

# What's the Difference Between Coping, Managing and Mastering Stress?

[James Petersen, Ph.D.](#)

The words "Cope, Manage or Master" stress are terms used every day and are often used interchangeably by both professionals in the field, as well as the public, at large. But, do they have same connotation, meaning and message? I believe the answer is **NO!** Let's take a look what these three words mean and why it is important to make a distinction between them.

## "COPING" WITH STRESS



Michelle lamented, *"My stress level is high, and I personally don't 'cope' with it very well. When I am with my family, it's hard not to talk about work, especially when the day has been horrible. It affects my family when I become quiet and need to be alone after work. I would love to have a magical way to snap off the stress, **but no such luck.**"*

Michelle is essentially saying that she has no control over her stress and that all she can do is to "cope" with it. "Coping with stress" is to struggle with stress, without a belief that "I" can do something about my stress.

When someone is just coping with stress, they tend to "muddle through" life without making any effort to mitigate their stress levels or to deal with the source of their stress. The fundamental belief is that they have no voice or choice in their own personal stress levels, so why try... *"no such luck."*

And, for many with a coping mentality, there is a strong tendency to engage in unhealthy and counterproductive behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse, over eating, under eating, excessive sleeping, social avoidance and excessive smoking.

## “MANAGING” STRESS



Stress coaches and trainers typically use the term “Managing Stress” for their programs or services. “Managing Stress” communicates an important message; we can modify and reduce the impact of the “stress response” on our bodies, health, behaviors and emotions. By learning how to bring down stress levels, the body will naturally move back to homeostasis or internal balance.

Stress Management programs tend to focus on techniques or ways to bring down stress through deep breathing, meditation, exercise, yoga, Tai Chi, progressive relaxation, Autogenics, and many others. These techniques can reduce stress levels; however, focusing on just reducing stress, by itself, does not address the underlying cause of one’s stress or how to prevent stress from escalating or recurring.

Even though we can exercise, do yoga, meditate and deep breath to reduce the stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, the underlying problem of why stress is there in the first place, is not solved. After a hour exercise or meditation, while we feel better, we still have to go back to the office, for example, and be faced with an overbearing manager, excessive workloads, deadlines, poor communication or irresponsible co-workers who just don’t do their jobs.

Life and work stressors happen at the least opportune time and it doesn’t take long for the stress response to return in the form of anger, irritation, intolerance, disappointment, fear or burnout. We may have been relaxed an hour ago, but now we’re fuming at some workplace manager who has just made your life more difficult.

Reducing stress is important, but unless we take control of the thoughts and perceptions about the stressors that come at us, we’re only half way to truly mastering stress.

## “MASTERING” STRESS

### CHANGE THINKING. CHANGE FEELINGS



Mastering stress starts with believing that we can alter the severity and duration of the stress response by changing how we perceive, interpret and respond to the stressful events that quickly trigger the stress response. This is not easy, since many of us are conditioned to respond automatically to stressors with emotions fear, anxiety and behaviors like anger, road

rage, and verbal aggression. These internal and external behaviors are learned, but they can be changed by recognizing the warning signs of stress, both internally and externally, and then taking mental steps to intervene and **STOP STRESS NOW!**

Once stress is recognized, stress masters take action and prevent the stress response from escalating. They do this by "talking to themselves" with words and images that counteract the stress response. This act will bring the mind and body back into balance and allow the relaxation response to take over. In psychology, this is called cognitive restructuring and may include a variety of mental techniques like re-focusing, re-directing attention, using positive affirmations, taking a more rational view of events or replacing a negative mental image with a more peaceful and serene one.

As the great American psychologist William James once proclaimed:

*The greatest weapon against stress is our ability  
to choose one thought over another.*

## WHAT ARE THE HALLMARKS OF A GOOD STRESS MASTER?

There are three things stress masters do to control their stress. These characteristics have profound impact on stress levels and, most importantly, they can be learned:



- First, stress masters have a mental gyroscope that provides a sense of **internal control** and **balance**; it allows them to change what they think and perceive when things go wrong and take ownership of how they respond to negative life events.

**“The Mind is It's Own Place and In It Can  
Make a Heaven of Hell or a Hell of Heaven.”**

John Milton. Paradise Lost

- Second, stress masters are quick to accept a negative event and, then, if necessary, to develop a strong **sense of commitment** to do something positive to alter their reaction to the stressor. And, when appropriate, they take positive steps to prevent the stressor from recurring or to change the stressor itself. Their "take" on life is this:

**Acceptance of what has happened is the first step  
to overcoming the consequences of any misfortune .**

William James

- Finally, stress masters respond to adversity with an **attitude of challenge**. They believe that the “problem” facing them is not a problem, but an event or situation that can be overcome; it becomes a challenge. The sense of **challenge, control and commitment** are hallmarks of those who master stress on a daily basis and, in the end, they are healthier, more productive and happier.