A person who wants to manage stress needs short-term and long-term methods. Long-term methods include such things as relaxation, meditation, and self-talk monitoring techniques, as well as exercise and nutrition programs.

Short-term methods help a person cope with pressured situations as they arise. Suppose it is only 9:00 A.M. on a certain morning and you have already learned that (a) there may be a surprise quiz in one of your afternoon classes and (b) your date for Saturday night has canceled. “The garbage is hitting the fan,” as they say, and you are starting to get pulled out of balance even as the day begins.

One essential short-term skill is being able to control yourself in the heat of the battle. When you are in control, all other aspects of the situation, such as making good decisions and making the most of your capabilities, become easier.

The person who is under control is taking one thing at a time. He or she is not worried about something that happened in the past or might happen in the future. The focus is on the present task—the only thing that can be controlled.

I find that when students get stressed out they constantly view the big picture rather than focusing on the small manageable task that they can actually deal with at the moment. Thus, my attention in working with students goes first to facilitating an understanding of the importance of the present moment and helping them to take one thing at a time. I call the strategy “KISS” for “Keep It Short and Simple.” Here are seven words starting with “Re” that capture its essence.

**RESPONSIBILITY:** This is the heart of the approach. If you’re not willing to take responsibility, there is very little that you can do to gain more control of a situation. Three points are critical in learning to take responsibility.

- First, you have limited control of what goes on around you, but total control of how you choose to respond to it.
- Second, you have to be in control of yourself before you try to control your performance.
- Third, “Attitude is a decision.” You choose how you want to think about a situation.

It is critical to start to view adversity as an opportunity and to view a crisis as a challenge. This change in perspective can do a lot to defuse a stressful situation and make it more productive.
RECOGNITION: Once you take responsibility, the next key is to recognize when you are starting to lose your focus. Think of your awareness as a traffic light inside your body. At a given moment, is the light green or yellow or red? The answer comes not as a definite thought perhaps, but as a feeling. When you are driving, you don't really think as you approach a traffic light. You see the light and respond. Likewise, as you navigate a day's events, you may not need to "think" about the signals so much as simply to be aware of what is happening and respond. On a good day, the light is green. You are just doing it; you're in the "flow zone." Cruise right on through.

Your yellow light comes on when you start to have trouble: arguing with a roommate, discovering you have a quiz in a class the next day, being rejected by a date or close friend. At this point you gradually start to tighten up, lose focus, and rush.

You're really struggling when the light goes red. Maybe you just realized you have not one but two quizzes. Perhaps the same day your mother informs you of some health problems she has and you get rejected on two more attempts at trying to find someone to go out with you. At this point your mind is really racing, your shoulders and lower back are tightening, and your self-talk is extremely negative.

People differ in what they choose to stress out about and in how they experience the tension. But the key is early recognition of when one is getting out of control so one can make changes before things become overwhelming.

RELEASE: Once you recognize you are out of control the next step is to let go of the pressure and "get the monkey off your back." Try tightening a fist or the muscular area where you feel tension for five to seven seconds and then let it go. Use your breath as a tool. We begin life with inhalation. When we die we exhale and let go. The breath is a mini-life-and-death cycle. When you need energy, focus on the inhalation. When you need to calm down focus on the exhalation. Such focused breathing puts your attention on the present moment. It enables you to check in with yourself and see if you are in control. And it helps you get control.

REGROUP: After releasing the pressure, regroup. Get yourself centered and balanced by standing tall and focused on the task at hand. As the baseball player Mickey Rivers once said, "There ain't no use worrying about things that are beyond your control, 'cause if they're beyond your control, there ain't no use worrying."

REFOCUS: Once you are in control of yourself again, you can think clearly and refocus on a mission or task; for example, "I'm going to read two chapters, write a rough draft of the introduction, and/or work on the computer for thirty minutes." It is important to establish a short-term plan and make a commitment to it.

READY: Now that your plan is set and you are clear and committed to what needs to be done, it is time to take a nice slow steady breath, say "Ready" and begin. Really commit to working on your task for five minutes. This can be an effective way to cope with procrastination because you won't feel overwhelmed by five minutes. Once you get started you'll generally be willing to continue.

RESPOND: Just focus on what you need to do. Trust your ability as you address and execute the task at hand.

This article was written by Dr. Ken Ravizza, Professor of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, California State University, Fullerton.