

# Managing Stress

## Overview

Tips for recognizing and managing stress.

- What is stress?
- What causes stress?
- Symptoms of stress
- Managing the symptoms of stress
- Relaxation techniques
- Taking care of yourself
- Finding help

Stress affects most of us -- it's how our minds and bodies react to change. A difficult change such as job loss or divorce can cause severe stress. But happy changes such as having a baby or starting a new job can cause stress as well.

Stress can be a good thing, energizing us as we try new activities and adapt to new circumstances. Unmanaged stress, however, can take a serious toll on our health, our relationships, and our ability to be successful in life. It can lead to unhealthy behavior, such as binge eating or excessive drinking. It can cause us to lash out in anger at our friends, relatives, or co-workers. Over time, stress can contribute to health problems such as depression and heart disease, and it can suppress our immune system, leaving us more vulnerable to other illnesses as well. In this article, you'll learn more about stress, how to manage it, and where to get help if you're suffering from severe stress, anxiety, or depression.

## What is stress?

Stress is the reaction we have to any change in our environment or within our bodies. In a threatening situation, the human body releases a surge of adrenaline. Your heart beats faster, your blood pressure rises, and your breathing quickens. When you are under stress your muscles tighten, you may perspire more, and you may even feel your stomach clench. This classic stress reaction is called the "fight or flight response," and it's an evolutionary adaptation to the archaic need to survive when hunting or faced with danger. Most experts agree that some degree of positive stress is actually good for us. It can stimulate us to peak performance for an important task. It is also linked with feelings of joy and exhilaration. In fact, a brief round of positive stress can leave us feeling refreshed, relaxed, and recharged.

But stress is *not* healthy when it occurs many times a day, day in and day out, year in and year out. With chronic stress, our bodies don't fully relax between "threats" but stay tense and poised for the next challenge. Chronic stress is associated with feelings of anxiety and overload. It is also the source of the serious health and personal consequences that are the gravest risks of stress.

### **What causes stress?**

We feel stress when we experience change at work or at home, when we're pushed to do something new and uncomfortable, or when something in our lives is not working out as expected. For many people, the causes of stress include both positive and negative changes, such as moving, starting a new project or job, receiving a difficult performance review, falling in love, breaking up, or even getting ready for a vacation. But the most common causes of severe stress are typically because of negative change, such as job loss, divorce, financial setbacks, or a serious illness.

### **Symptoms of stress**

The first step in managing stress is to become aware of it in yourself. Once you learn to recognize your own body cues, you can begin to treat your stress effectively. Stress affects everyone differently, but some of the most common signs of stress include the following:

#### **Physical symptoms of stress**

- difficulty sleeping
- fatigue
- headaches
- neck or back pain
- muscle tension
- chest pains
- heart palpitations or shortness of breath
- stomach pain or upset stomach
- constipation or diarrhea
- blushing, feeling hot
- sweaty hands or feet
- trembling, nervous tics
- increased menstrual symptoms and more extreme PMS
- decreased sexual drive

#### **Psychological symptoms of stress**

- irritability or hostility
- anger
- depression

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- “floating” anxiety (you are anxious or afraid but are not sure why)
- rapid emotional swings
- overpowering urge to cry, run, or hide

#### **Behavioral symptoms of stress**

- binge eating or food cravings
- drug or alcohol abuse
- increase in smoking
- increase in use of prescription drugs
- bullying, aggressive actions
- over-exercising
- emotional outbursts
- inactivity or lack of energy
- withdrawal from relationships or activities that were once pleasurable
- single-mindedness and extreme focus, or, the opposite -- inability to focus and to follow through on tasks

Most stress comes and goes. It's normal to notice some of the above symptoms for a few minutes or even a few hours at a time. And often, you can relieve your symptoms by following some of the simple stress-management techniques outlined in the following sections.

But if these strategies are not working -- if you're experiencing these symptoms for days or longer, if you're experiencing racing thoughts, if you're unable to control your emotions or actions, or if you're afraid that you might harm yourself or someone else, it's important to seek help immediately. See the “Finding help” section at the end of this article.

#### **Managing the symptoms of stress**

The best way to deal with stress is to identify what is causing your stress and to confront it at the source. For example, if you're worried about what your boss thinks of your performance at work, you could ask and find out. If you're anxious about a task on your to-do list, you might block out some time and get it done, or break it down into pieces and at least get started.

Other stresses can't be dealt with so directly. Most of us need to learn to live with a certain amount of conflict, change, and uncertainty. Learning about stress

management techniques, and finding one that will work for you, will help you cope with the stress that you can't avoid.

### **Relaxation techniques**

Stress increases your heart rate, breathing rate, and blood pressure. Relaxation techniques do the opposite: They lower your heart rate, breathing rate, and blood pressure. As an added benefit, regular use of relaxation techniques -- even for just a few minutes once or twice a day -- can reduce stress all day long.

Many people benefit from relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, visualization, and yoga. Some of these techniques, like yoga, are best learned with the guidance of an expert. If you are interested, look for classes at a local Y, health club, or community center. What follows is a brief explanation of some of the simple but effective relaxation techniques.

### **Deep breathing**

Deep breathing is probably the easiest relaxation technique to master and among the most effective. Slow, deep, diaphragmatic breathing actually slows down your heart rate, reduces blood pressure, and relaxes tense muscles.

Stand, sit, or lie down in a comfortable position with good posture so that your stomach is not compressed. Put one hand over your belly button. Now breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose, letting your stomach expand as much as possible. Hold your breath for a few seconds, then exhale slowly through your mouth.

When you've relaxed your stomach muscles and this deep breathing is working, you'll feel your hand on your stomach rise and fall about an inch with each breath. Keep your shoulders and the rest of your body relaxed; if you find that your shoulders are rising and falling as you breathe in and out, you are working too hard. Remember, your diaphragm should be doing the work. Slowly count to 10 when inhaling and when exhaling.

When your lungs are empty, start again with another deep breath. After just three or four breaths, you should feel the calming effect through your whole body. If you keep at it for a few minutes, you should feel a significant drop in stress.

Deep breathing is one relaxation technique you can use throughout the day, even when you have only a minute or two to spare. It's a great stress reducer when in heavy traffic or in a long line at the supermarket or bank.

### **Meditation**

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit, where you won't be interrupted or distracted for at least five or 10 minutes. If your shoes are uncomfortable, take them off. Loosen any tight clothing. Sit quietly, close your eyes, and begin to breathe deeply as described above. Focus your thoughts on a single calming image or word, clearing your mind of all other thoughts. Keep your mind clear and focused on that one word or image for several minutes.

It takes most people some practice to really concentrate on one thought and clear their minds of all distractions. If you have trouble sitting still for meditation, you might find it helpful to walk (with your eyes open) and meditate at the same time. Concentrate on your breathing or on the length and pace of your stride.

As you become able to concentrate more easily, gradually increase the amount of time that you meditate. Meditating for even 15 minutes can be refreshing.

### **Visualization**

Follow the instructions for meditation, but instead of focusing on a single word or image, use your imagination to create an entire relaxing world. Think of a scene or a place that relaxes you and imagine it in detail. You might picture yourself walking on a beach on a warm, calm evening. Imagine the sounds, the smells, the feeling of sand on your feet. Or imagine yourself in a beautiful forest, sailing a boat, or sitting by a waterfall.

Many audio recordings are available to help with visualization and guided imagery. You can find them at bookstores, music stores, and libraries.

### **Getting your right and left brain to communicate**

Moving both sides of your body will help to build communication between your left and right brain, decreasing levels of stress. This is why walking or tossing a soft ball from one hand to the other eases stress for some people.

The key to using relaxation techniques is to do them two or three times a day and to protect those times in your schedule as high-priority relaxation breaks. Some of these techniques may be difficult at first, but the more often you do them, the more easily your body learns to respond.

### **Taking care of yourself**

When you're under stress, it's important to take care of yourself. Set aside time regularly for activities you enjoy, such as listening to music, going to a movie, watching a game, or talking with a friend. Also, make sure you get enough sleep, eat healthfully, get some regular but moderate exercise, and practice positive thinking.

### Healthy eating

Healthy eating is a key part of managing stress. One good way to use nutrition as a stress management tool is to follow the “80/20” rule. If 80 percent of what you eat is healthy -- with a nutritious, low-fat mix of vegetables, fruit, and grain products -- you can allow yourself to eat what you want for the other 20 percent.

Regardless of whether you follow that rule, it’s important to eat in moderation, avoid foods with lots of salt and sugar, limit caffeine and alcohol, and drink plenty of water. This can help you keep stress under control.

### Moderate exercise

Regular exercise is one of the best ways to reduce stress and improve your mood.

You can ease tension with vigorous activities like brisk walking, running, swimming, bicycling, or swing dancing. Stretching exercises can help relieve tense muscles and improve your body’s flexibility.

Be sure to avoid overexertion as you’re getting started. Ask your doctor what would be healthy for you. Look for a level of exercise that’s safe, comfortable, and enjoyable and that you’ll be able to sustain over time.

### Positive thinking

Most of us are our own toughest critics. We think negative thoughts about ourselves all day long. Positive thinking -- a kind of “cognitive restructuring” -- involves paying attention to the negative messages we often send ourselves, and then turning them around to be more positive.

Even very successful people often think of themselves as failures or underachievers because of comments from parents or teachers that have remained with them. “You’ll never amount to anything. You’re a girl,” or “You don’t have the self-discipline to succeed,” or “You’re such a slob.” By replaying these deep-rooted (and generally untrue) messages to ourselves, we reinforce them. Positive thinking replaces these internal messages with more positive (and truer) statements that make us feel better. “I’ve accomplished a lot and I can keep on doing it.” “I procrastinate once in a while, but I’m usually on time.” “My house gets messy sometimes, but I do get it back in order eventually.”

Taking time to write down three things you’re grateful for each day -- from enjoying a sunset to a talk with a friend or special time with your child -- will also help keep you in a positive frame of mind.

### Social support

Research shows that companionship -- time spent with friends sharing thoughts and feelings -- makes you feel better and has a significant effect on your health.

Exercising with a friend, finding people who share a hobby, looking for compatible people at work or through your child's school, or getting back in touch with siblings can all help you build a healthy social support network. And those connections can form an important defense against stress.

One idea that works for many couples is for each person to make a list of things his or her spouse can do to help when they're feeling stressed and needy. This is easy to adapt for close friends. When one person is having a bad day, the other knows from the list what he or she can do to help.

### Expressing emotions

Writing and talking about your feelings and emotions has been shown to be an effective way of releasing tension and relieving stress. Even a 15-minute conversation with a close friend or relative can help if you're under stress. Studies show that people who spend time writing about their feelings and their reactions to traumatic events are less likely to feel anxious and depressed about them. If you're worried about something, try taking a few minutes to write down your thoughts. It can free your mind to move on to other things.

### Finding help

If you're having trouble coping with the stress in your life, here are some resources that may help.

- *Contact your EAP or employee resource program.* Employee assistance programs and employee resource programs are designed to help employees deal with issues that are causing them stress at work and at home. They can help you address short-term issues and to identify resources and referrals for emergency and long-term issues. If you have access to a consultant through your EAP or employee resource program, he or she may be able to discuss your particular concerns and help you find the resources you need.
- *If you need immediate help or if you are having thoughts of death or suicide,* call the National Hopeline Network at 1-800-442-HOPE (4673) or go to the nearest emergency room.
- *Talk with your doctor.* Your primary care physician can help determine whether your symptoms are indicative of a more serious problem, such as anxiety, depression, addiction, or another disorder and may be able to recommend initial treatments and refer you to a counselor or therapist in your area. Your health plan may also be able to give referrals or have a list of participating mental health counselors.

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- *Talk with clergy members or other available counselors at a house of worship.* Members of your religious community may be able to offer both emotional and practical support.

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