

What Is Stress Management?

Now more than ever, stress can feel like an ever-present part of life.

Whether you work in an office, at home or a factory, or manage a household and care for energetic kids, every week can bring many stressful situations. Particular stressors can affect some groups more than others. And that's to say nothing of the ongoing pandemic. COVID-19, its economic impact and the social isolation of lockdowns took a toll on many Americans' mental health.

Let's talk about some of the sources of stress and what you can do to manage stress.

But first, a basic question you may be asking:

Is stress really a problem?

Yes, especially if your "stressed out" feeling remains constant, or chronic. Chronic stress can affect your physical and mental health. It can weaken your immune system and cause physical symptoms too.

Talking about stress and its impact on our lives is still somewhat taboo. That's especially true for some groups: Among Black communities, for example, acknowledging stress may be viewed as inconsistent with a strong work ethic. Many in the Black community may not feel as though they have the luxury to worry about stress management.

Common causes of stress

When people cite what's causing them stress, many answers have remained near the top of the list for years.

Commonly mentioned causes of stress include:

- money
- work
- health issues

- family responsibilities (caregiving can be particularly stressful)

These answers span generations and groups. But certain stressors, such as discrimination, affect some groups more than others. Making matters worse, many members of affected communities may not feel as though they can afford to manage stress, lacking the privilege of available time or income that others may be able to devote to de-stressing.

It's also worth making another observation about what causes stress, whether that cause is universal or specific to some groups. All too often, stress results from factors out of our control.

That brings us to a recent cause of stress, for everyone.

The ongoing impact of COVID-19

No question, 2020 had a devastating impact, on many fronts. But one of the lagging effects that has slowly revealed itself? The ongoing pandemic's profound impact on the nation's mental health.

Even before the pandemic, people in the U.S. were already among the most stressed populations in the world. COVID-19 and the social isolation of lockdowns impacted the minds of many.

A recent 2022 study found people in the U.S. have reported higher levels of loneliness, burnout, depression and sleep problems. Approximately 50% of people in the U.S. reported feelings of loneliness with highest rates in young adults. Many have turned to unhealthy ways to cope with stress, such as overeating, staring at screens nonstop, drinking to excess or substance abuse.

Why should we try to manage stress?

Chronic stress is bad for you. So, it makes sense that lowering your stress will lower your risk for the harmful physical and mental health effects of stress. A constant state of stress can sap your creativity, productivity and motivation. You want to manage stress so you can live your best life.

Keys to stress management

The first step is awareness. Step “away from yourself” for a moment. Objectively ask yourself, “Is my stress level too high?” If so, what is causing my stress?

This process alone may help. Once you identify your stressors, you can ask yourself, “Is this a factor out of my control?” Sometimes, the acknowledgement that something is not in your control will give you a helpful (and healthful) perspective. It may not be worth fretting over something you can’t change.

That’s not to say that you can’t take steps to manage stress. In fact, here’s a handy list of stress-busters:

- **Move more.** Exercise is a great antidote to stress.
- **Deep breathing.** This can help relax your mind and body.
- **Meditation or prayer.** Many find relief in mindfulness.
- **Mind/body practices.** Consider tai chi or yoga.
- **Get some rest.** Strive for seven to nine hours of sleep per night.
- **Get outside.** A walk in a nature, or a city park, can help.
- **Find a furry friend.** Pets can have a positive impact on your health.