



# *Action Plan for Stressful Situations*

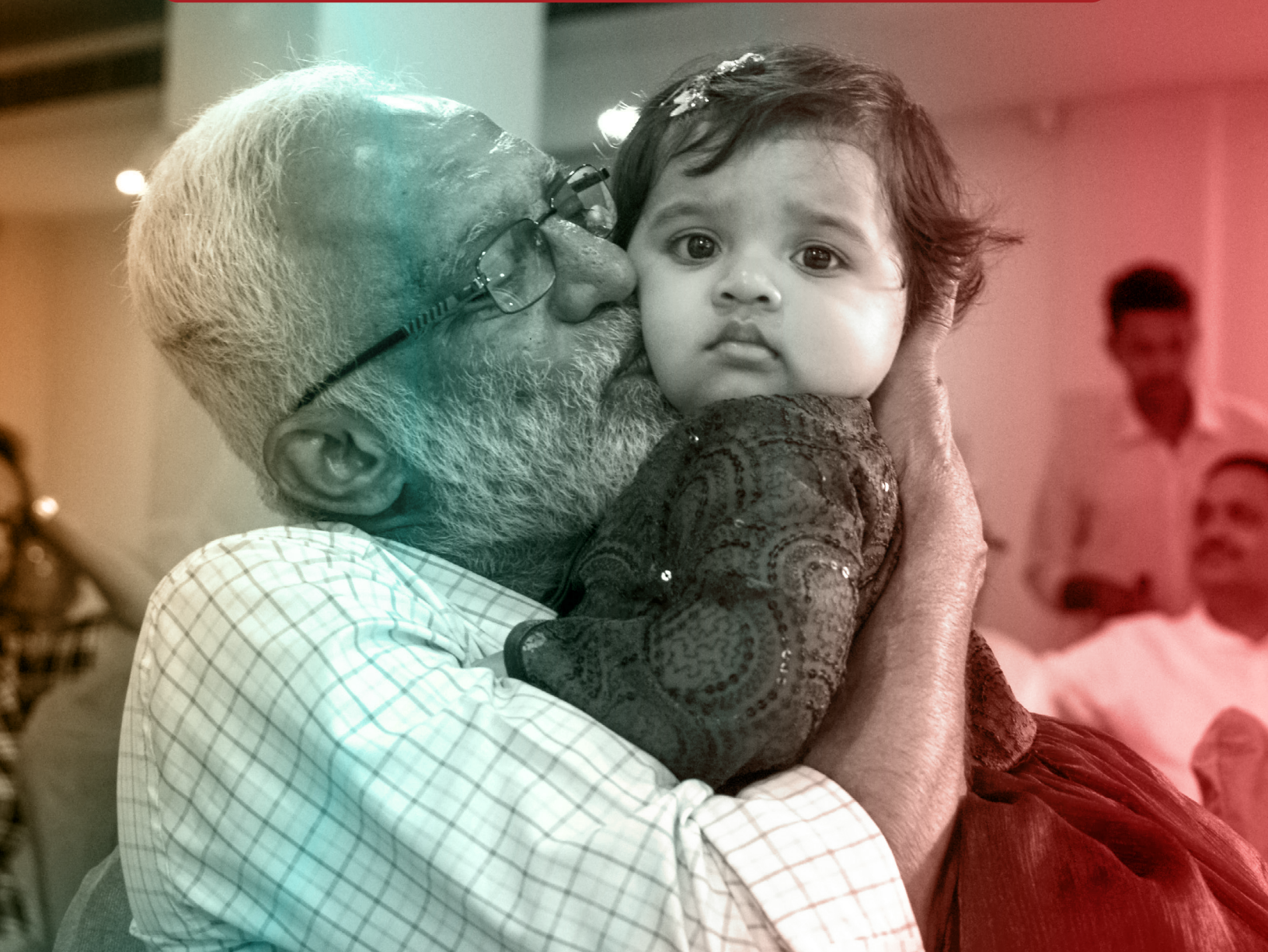
A JOURNALING EXERCISE



[TakeAction4MH.com](https://TakeAction4MH.com)

**There will always be things in life that send our stress levels soaring. And, if we've experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), the impacts of these experiences may show up in our relationships, family, work, and more, and affect how we respond to stress or stressful situations.**

ACEs are stressful or potentially traumatic events that happened to us before we're 18, including growing up in a household with parental substance use or mental health problems, loss of a parent due to death or incarceration, or experiencing abuse or neglect.



**While everyone is different, some common situations that can cause anxiety or increase our stress include:**

Work-related worries, e.g. about a layoff, evaluation, or giving a presentation

Having a difficult conversation with a friend, family member, or loved one

Being mocked in front of your peers

Going to the doctor or navigating the healthcare system

Getting a call from your kid's school or teacher

Feeling "othered" at work or in social settings

Being followed at the store

Being called names and harassed, in-person or online

**Whether or not you've experienced ACEs, it's important to manage stress and find healthy ways to cope when facing stress-inducing situations.** And while some of these situations are just a part of life, we can reflect on them, observe our thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and start to plan for how we may want to better handle them in the future.

**Think through the following questions and use the worksheet to make your "Action Plan for Stressful Situations."** This plan can help you make a plan to better understand, manage, or release those feelings. Refer back whenever you need it.

## 1. First, identify the situation(s) that causes you stress.

How does this situation usually unfold? Is there anything that sticks out?

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What are you worried about if things don't go smoothly?

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How stressful would you rate this, on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most stressful thing for you?

## 2. How does this situation make you feel — physically and emotionally?

Describe your feelings and thoughts in detail. What is it bringing up for you?

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Do your best to name the emotions you're feeling — whether it be fear, worry, jealousy, anger, impatience, sadness, or anything else.

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Don't forget to think about how your body is feeling. Is your heart beating faster, is your breathing deeper or more shallow, do you find yourself getting sweaty, do you find your voice getting louder or quieter? Did you end up getting a headache afterward?

## 3. Work backward to understand underlying factors that may contribute to your stress.

Take it a step further. Try and identify *why* you may be feeling these things. For example, this situation makes me feel \_\_\_ because \_\_\_. Sometimes, we may find the reasons for our emotions have nothing to do with the present situation at hand.

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Are there other things that contribute to you feeling stressed about this situation? For example, not eating breakfast that day, not getting enough sleep, waking up late and being rushed, an earlier argument with a partner, or something else that may have contributed to how you felt?

## 4. Identify your strengths.

Is there a trusted friend, family member, or supportive person in your community you could talk to about these situations?

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Are there things you can control or plan differently, if or when this situation occurs again?

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What are things you can do to help calm your body and mind? Perhaps it's calming your breathing, taking a small "break" from the situation, or in some cases, removing yourself from the situation altogether.

## 5. Make a plan for next time, and consider the 4A's of stress management.

While stress and stressful situations are unique to everyone and can't always be avoided, we *can* think about how we can better manage these situations, for our own well-being. There are tried-and-true ways to do this, including the 4As of stress management:

### Avoid

**Avoid:** While it may not always be possible, in some cases, we can try and avoid these stressful or triggering situations, circumstances, or even individuals altogether. This might mean saying no to invitations or events.

### Adapt

**Adapt:** If we can't change or control the stressor, what we can change or control is ourselves. Try reframing the situation and thinking of the bigger picture — will this matter tomorrow, in the next few months, or next few years? If the answer is no, it may not be worth stressing over! And, whenever possible, we can practice gratitude and reflect on the *good* things, situations, and people who bring us joy.

### Alter

**Alter:** In many cases, stressful situations can't be avoided, but we can alter how we approach, respond to, or deal with them. For example, we can communicate limits or boundaries of how long we will engage with the situation or person. By being open about our limits, we can better control how situations may play out. And, we can express our feelings and communicate our concerns in respectful ways instead of holding onto them and causing ourselves more stress.

### Accept

**Accept:** Some situations may just be unavoidable. In these cases, we may need to accept that we can't control the uncontrollable, and accept that while we may not be able to alter the situation or behavior of another person, we can control how we respond or react. And whenever possible, try to see the upside. How is this situation contributing to your own personal growth or resilience?

### Some *additional* reminders...

- Don't forget to breathe. If you feel stress coming on, pause, close your eyes, and take a few slow, deep breaths and remember you have a plan.
- Stress management is about progress, not perfection. Sometimes the best plans fail but there is also a benefit in planning and thinking ahead!
- The goal is to reduce stress, and we can always reflect, revisit, and make adjustments.
- Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can.

## 6. Write down your wins.

Make sure to keep track of what's been working to lower your stress - or things you'd like to try. For example, a family dinner, catching up with an old friend, playing a game, or doing a breathing exercise.

# Action Plan for Stressful Situations

Try out this action plan to help you plan for, manage, and find healthy ways to cope with stressful situations you may encounter in your life.

## 1. Identify the situation

What is the situation that is triggering your stress? When does it occur? Does it happen often, and is there a pattern behind it?

How do I rate this on a stress scale of 1-10, with 10 being the worst?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

## 2. How does this make me feel?

What are the emotions I feel in this situation?

What happens to my body in this situation?

What is this bringing up?

## 3. What else may be contributing to my stress in this situation?

What other things may be contributing to stress? E.g. not enough rest, time pressures.

What are some underlying reasons that may be making this so stressful, if we dig really deep?

*This situation makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ may be triggering me.*

## 4. Identify your strengths

Is there a trusted friend or support (like a therapist or group) I can go to for help?

What can I control for, or plan differently, if or when this situation occurs again?

## 5. Make a plan for next time, and consider the 4A's of stress management. How can I...?

...avoid this stressful situation (if it's possible)?

...alter this stressful situation (if it's possible)?

...accept this stressful situation?

...adapt to this stressful situation?

## 6. What are my wins?

What are the healthy ways I coped and/or managed this situation in the present or past?

What are some things that bring me calm, and peace?

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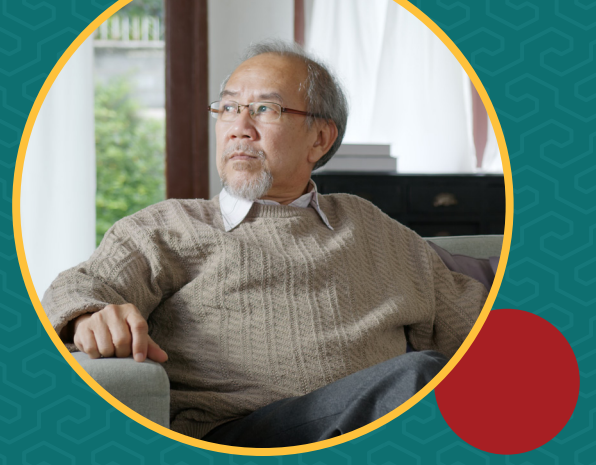
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