

Taking Care of Yourself

Overview

Ways to take care of yourself and reduce stress.

- Eat a healthy diet
- Get exercise
- Get a good night's sleep
- Reduce stress

How you deal with everyday stress as well as the stress and anxiety related to significant events affects how you feel emotionally and physically. But if you pay attention to your health and learn ways to handle stress you'll be better prepared to handle whatever challenges and changes come your way. If you make time to exercise, eat right, and do the things that make you feel good, you'll have more energy to tackle all of the other things you have to do.

Eat a healthy diet

There is no question that the foods we eat affect how we feel and look. You don't have to follow a strict diet, but it is important to follow a healthy diet. A nutritious, well-balanced diet gives you energy, protects against disease, and helps you maintain a healthy weight.

One easy rule to follow is what some experts refer to as the "80/20 rule": If 80 percent of what you eat is healthy -- with a nutritious mix of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains -- then you can let yourself eat what you want for the other 20 percent. Here are more tips for improving nutrition without overhauling your entire diet:

- *Try to fit in two to three nutritious snacks throughout the day in addition to well-balanced, but not overly large main meals.* This will give you more energy throughout the day, even during an afternoon slump. For example, you may find that eating snacks like crackers with cheese or peanut butter, yogurt, or fruits and vegetables gives you energy throughout the day so that you don't overeat at main meals.
- *Drink water throughout the day.* Cut down on the amount of soda and coffee you drink, as well as sports drinks that are often high in sugar. Sugar and caffeine may make you feel great for a little while, but when they wear off, you may feel even worse. Try to keep a bottle or large glass of water at your workstation and fill up throughout the day.
- *Replace high-fat foods with low-fat versions.* Buying low-fat salad dressings, mayonnaise, milk, ice cream, and other items you eat a lot of helps reduce calories and weight gain. Try to reduce your saturated fat intake to less than 7 percent of your daily calories.
- *Eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and fish.* Vegetables like broccoli and tomatoes are full of antioxidants that can fight cancer, and some fish like salmon have Omega-3

acids that are great for your heart. Try to build fruits and vegetables into your diet everyday. Snack on apples, oranges, dried fruit, carrot sticks, and other fruits and vegetables. Try to eat fish at least once a week.

- *Look at portion sizes when you indulge.* A little of some “junk food” won’t hurt you occasionally, but eating from the bag definitely will. Even using a smaller plate for meals will help to curb your food intake.
- *Avoid multitasking at mealtimes.* If you always watch television at meals or eat on the run a lot, you may not be aware of how much you are eating. If you’re on the go a lot, keep healthy snacks in the car and eat a little while you’re out, then a little more once you arrive home. Remember -- you don’t want to eat big meals just before going to bed.
- *If junk food is your downfall, don’t buy it.* Shop with a list to avoid impulsive buys. The healthiest foods are usually around the outer perimeter of the grocery store, so stay away from the aisles where the processed foods tend to be.

Get exercise

People who exercise even moderately have much lower rates of heart disease and other medical problems, and regular exercise is a great way to reduce stress. But exercise is often the first thing to go when schedules get busy or during difficult times. Experts recommend that adults get a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise that makes you breathe harder on all or most days of the week. If the thought of joining a gym or reserving half an hour everyday for exercise seems impossible, try starting with small steps and building up over time. Instead of worrying about fitting in 30 minutes of exercise into your daily routine, concentrate on what you can do whenever you have five or 10 minutes -- it will add up. Here are some easy ways to build exercise into your life:

- *Take a short walk during breaks at work.* Walking just 15 minutes a day can make a big difference in how you feel. If you have trouble breaking away from work, pair up with a co-worker to make sure neither of you misses a planned walk. Even parking farther away from your workplace will add in some exercise, as well as give you more time to clear your head before starting to work or starting the drive home. Park at the opposite end of the grocery lot when you have a little time -- combined with pushing the full cart, this will help both strength and endurance.
- *Get exercise while you’re watching television.* Buy a set of hand weights and exercise during commercials or do sit-ups while you’re watching TV.
- *Turn family time into exercise time.* Try exploring a local park, going for a hike or bike ride, or just walking around the block with your family instead of going to the movies or shopping.

- *Stretch for just a minute or two when you wake up each day.* In addition to helping you ease into your day, a brief stretching routine can restore or build flexibility and energize your body.

Get a good night's sleep

When you're well rested, everything in your life is easier. You think more clearly, feel better, look better, and have more stamina and energy. But sleep is a basic need that many people ignore. Many people don't get the eight hours of sleep that are recommended for good physical and emotional health. And during times of stress, even people who usually sleep soundly may have trouble getting enough sleep. A lack of sleep -- even for just a few days -- can leave you feeling irritable, frustrated, and forgetful, and can also make you more susceptible to illness. Here are some tips for getting a good night's sleep:

- *Establish a bedtime routine.* Even adults need a bedtime routine. By adopting a routine and then sticking with it, you can train your mind and body to feel relaxed and ready to fall asleep when you start the routine. A bedtime routine can be as simple as listening to soft music, drinking a cup of herbal tea, or taking a bath and then turning out the lights at the same time every night. If you watch TV before bed, try not to watch programs that are violent or make you think too much, as it may then be difficult to turn off your brain.
- *Avoid or limit caffeine and alcohol after five o'clock.* The effects of caffeine can last for three to four hours and for some people, even longer. And though it may seem like alcohol makes it easier to fall asleep, it may wake you up later in the night.
- *Try to exercise during the day.* Many people find that regular exercise helps them sleep well at night. However, exercise too late in the afternoon or evening may actually interfere with sleep.
- *If you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, try not to lie in bed worrying about the fact that you can't fall asleep.* Get up and do something relaxing instead. You might try the following:
 - Read something light or listening to music in another room until you feel sleepy.
 - Do deep breathing or other relaxation exercises.
 - Drink a cup of hot milk -- research shows that the amino acids in milk may help you get to sleep.
- *If your sleep problems persist, you may want to talk to your health care provider.* Some sleep problems can be related to depression, anxiety, or chronic pain, all of which can be treated with professional help.

Reduce stress

Stress is a normal part of life for most people. But stress can affect your health, the way you feel, and your ability to perform well at work and at home. That's why it's so important to learn ways to deal with stress.

In some cases, the best way to deal with stress is to go straight to the source. If you've been worrying about tackling your to-do list, you can take a minute to prioritize it. If you're anxious about what your manager thinks of your job performance, you can ask and find out.

But some stresses can't be dealt with directly, and you will have to learn to live with them. The first step in managing stress is becoming aware of how you react to it. Once you learn how you react to stress and how it's affecting the way you feel and behave, you can start treating it. Here are some common symptoms of stress:

- fatigue
- depression
- anger or irritability
- headaches or neck or back pain
- stomach pain
- changes in appetite (eating too much or too little)
- drug or alcohol abuse or increase in use
- increase in smoking

Different techniques for dealing with stress work for different people. You may need to try several different approaches before you find something that works for you. Here are some ideas:

- *Learn some relaxation techniques.* Deep breathing and meditation are two of the most widely used relaxation techniques. To do deep breathing, try inhaling as you count to five slowly, and exhaling as you reverse the count. Some people also find it helpful to relax each part of their body in succession, starting with the right foot, right leg, right shoulder, right hand, and so on, back down the left side.
- *Use exercise to relieve stress.* The next time you feel frustrated or overwhelmed at work or home, try taking a walk or bike ride. Many people find that physical activity relieves stress.
- *Express your emotions.* Writing and talking about your emotions can be very effective for dealing with stress. Talking to a trusted friend or writing about your

feelings in a journal can help you release strong feelings instead of keeping them bottled up, which can lead to more stress.

- *Make time to do things that make you feel good.* Whether it's going to a movie, spending time with a relative or friend, or going for a walk, it's important that you schedule time to do things that you enjoy and make you feel good so that you can cope with the pressures that cause you stress.
- *Make a date with someone who supports you.* During times of stress, it helps to reach out to others who care and who will listen and understand. Don't be afraid to ask for help and support, as your friends and family members may not realize that you are under a lot of stress. They may be able to help you find solutions to some of the issues you are facing.
- *Contact your health care provider, your employee assistance program (EAP), or the program that provided this publication for help with stress reduction.* Your health care provider, EAP, or the program that provided this publication can offer resources and support with reducing stress. If you find that stress is interfering with your job performance, personal relationships, or sleep, it might be time to consider talking with a counselor about how to better handle your stress. Often, people do better talking about it rather than trying to ignore all that is going on or trying to handle it themselves. A fresh perspective from someone not intimately involved in your life may help you to find other ways to cope or relieve some of the stress.

Taking care of yourself means paying attention to your physical and emotional needs. It means eating nutritious foods, getting exercise and sleep, and carving out time for pleasure and for being with people you care about. It also means learning ways to cope with feelings of stress so that you're able to handle whatever challenges come your way with resilience and flexibility. These are all things you can start working on -- today.

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