something like this. You are feeling stressed out because of the many problems in your life. When you think it couldn't possibly get any worse, it does. You are worried about many things and find yourself easily irritated. Someone says or does something that you would normally be able to ignore but this time you over-react. Maybe even to an extreme amount that causes hurt feelings between you and the other person. This is a perfect example of overflow. We only have so much ability to hold in emotions and stress and when we reach our limit any small thing can set us off.

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Everyone is different. Some have a greater ability to let things slide and keep from worrying but don't be fooled stress and worry can be a problem for anyone in the right situation. Some people don't seem to be able to handle anything. Everything bothers them and makes them nervous. On the other hand, some seem to be able to handle anything—nothing seems to bother them. But, the truth is people who handle stress in both of these styles can be emotionally and physically damaged by excessive stress. Stress can lead to many health problems up to and including heart disease and stroke.

“All secrets are deep. All secrets become dark. That's in the nature of secrets.”
-Cory Doctorow⁶

One of the dangers we run into is that of keeping secrets. Secrets are dangerous to our emotional health. They create many problems and complications that lead to a variety of problems including relapse to drugs, alcohol, and/or other problem behaviors. Secrets often begin innocently as temptations or thoughts that can be easily dealt with. There are different kinds of thoughts—those we have on purpose and those that just seem to come from nowhere. A thought that pops in our head from nowhere is an innocent thought.

Let's take a look at a possible example. A typical situation might be you are going somewhere that has something you are trying to avoid—let's say beer. You have just filled up your gas tank at a local convenient store and go inside to pay. As you walk to the counter you pass by a stack of 24 packs of your favorite beer. Immediately, the thought pops in your head that a beer right now would taste really good. But, you have decided that you are not going to drink any beer. So, you

⁶ **Cory Doctorow**, *Someone Comes To Town, Someone Leaves Town*, 2005
Canadian science fiction writer

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turn away from the beer and feel good about your will-power. You pay for your gas and pass the beer again on the way out to the car. You may even look away intentionally to avoid thinking about it. On the way home, you think about how the thought kind of surprised you and you again feel good about the fact that you so easily turned away from the temptation. That may seem like the end of it. The problem comes when that simple thought or temptation is held in and becomes a secret. We take simple thoughts like this and make them secrets for many reasons—we are afraid of what others will think about us if we tell them about the thought. Possibly, a spouse may chide us for thinking about drinking even though we had promised that we would not. Or, a friend who is still drinking might give us a hard time and say “I knew you weren’t going to quit.” There are many reasons why we don’t tell anyone but the end result is we allow an innocent thought to become a secret. The secret does not stay an innocent thought for long in the process of hiding it gains strength and momentum and can soon become an unbearable desire.

As with other examples, don’t get stuck on the details of the example, whether it is drinking or drugs or other behaviors. Look for the truths behind the details that you are able to relate to. It is easy to get hung up on the specifics and talk yourself into believing that it doesn’t refer to anything in you when it does.

The point here is we allow an innocent thought to become something unbearably powerful but keeping it hidden. We must share our thoughts and desires with others. By sharing them with others we decrease their power over us. By talking about them we gain power to control them better.

There are many ways to share with others by talking. Most people have someone they feel comfortable sharing with. Sometimes it just takes a little determination and effort to get the ball rolling, so to speak. You might find that talking with a friend, wife, husband, brother, sister, therapist, or in a group of others that share similar problems and goals can be a wonderful way to express your feelings and greatly decrease the amount of pressure in your life.

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Talking can be a valuable way to express strong emotions. Often, we talk about our feelings only as a last resort rather than as an on-going part of the solution. In many ways our society does not encourage us to share our feelings and thoughts with others. Peer pressure can be a very powerful force.

Confession is another way that talking about your feelings can be helpful. You may have heard the saying “confession is good for the soul.” We have a need to tell others about things we have done. The founders of Alcoholics Anonymous knew this when they included Step 5 in the healing process of the 12 Steps. Step 5 says, “We admitted to God, ourselves, and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” This is done after Step 4 which involves “a searching and fearless moral inventory.” There is no doubt that many people have found great healing through the process of confessing to another human being the wrongs they have done.

Along the same lines is talking or sharing thoughts and feelings with God. God is always with us and always there to listen and hear our deepest thoughts and concerns. We certainly can find great healing and comfort in unloading our burdens on the great shoulders of a loving God. God is a great listener and you know he is not going to share your secrets. The truth is you have no secrets from God, so he is perfect to share those uncomfortable details of life that we all have.

One of the best ways to talk about your feelings is to have a specific person or group of people that you can share with back-and-forth. We need the encouragement, support, and accountability that can be found in this important type of relationship. All you need is to find a couple of people you respect and trust (they don't have to be your best friends). Trust is the most important thing in trying to find someone with whom you can share intimate details of your life. You don't have to do anything formal; you might just ask someone to meet you an hour a week to share what is on your heart; you can give them the same opportunity if they want. Tell them you need someone to share with—someone you can trust. They may or may not want to commit to this. Don't take it personally if they don't.

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There are a variety of support groups that might provide a great place for you to share your thoughts or feelings with others. One of the great things about these many support groups is you are able to share with others who can really relate to what you are feelings. If you choose to give a support group a try you will be very pleased with the amount of help you can get with decreasing the level of emotions trapped behind your emotional dam.

Write your feelings down

“I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear.”⁷

-**Joan Didion**, *US author & journalist (1934 -)*

Writing your feelings down is another excellent way to express your feelings. I have learned over the years that writing your feelings allows a great opportunity for healing. There is something significant that happens when you take thoughts or feelings which are hard to put your finger on and put them in writing where they become more concrete. It is for this reason I believe writing is an especially good way to effectively express difficult or painful emotions. My experience with writing feelings has shown me it is easier to let go of emotions that cause me pain when I write them compared to when I talk about them. There is something more permanent in writing than in talking and that seems to help let go without trying to take it back.

⁷ **Joan Didion**, *US author & journalist (1934 -)*; found on www.quotationspage.com

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There are many ways to write your feelings. The most effective one of these is the one that works the best for you. I have included only a few possibilities such as writing in a journal, writing letters, writing a story, writing poetry or song lyrics.

- Journaling – on an ongoing expression of feelings
- Writing letters – telling your feelings in a letter that you can mail or you can rip up
- Stories – share your feelings in a story
- Poetry/Song lyrics—write a song or a poem that expresses how you feel

Journaling

“Journal writing is a voyage to the interior.”

-Christina Baldwin⁸

Writing in a journal can be a very effective way to express your feelings on a regular basis. I have written in a journal for years and I know that much of my personal and spiritual growth, not to mention emotional healing I've experienced, has occurred through the process of journaling on a regular basis. I have discovered many things about myself as I read journal entries from months or years earlier. It has been truly amazing at times to see the changes that have taken place in my life. Journaling provides an opportunity to write a variety of information including daily activities, plans and goals for your future, thoughts and ideas that have significance for you, quotes, scripture, or other sayings that will inspire or encourage you. A journal can be a very versatile tool for personal growth.

⁸ Christina Baldwin; found on www.quotationspage.com

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There is something amazing that happens as we express our thoughts and feelings through writing. It is a different process than speaking and often the results are unexpectedly deeper and more expressive of what is really going on within us. Our brain works differently as we formulate thoughts and expressions to write down what we think or feel than when we try to talk about the same feeling. The process of thinking through what we want to say and then putting it in writing—making it permanent on paper—can be a very “healing process” and very different than talking about our feelings. This difference seems to work wonders for me and I know it does for many others I have talked with about journaling.

Let me take a moment to share my experience with journaling. My journal has been an outlet where I have been able to express intense emotions—emotions I have not felt comfortable sharing with many people. Many times my journal entries became prayers that sought the healing hand of God and even though I didn’t always realize it at the time I look back and see that God did work miracles of healing in my life. I have used the pages of my journal as a sounding board for ideas and plans that I was burning to share. I have been able to track my progress in some areas and my lack of progress in others. At times, my journaling was a daily history of what was going on in my life. At all times my journaling was a safe and healthy expression of the various thoughts and feelings that were sometimes raging and at other times gently flowing in my inner being.

So, as you can see, journaling has been an important part of my life for the last 15 years. I cannot emphasize how productive and encouraging it can be. I have encouraged many of my Clients to journal over the years and never fail to be surprised by some who use this tool and benefit from it. I have learned not to try to determine who will be able to use journaling effectively (or any of these techniques, for that matter) based on appearance or first impressions. Some of the ones’ that I thought would never in a million years try something turned out to be the very one’s who tried it and it worked

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well for them. You just never know what is going on inside someone or what will interest them or help them. That is the reason I encourage everyone to try many different things in their efforts to find what does work for them.

I do know not everyone will benefit from journaling the way I did. There are many, many ways to express your feelings and journaling is only one of many.

Letters

“All a good letter has to do is make you feel special.”

-Takayuki Ikkaku, Arisa Hosaka and Toshihiro Kawabata⁹

Another way to write your feelings is to write letters. There are many types of letters. Letters that are actually given or mailed can be a good way to share your feelings with someone else. I always encourage people to plan on writing difficult letters in stages, especially when they are emotionally charged due to past hurts or painful memories. The way to do this is to write a first draft of a letter that you know is only a first draft and will never be sent. In this first draft you should freely express your emotions related to the person or situation in question. Let loose and get all the feelings out. Remember, this is a first draft and it will not be mailed. After you finish this draft put it aside and don't think about it for a while, maybe a day or two or possibly even a week. Later, come back to the letter and read it with a pen or pencil to mark or underline parts or make corrections. As you read the draft think about what you really want to say to the person. Make notes about your thoughts as you read and mark parts that you want to make sure to keep and also, parts that you may not want to keep. After reading and thinking through this draft consider any things you might want to say but didn't mention in the first draft—make a note of these. When you are ready to write the next draft go through and decide about order of sentences and

⁹ Takayuki Ikkaku, Arisa Hosaka and Toshihiro Kawabata, *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, 2005; found on www.quotationspage.com

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wording, etc. Finally, write the next draft. Again, if your emotions remain strong then let them out—don't hold them back. You may find that you are reminded of things you failed to mention in the first draft. When you have finished this draft of the letter set it aside and come back to it later. Read it and consider it as before. This one may be ready to mail or you may need to re-write it again. Be patient with this process. You may be tempted to mail one of the earlier drafts but don't give in. You will communicate more effectively through writing one or more drafts and taking your time. You might even find that you have found some healing through this process and don't feel the need to mail the letter after all. A lot of times we want to mail the letter because we want to hurt the other person or let them know how they hurt us to make them feel bad or some other reason. After this process of writing in stages you might find that mailing is not needed after all. The real important issue here is your healing.

Now, I want to tell you about another way to use letters for healing through expressing feelings in a healthy way. You can write a letter to a person, to God, to a situation, or to whatever and then destroy the letter in some way. One of the good things about a throw-away letter like this is, it allows you to really let down your guard and express your thoughts and feelings without the fear of hurting someone else or fear of another using your words against you. It is a great opportunity to say what you always wanted to say but didn't for whatever reason.

I have asked a quite a few Clients, over the years, to write a throw-away-letter every day for a period of time, like 30 days or 2 weeks. Some have told me later that it really helped relieve the pressure and others have said it didn't work for them. As I said before, none of these are definitely for everyone but you don't know which will help till you try them. Let me also say that none of the Clients who told me this didn't work for them wrote more than 1 or 2 letters—I don't think they really gave it a try. Some people aren't comfortable writing their feelings, so, if that's true for you, move on to something else. You will not know till you give it a try.

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Creative writing

Creative writing is an incredible way to express your feelings. There are many ways you can do this. Below you will find several I describe but there are many more ways you could use your creativity to express your feelings.

Share your feelings in a story – for those of you who have a more dramatic flare you might want to try to write a story that expresses how you feel. There are many ways to write your story—a non-fiction autobiography from your point of view, a fictional story (short story or longer novel), a play, or in poetry.

One way to share your feelings in a story would be to create a character that shares your emotional makeup and possibly, similar circumstances. In fact, you might be simply telling your story—writing it down for others to read exactly as you see it. Or you could change all the details but still express the basic feelings you have. Yet another possibility is to totally create a fictional character that experiences all your circumstances but who handles everything differently, maybe even as a superhero might. Ultimately, the possibilities are endless, only limited by your imagination. Even though the story you create doesn't seem to parallel your life you will still express your thoughts and feelings by writing it—that is human nature and it will happen. Writing a story can be an effective way of expressing thoughts and feelings that you can't express any other way.

Writing poetry or song lyrics can be a very effective way to express your feelings. Some people just tend to have a natural inclination or “talent” for putting words together in poetry. Whether you have that special gift or not you can benefit from the practice of expressing yourself in poetic ways. Don't worry about how it sounds or if things rhyme. Just express yourself...let out your feelings and thoughts. Have fun with this. Remember you are doing this to let out your feelings not to produce a “hit song.” You never know what you might end up with if you allow your creativity to come out. Think about it, even hit songs started out as an expression of someone's feelings.

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I'm sure there are other ways to write about your feelings. Use your imagination and see what you can do.

Creative expression

“Everything that is really great and inspiring is created by the individual who can labor in freedom.” -**Albert Einstein**¹⁰

We have already talked about some ways to creatively express yourself through writing but let me share a little more about the creative process and how it leads to healing.

By using your creative ability to express what you are feeling you are greatly increasing the therapeutic benefit. I have a theory about why this creative expression is so effective. The Bible teaches that God created us in His image. We don't all look the same so this cannot mean that God created us to look alike. I believe we are created like God in other ways, one of which is our desire to create and also our desire to express ourselves. When we tap into our creativity this way we are able to express ourselves to a much greater capacity. Your method of creative expression only has to make sense to you—it is for your benefit. It has been my experience that our creative expressions somehow resonate with others and they are able to see the beauty in our efforts of self expression. When you express what is inside of you there will be an expression that is valuable and worthwhile and often, beautiful. Also, it's not about beauty or perfection it's about expressing yourself for the purpose of releasing pent up emotions and receiving healing. We are often too critical of ourselves and the things we do—

¹⁰ **Albert Einstein**, *'Out of My Later Years,'* 1950 US (German-born) physicist (1879 - 1955); quotation found on www.quotationspage.com.

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we need to let our expressions flow and see what happens. We tend to limit ourselves too much based on our thoughts when we should allow freedom of expression. It is too easy to be overly critical and in some ways we get a certain measure of satisfaction from criticizing ourselves—this can become very unhealthy. We know what we were trying to do and when we fall short of that mark we tend to be very critical. We fail to see progress we make or the good we accomplish as we try to hit the target—we only see our failures and we quickly jump to the conclusion that we must be a failure. We begin to judge ourselves, seeing only our mistakes rather than our successes. We define who we are based on how we fail. This is not a fair assessment. Everyone makes mistakes. People who have emotional health tend to bounce back after a mistake; they don't allow the mistake to worry them. The mistake becomes an opportunity to learn and grow and become better in that area. On the other hand, people that are not very emotionally healthy might take a simple mistake that anyone could make, and through worry and distorted thinking blow it out of proportion. The mistake becomes another loop in a long chain of negative thoughts and feelings which are usually self-directed. We must look at ourselves realistically and say “it is true that I did not reach my goal, but I was very close and I will get closer next time and eventually I will reach it and be successful and set a new goal.” We cannot allow ourselves to continue this negative tearing down.

There are many choices for creative expression. Some are listed below but there are as many possibilities as there are people. Each person has their own way of creatively expressing themselves. Using your unique skills and talents you may be able to think of many possibilities that I never considered. If it works for you it is a valid way to creatively express yourself. There is no wrong way.

Remember, it's not important how beautiful or “perfect” a picture or poem is. What is important is that you have expressed yourself in the process. Once you find your method of creative expression you will be surprised at how much enjoyment and fulfillment it brings you.

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Be careful not to get caught up in pressure to create as that might add to more stress and keep your creative expression from being a healthy outlet. As in all things, balance is the key. One of the keys to successfully expressing your feelings creatively is to enjoy yourself.

Draw a picture that expresses how you feel

“Art is a collaboration between God and the artist,
and the less the artist does the better.” -**Andre Gide**

Drawing can be an enjoyable hobby but it can also be a great way to express feelings. Again, remember it is not about how well you draw or how perfect or accurate a picture is. Some of the greatest, most well-loved, pieces of art may not make sense to everyone but they did make sense to the artist and they do make sense to those who love the art.

Let me share an idea for a drawing that anyone can try. Don't worry if you don't think you have any talent. You don't have to be a talented artist for this to work for you. Obviously, this is not meant to be an art lesson, but, I want to encourage you to give this an honest try. Approach this drawing as an opportunity to go somewhere new in your emotional journey. Try not to place limits on your lines, shades, and colors. Draw according to what you feel at the moment. Use the medium (crayons, markers, pencils, pastels, charcoal, etc) that expresses something you feel at the time—whatever makes sense to you. Try to stay away from drawing something you will be able to recognize or identify but rather let your hand express the shades of emotions that may not have a solid structure like a house or a tree. On the other hand, you might try to draw a house (car, tree, etc.) that expresses frustration or disappointment or anger. It doesn't have to look like a house or car to

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effectively express what is going on within you. In fact, the more lifelike it is the less it may express what is inside you—it is merely a house or a car. It might not make sense to you now but give it a try. It might be the best thing you ever did.

Some other ideas related to drawing are to use your other hand, rather than your dominant hand. Don't worry that you can't draw as good with the other hand. It's not about drawing well—it's about expressing yourself through whatever you draw.

Try to draw something like your shoe without looking at your hand or the paper—just look at your shoe. Your drawing doesn't have to be anything fancy. You can express yourself in doodles if you want. Let yourself go; don't hold back. Don't limit your expression by trying to make the drawing “right” or “perfect” or “lifelike.”

As I mentioned before, try different mediums. You might like drawing with charcoal or pastels better than with pencils.

Paint a picture that expresses how you feel

“Painting is just another way of keeping a diary.” **Pablo Picasso**¹¹

Painting a picture is much like drawing but the medium is obviously different. This different medium may allow you to express yourself in a more effective way. There are many ways to express yourself through painting using oils and watercolors and many others. Finger painting might be a great way to let out those emotions and have some fun at the same time—If you have children, I'm sure they would love to join you. You might like to try putting some paint in balloons or small snack bags and throwing it at a canvas. Make sure you do this in a place that won't cause you extra anxiety due to the

¹¹ **Pablo Picasso**, *Spanish Cubist painter (1881 – 1973)*; Quotation found on www.quotationspage.com

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mess. I saw someone on a movie who put balloons filled with different colored paint on a canvas and threw darts to burst the bags. It looked fun but also very messy. If you can handle the mess it could be a great thing. Another idea is to put a canvas on the floor and use a sponge or brush or something to drip the paint on the canvas. You could also use different textures to apply paint to the canvas—sponges, rags, various cloths (canvas, corduroy, silk, terry cloth, etc.). Other objects with various textures might also produce some nice results—balls, a brick, rocks, etc. The possibilities are unlimited.

As I have said before, the method or technique to use in these paintings is not as important as allowing what is on the inside to come out.

Build something

Building something can be very rewarding. Building things from scratch might take some tools that you don't have. As I have said all along, it is not about what you create, or in this case, what you build. Building things might provide a lot benefit in different ways—as we will discuss later, hobbies can be very rewarding and helpful. Another way this might benefit you is simply having fun. Fun can be very helpful with decreasing stress. Building something can be a good way to express something in your life. Really, everything you do is an expression of something about you.

You could build something that is large or small, rugged or delicate, simple or complex. There are many possibilities.

Even if you build something using a kit rather than building it from scratch it can still be a valuable thing. There is nothing like the sense of accomplishment you find in putting something together with your own two hands. Also, there is a certain enjoyment that comes from finishing a project. You may have talent with woodworking that you could actually build something from scratch. Part of the therapeutic benefit of building something is found in focusing on solving the puzzle or

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putting in the time on the tedious tasks. While you are focusing on solving the problems involved in completing the project your mind is allowed to relax and work on other life issues in the background. This gives your mind time to think through problems and issues in a less threatening way—while you are building you are thinking. Also, hopefully, you find enjoyment or satisfaction in this kind of project.

There are many different types of model kits that you can put together—cars, planes, ships, buildings, etc. Putting together a jigsaw puzzle is another great idea. Personally, I have never enjoyed puzzles very much, so they are definitely not a good way for me to find peace, fun, or healing.

Up to this point the techniques listed have been ways to express your feelings. From this point on the techniques will focus more on other ways to decrease stress and anxiety in your life.

Exercise to let out tension and frustrations

Exercising can be a very helpful way to let out frustrations and tension or nervousness. Any type of exercise can be helpful. Sometimes, just doing something active can be extremely helpful. Exercise is most helpful when it is done on a regular basis so one or more types of exercise that you like would most likely encourage regular participation. There are many possible choices like going for a walk or a jog, playing some type of ball, riding a bike, lifting weights, or going to an aerobics class. Obviously this is not a comprehensive list. You know what you like to do so go do it.

Some of the ways exercising may help include releasing pent up energy (tension and stress), giving your mind a chance to “get away” for a while which can help clear up your thinking, the chance to “work through” problems as you

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participate in some type of repetitive exercise, and doing something you enjoy. There are many other ways exercising may help you. If you try, you will find some that work for you.

Exercise to help my body handle tension and anxiety better

There are many different ways to exercise. Describing each of these goes beyond the scope of this book but I do want to share some other emotional health benefits of exercising.

Consider the following quotation on the emotional effects of exercise.

“While the majority of fitness research efforts focus on the physical and health benefits of exercise, there is a growing body of work demonstrating that exercise promotes wellness and mental health. Researchers at Duke University studied people suffering from depression for 4 months and found that 60% of the participants who exercised for 30 minutes three times a week overcame their depression without using antidepressant medication. This is the same percentage rate as for those who only used medication in their treatment for depression.”¹²

In the study mentioned above 60% of the participants overcame their depression with minimal amounts of exercise. That is very significant. You must understand that at times, depression is merely a symptom of other issues or circumstances in life. But, some people have a greater tendency to be depressed either because of genetic factors, environment, how they learned to deal with things while growing up, and personality. Everyone is different and their ability to

¹² "Mental Health Benefits of Exercise" was written by Jennifer C. Panning and published in the Find Counseling.com (formerly TherapistFinder.net) Mental Health Journal in November, 2000

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bounce back from depression is also different. For some people, fighting depression is going to be an ongoing battle they will fight through much of their lives. There is no doubt they can learn techniques that can help, but they will constantly be working to feel good. Some people get overwhelmed by the constant struggle and give up and give in to the depression (also, anxiety and other emotional problems can be overwhelming). For other people the battle to overcome depression may just be a short skirmish since their depression may have been brought on only by circumstances that are temporary and they don't have the other factors that would cause their depression to be a long lasting fight. Remember, everyone is different. You can't compare yourself to anyone else. You are unique.

I always encourage people to avoid comparing themselves to others. Instead, it is better to think about whether they are living the life they want to live. If not, then, get to work and make it happen. When we compare ourselves to others we don't do it objectively. We don't (maybe, can't) consider all the other person has gone through and achieved to be where they are. They may have overcome many difficult obstacles to get there. Or, they may have just been born that way. Some people don't have to work at having the body or the looks we would like to have—it just happens. To most people it doesn't come that easy. To some it doesn't come at all.

You may never have what your neighbor has. Real happiness comes from appreciating what you do have.

Exercise also helps us in a practical way by improving our health. When we gain strength it helps us move around better. After losing some weight you begin to realize how that extra 20 (or more) pounds, was keeping you from being as active as you wanted to be. It's amazing the difference losing a small amount of weight can make. If you are having trouble grasping this concept then get a 20 pound dumb bell and carry it around for a day. I guarantee you will notice the difference. The truth is, many of us are carrying around more than 20 extra pounds.

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So, the bottom line is exercise helps us feel better in many different ways—in the long-term health benefits and short-term emotional benefits.

Stretching to release tension in muscles

Stretching is one of many ways to help relieve tension in muscles and joints. Stretching helps keep us flexible and can help your body deal with stress and anxiety by keeping your muscles, joints, tendons, and ligaments healthy and flexible.

Here are some guidelines related to stretching found at MayoClinic.com:

Benefits of stretching

Regular stretching is a powerful part of any exercise program.

- Stretching increases flexibility. Flexible muscles can improve your daily performance. Tasks such as lifting packages, bending to tie your shoes or hurrying to catch a bus become easier and less tiring.
- Stretching improves range of motion of your joints. Good range of motion keeps you in better balance, which will help keep you mobile and less prone to injury from falls — especially as you age.
- Stretching improves circulation. Stretching increases blood flow to your muscles. Improved circulation can speed recovery after muscle injuries.

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- Stretching promotes better posture. Frequent stretching keeps your muscles from getting tight, allowing you to maintain proper posture and minimize aches and pains.
- Stretching can relieve stress. Stretching relaxes the tense muscles that often accompany stress.
- Stretching may help prevent injury. Preparing your muscles and joints for activity can protect you from injury, especially if your muscles or joints are tight.

Stretching essentials

Ready, set, stretch!

- Target major muscle groups. When you're stretching, focus on your calves, thighs, hips, lower back, neck and shoulders. Also stretch muscles and joints that you routinely use at work or play.
- Warm up first. Stretching muscles when they're cold increases your risk of injury, including pulled muscles. Warm up by walking while gently pumping your arms, or do a favorite exercise at low intensity for five minutes. Better yet, stretch after you exercise — when your muscles are warm and more receptive to stretching.

One caveat: If you plan to stretch only after your workout, increase the intensity of the activity more slowly than you would if you had stretched your muscles before exercising.

- Hold each stretch for at least 30 seconds. It takes time to lengthen tissues safely. Hold your stretches for at least 30 seconds — and up to 60 seconds for a really tight muscle or problem area. That can seem like a long time, so keep an

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eye on the clock or your watch. Then repeat the stretch on the other side. For most muscle groups, a single stretch is often enough if you hold it long enough.

- Don't bounce. Bouncing as you stretch can cause small tears in the muscle. These tears leave scar tissue as the muscle heals, which tightens the muscle even further — making you less flexible and more prone to pain.
- Focus on a pain-free stretch. Expect to feel tension while you're stretching. If it hurts, you've gone too far. Back off to the point where you don't feel any pain, then hold the stretch.
- Relax and breathe freely. Don't hold your breath while you're stretching.¹³

How often to stretch is up to you. As a general rule, stretch whenever you exercise. If you don't exercise regularly, you might want to stretch at least three times a week to maintain flexibility. If you have a problem area, such as tightness in the back of your leg, you might want to stretch every day or even twice a day.

Meditate to take my mind off worries and work through problems calmly

There are many ways to meditate. Any form of meditation may be helpful for decreasing anxieties and clearing your mind of worries. Due to your specific traits and personality characteristics some types of meditation may work better for you than others. Many religions encourage some form of meditation as part of spiritual growth. There are also many forms of meditation that have been developed in recent history that are secular in nature. All forms of meditation have positives. If you want to learn more about the many types of meditation you can visit your local library or bookstore or, you could visit

¹³ Article "Benefits of Stretching" from www.MayoClinic.com

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www.wikipedia.com and search for meditation. When I went there I found a wealth of information about various forms of meditation.

I have found a type of meditation that works well for me. I have trouble emptying my mind which is the goal of some types of meditation. There are other forms of meditation that encourage focusing your mind or thoughts on a specific thought, idea, mantra, or other repetitive prayer.

Several years ago I learned the method that works best for me. In the Old Testament the word that is translated meditate is a word picture that describes a cow chewing it's cud. If you can, imagine a cow chewing on grass, straw, hay, or some other hard to digest food. It would be impossible for us but the cow has a way to get all the nutrients out. The type of meditation I'm talking about is taking something positive—a quote, a saying, a Bible verse, or some idea that encourages you and lifts you up. Throughout the day you pull this positive, encouraging thought out and “chew” on it a while to get all you can from it. Turn it over in your mind and think about it from all different perspectives. See how it applies to you from all points of view. As you go about the activities of your day you may have to put it away for a while. Later on, when you again, have a moment or two of free time then pull that thought or quote out again and “chew” on it some more. In this way you will be able to consider the idea and how it applies to you from many different points of view.

Let's look at an example. Using the verse from the Bible (Matthew 6:25) where Jesus says “do not worry” you could ask and answer the following questions throughout your day. (By the way, this is just a small part of the statement by Jesus. To understand what he is saying you would need to read the whole section and consider it in context.)

- How much do I worry in a day?
- What things do I worry about?
- What things do I worry about more than others?

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- What happens when I worry about these things?
- What happens when I don't worry about these things?
- In what situations does worrying help me?
- In what situations does worrying not help me?
- Do I worry too much?
- What does Jesus mean when he says not to worry?
- If my situation were different would I still worry?
- What do I "get" from worrying?
- Does worrying make me feel better?
- What makes me worry?
- Does fear make me worry?
- Does concern for others make me worry?
- Am I showing faith in God when I worry?
- If I worry about something does that mean I don't trust God in that part of my life?
- What would it look like if I didn't worry in this situation?
- Are there times when I have not worried in similar situations?
- What ways do I decrease my worries?

Do you get the idea? If you were to ask yourself all of these questions in a day and truly considered and answered even just a few, I guarantee you would learn something about yourself. There is no way around it.

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Imagery – allow your mind to relax through imagining yourself in a situation

Imagery can be a great way to get away for a short while. There are several ways you can do this. You can imagine yourself in some place you would find peace or happiness, such as, reclining on a beach in Acapulco or walking in a forest. The key here is to allow plenty of time to really get into the imagery. Make sure you are comfortable—reclining in your favorite chair or laying on your bed. Make sure you have enough time to relax for 20-30 minutes. Begin by laying back, getting comfortable, relaxing, and breathing (slow, deep, and steady breaths). Imagine yourself in whatever setting you have decided. Let's use Acapulco for an example. Think about the different sights you might see—the blue sky with occasional clouds floating by, the beautiful blue water, the white surf splashing on the beach, the sand, the green of palm trees, the different people walking, running, and enjoying themselves. Think about the sounds you might hear—the splash of the ocean, the gentle whisper of the wind through the trees and across the beach, the laughter of children and adults playing and having fun in the water and on the beach. Imagine the warmth of the sun on your face and your body as you lay there. Imagine the feel of the gentle breeze and the occasional splash of the ocean spray. Imagine the relaxed feeling as you enjoy this time away from the “busyness” of everyday life. Take your time and enjoy the moment. Really, get into imagining what you would experience with all of your senses. This can be very relaxing and helpful on a busy, hectic day. A few minutes of purposeful relaxation could produce great results. Many people do this as they as they are lying down to sleep. There is nothing wrong with that and it might be very helpful if you have trouble getting to sleep. Or, you might want to set aside 30 minutes in your day to give yourself some time to relax and gain some much needed peace.

Another way to do this is to imagine yourself successfully doing something that you are nervous or concerned about like a job interview or a confrontation with a coworker. Start out the same as in the previous example in a comfortable chair,

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couch, or bed. Make sure you are relaxed and comfortable and begin to breathe. Imagine yourself successfully working your way through the difficult situation. See yourself answering all questions efficiently and effectively. Imagine how it should go without any mistakes and pay attention to your feelings, concentrating specifically on remaining calm and collected. If you need to repeat the process and mentally work through the situation with different details to help prepare for any possibility. This can be a very effective method of preparing for a difficult and nerve racking situation. The more prepared you are the lower your level of anxiety will be.

Deep breathing

Deep breathing is a wonderful way to relax and decrease the anxiety and stress you feel. There are many ways to practice deep breathing. We will look at a couple of methods that I have shared with clients for years—these have been proven to help over and over again.

Deep breathing can help in many ways. There is an obvious benefit to getting plenty of oxygen especially since our bodies require oxygen to live. Also, deep breathing is an effective technique for calming down in difficult and anxious moments. In addition, practicing deep breathing on a regular basis can be a very effective way of keeping stress down.

Most people have heard about taking deep breaths and counting to ten while they are trying to calm down after getting upset or angry. Counting to ten and breathing deeply has become so common place that most people don't give it a fair chance. But, it can be very helpful if you really put it into practice.

Over the years I have shared a couple of different methods of deep breathing that many clients have told me have really helped them decrease their overall level of stress.

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The deep breathing method I have shared with clients involves lying on a bed or relaxing in a comfortable chair or recliner and breathing in a calm and relaxed manner for a period of time. Make sure that you have at least 20 minutes to just breathe and relax. Each breath should be deep and controlled. Try to keep your breaths consistent and calm. As you breathe and relax you should focus your thinking on things that will help you stay calm and relaxed. In another part of this book we will look at imagery which could be combined with deep breathing to help it be even more powerful and effective. Your thinking should be of something that is pleasant and enjoyable, something that will help you feel peace and calm.

Listen to music

“All the sounds of the earth are like music.” **Oscar Hammerstein II**¹⁴

Music is a very powerful way to decrease stress. I believe the ability to appreciate music is part of our genetic makeup. Just about every human being can find pleasure or peace or some other emotion in music. You may like several types of music depending on your mood. That is how it is with me. There is some music that will help me relax and other music that will motivate me to action.

I encourage you to give listening to music a try as a way to calm your anxiety. The style of music that will work for you might be completely different than what will work for me. But, there is no wrong answer. What works for you is what works for you.

¹⁴ **Oscar Hammerstein II**, *US Writer and Lyricist (1895-1960)*; Quotation found on www.quotationspage.com

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One way you could relax with music is to find a type of music that makes you want to dance and get up and dance. You can do this in the privacy of your own home. You are not dancing for anyone else just for yourself—because it makes you feel good. This might be a great way to let go of some stress that has been building.

Another type of music might relax you by just listening to it for enjoyment. We are all different and what might relax me might cause you tension.

Music is powerful and there is no wrong answer. What you like is the right answer for you.

If you play an instrument music might be a way for you to creatively express yourself. It doesn't matter if anyone else likes it. This is for your benefit. Let yourself go. Play what makes you happy.

Go for a walk

Walking is supposed to be the very best exercise there is. I have heard this consistently for several years. In fact, I have read that walking is just as effective as jogging for losing weight and other health benefits and with walking you don't have the stress on your knees and others joints you get with jogging.

You can walk for health or for pleasure to view the sights or many other reasons. The important thing is to get out there and walk. It will reduce your stress.

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Play a game

“The most wasted of all days is one without laughter.” -e e cummings¹⁵

When was the last time you played a game or just had fun? One of the problems we run into in life, as we grow older and take a more responsibility, is that we forget how to have fun. We don't take the time to a play or enjoy ourselves. As a result, stress builds and tension grows, before we know it we begin to experience problems in life related to stress and anxiety that has built up over time. It is important for all of us to have fun from time to time. Some people are masters and having fun. Others, are so worried about responsibilities in life that they forget all about fun. Some, wish they had time for fun but they are so busy in life that they know in their heart that they will never have time to have fun again. The irony is that making time for fun can help you manage the “busyness” of your life. It is a healthy thing to make time for fun. We all need to have fun in our daily lives. Doing something fun helps us to relax for a while—to get away from the stress and worries of life. After the fun, we can come back to our concerns in life and be more effective in accomplishing our goals. Laughter can be an important factor in healing of many kinds.

Some ideas for healthy fun include:

Play a game – playing a game has many health benefits. Fun can be very healthy. Playing a game brings you together with others.

¹⁵ e e cummings, *US poet (1894 - 1962)*; Quotation found on www.quotationspage.com

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Comedy – reading a funny book or watching a funny movie or show are excellent ways to have fun. They give us a little time to get away from reality just long enough to help us keep perspective on what is really important.

Go to a comedy club—I was doing this for a while when I was younger but it became a problem for me since I began wanting to drink while I was at the club. I had to quit going since I didn't want to begin drinking again. You have to weigh the good and the bad about any type of fun.

Look up your favorite comedian's website on the internet – there are many funny things on the internet.

YouTube is a source of many funny videos.

This list of possible ways to have fun would probably stretch for miles. You know what is fun for you—go have fun. Here is an article I found on the mental health benefits of laughter.

Mental Health Benefits of Laughter from HelpGuide.org

- Humor enhances our ability to affiliate or connect with others.
- Humor helps us replace distressing emotions with pleasurable feelings. You cannot feel angry, depressed, anxious, guilty, or resentful and experience humor at the same time.
- Lacking humor will cause one's thought processes to stagnate leading to increased distress.

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- Humor changes behavior – when we experience humor we talk more, make more eye contact with others, touch others, etc.
- Humor increases energy, and with increased energy we may perform activities that we might otherwise avoid.
- Finally, humor is good for mental health because it makes us feel good!

Hobbies

Hobbies are a wonderful and healthy way to decrease stress and maintain emotional health and balance. Hobbies provide us the opportunity to get and stay involved in activities that are healthy. This helps in many possible ways—we focus our attention on something positive, we replace negative habits,

There are so many different types of hobbies I wouldn't be able to list them all. You know what you like to do. Go and do it.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a great way to relax your physical body along with your mind and emotions. I have worked with many people over the years who have found a lot of help through progressive muscle relaxation. There are many ways to do this and none of them wrong. Here is what I tell my clients to do:

- Sit or lay in a comfortable position.

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- Make sure you have at least 20 minutes of free time to do this properly.
- As you are laying or sitting begin to think about relaxing your body and try to get an image or idea of what that will feel like.
- Begin at the top of your head and tighten each muscle group and hold that for at least 30 – 40 seconds.
- After tensing the muscle group you should relax the muscles for about 30 – 40 seconds.
- Move down to the next muscle group and tense and then relax the muscles.
- Take your time and continue this process, moving down your body.
- This should take about 20 minutes and by that time you should be feeling more relaxed.

A lot of my clients have tried this when they have trouble sleeping and it seems to help some. I always tell them, if nothing else it will put them to sleep due to boredom.

Stay away from alcohol and other drugs

Alcohol and other drugs will not help you fight of stress and anxiety, in fact, they will eventually add to your stress as many people do things they regret while drinking or using drugs. Drugs and alcohol seem to be a way to avoid your problems but the truth is once you sober up your life problems are still there and possibly even worse related to what you may have done while drunk or high.

My best advice is to stay away from alcohol and drugs. They simply do not help with stress and anxiety in the long run.

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Go to a meeting of AA or NA or other self-help group

If you are a person in recovery from alcoholism or addiction then you already know the benefits of going to a self help group for support. Going to a meeting can be a great way to let go of some stress. Sharing your thoughts and feelings is always helpful and hearing other people's stories can also be helpful in working through your own problems.

Spend some time with friends or family

Depending on the relationship you have with family and friends spending time with them might decrease stress or it might add to your stress. You know your situation better than anyone so you will have to be the judge of the effectiveness of spending time with family and friends. Generally speaking spending time with people you care about has great potential to help decrease stress. Just being with someone you love can make you feel good. It is a basic human need to be around people who care about you.

Read a good book/Listen to a good book

Those of you who love to read will already know the benefits of reading a good book. I recently discovered the joys of listening to a good book. A few years ago I was driving 70 minutes to work and 70 minutes home again. In the long drive I began listening to audio books to pass the time. I actually came to look forward to my daily drives so I could continue listening to my books. I have listened to many books in a several year period including the entire Bible, two times. I have

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discovered that I process information differently by hearing than I do when reading. I am basically a visual person but I have noticed things while listening to the Bible that I never noticed while reading.

I encourage you to try listening to a book if you have never done it before. You might find you love it.

Go for a drive

Going for a drive in the country can be a very relaxing activity. I used to love to drive and would just take off driving for a while. It was most enjoyable. But, with the rising cost of gasoline and the fact that I have just grown tired of driving I don't do much of it anymore.

Going for a drive might be just the thing to help you de-stress some today.

Deal with old unfinished business (unresolved grief, unforgiveness, resentments, anger, etc.)

We all have unfinished business in our lives. It's part of the living process. Over time we develop resentments, anger, unresolved grief and the list could go on and on. We have a tendency to stuff these feelings rather than express them in a healthy way. I recommend you buy a journal and begin writing to let these feelings out. You might also find help in going to see a therapist or counselor. The bottom line is this: you will continue to have trouble with stress and anxiety, not to mention many other problems if you are carrying around a lot of unfinished business emotionally.

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Deal with fears

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.” -e e cummings¹⁶

Anxiety is all about fears we have. Sometimes people can find help by learning to deal with things they are afraid of. There are many ways to do this. Talking with someone and getting personal guidance from someone you trust should be high on the list for you. We all have things in our life we are afraid of... the key is to learn how to continue living through the fear. Learning to deal with fears will help you decrease your stress.

Get proper rest (not too much and not too little)

Getting enough rest is essential to dealing with stress. The key is to figure out how much is right for you. If you don't get enough rest you will notice more stress in your life (you will not deal with stressful situations as well). Also, if you get too much rest you may notice you are feeling “draggy” and tired all the time. I recommend people figure out how much rest you need and make sure you get that amount each night. If you happen to wake up on your own (without an alarm clock) you should go ahead and get up, unless it's 3 am, you will feel more rested. The mistake a lot of people make is they are awakened from the middle of a sleep cycle by their alarm clock and they are drowsy and groggy. If you wake up on your own, at the end of a sleep cycle then you feel more rested and less drowsy.

¹⁶ e e cummings, *US poet (1894 - 1962)*; Quote as found on www.quotationspage.com

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Routine

It is important to have a set routine that you follow. It's ok to have some flexibility for unusual circumstances but overall we tend to do better with a set routine. A routine helps us feel less stress and anxiety. Routines keep us focused and organized which also helps us deal with anxiety. When you don't have a routine to follow you tend to have more anxiety and stress. I encourage everyone to set a routine and stick with it as much as possible.

Establish goals and plans to help decrease worry and anxiety

Setting goals and working to achieve them is very helpful with dealing with stress and anxiety. It helps in many ways. We feel good when we accomplish something. We stay more focused when we have a goal we are working to achieve. It helps us determine if we are making progress or not.

You should set some larger goals that you want to achieve and also some smaller goals which are steps leading up to accomplishing the bigger goals.

Where Do I Go From Here?

This is by no means an all inclusive list of ways to deal with stress but it is a good start. I encourage you to continue your search for ways to deal with stress. There are many good sources of information on the internet. Also, there are many good books on the topic.

If you are in recovery or have any problems with alcohol or other drugs I encourage you to stop by my blog [STABLE Recovery](#).

I hope you have found some help in the pages of this book. May you be blessed in life. Tim

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Tim Gray, MA, CADC -- I'm a husband, a father, a minister, a musician, a person in recovery, and a therapist.

My desire is to honor God in all of these parts of my life.

I accepted the call into ministry in 1982. Since then, I have served as a pastor, a minister of music, and a minister of youth. Through all these years I was bi-vocational and also working in the mental health and substance abuse fields.

- Bachelors degree in Music - 1989 (trumpet)
- Masters degree in Mental Health Counseling - 1991
- Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor
- 23 years of experience in mental health and substance abuse fields
- 26 years of experience in Christian ministry
- Currently play bass on Worship Team. Still play trumpet when I can (usually at church or at home).
- Recently bought an Akai EWI 4000s (Electronic Wind Controller) which I am really enjoying, by the way. It is basically a synthesizer that is played like a clarinet or saxophone.

Websites:

<http://www.STABLERecovery.com> -- blog related to recovery from addictions

<http://www.livetohonorGod.com> -- blog about living life to honor God.

<http://podcast.livetohonorGod.com> -- podcast related to honoring God in all parts of life.

<http://www.HonoringGodMusic.com> -- Selling my arrangements of hymns, sacred music, and original music for brass quintets, quartets, choirs, worship teams and over small ensembles.