

## The Benefits of Stress Management:

We are all familiar with stress — it's a fact of life. With the rapid pace of modern living, it feels increasingly difficult to keep up. Sadly, the negative effects of stress are widespread and growing.

Our stress response is triggered when we are faced with overwhelming demands. The demands can be large or small, but it's the importance we attach to them that decides their impact. Important pressures we feel incapable of coping with result in stress, and prolonged exposure to these reactions can have an impact on physical, emotional and mental health.

To help yourself over the long-term stress:

Try to build stress-reducing activities into your life, such as exercise, relaxation and hobbies.

Eat well and ensure you have sufficient rest and sleep to prepare yourself for the inevitable stresses of life.

Avoid making self-critical comments.

Become aware of your own strengths, weaknesses and needs.

Make it a priority to get plenty of support rather than trying to cope alone.

Write down your thoughts so they begin to make sense. Decide on priorities and look for solutions.

Think creatively — what might another person do in your situation?

Delegate, share responsibility, and renegotiate deadlines. Often those around you won't realize how overloaded you're feeling.

Prepare for events as much as possible in advance, but don't try to be perfect, or expect other people and events to be perfect.

Always seek expert advice when you experience severe physical and emotional symptoms.

## Impact on health

Persistent reactions to stress can lead to serious health problems, including:

1) Cardiovascular disease. One study that tracked over 68,000 healthy adults for eight years found that those who reported feeling constantly under strain and unable to cope, among other symptoms of chronic stress, were likelier to die of cardiovascular disease. The results of another study associated

chronic stress with a 40-60% increased risk of coronary heart disease.

2) Digestive disorders. The “brain-gut” connection has a two-way effect: digestive disorders can

Learn more about irritable bowel syndrome

cause stress, and the negative effects of stress can cause and aggravate digestive disorders. Part of the fight-or-flight response’s job is to halt digestion so the body can focus its energy on dealing with the perceived threat. Prolonged stress, then, can disrupt the normal digestive function and cause bloating, pain, and discomfort.

3) Accelerated aging. Elissa Epel, a professor at the University of California, has focused much of her research on the relationship between stress and telomerase (the enzyme associated with aging). Her studies show that people with chronic stress in their lives, such as mothers with chronically ill children, have markedly shortened telomeres. In fact, one landmark study found that these women aged on average ten years faster than women who did not perceive chronic stress in their lives.

4) Decreased immune functioning. Since the 1980s, research has found that stress can negatively affect the immune system. The American Psychological Association suggests that one cause of stress that might be most intricately linked to immune function is loneliness—people who don’t have a support system to lean on in stressful times wind up getting sicker more often.

According to the HeartMath Institute, other effects of stress include weight gain and obesity, headaches, irritability, diabetes, and insomnia, among others.

Impact on relationships

angry couple in their kitchen, not looking at one another If you have ever spent time with someone who is suffering from severe stress, you’ll understand the ways it can affect how you two relate—the anger, irritation, and frustration that comes from stress can easily influence the things we say and how we treat one another.

In a 2009 study, researchers Neff and Karney examined the lives of newlyweds and found that during periods of high perceived stress, people tended to react more intensely to the normal ups and downs in a relationship—creating, in effect, problems where there weren’t any. When we perceive high amounts of stress, we tend to blame or take out our frustrations on others. This can create real damage in a relationship, affecting communication and trust, which then becomes another source of stress.

Impact on job performance

Stress at work is very common—the fight-or-flight response reserved for true threats can often be triggered by a demanding manager or an upcoming deadline. But reacting to chronic stress can impair your ability to succeed at your job. In fact, stress can impact job performance in a variety of ways,

including:

woman sitting at work desk with headset and several computers Physical symptoms that recur on work days (for example, upset stomach, headaches)

Difficulty making decisions

Dread of work days

Wanting to avoid or leave work

Emotional swings at work (for example, anger outbreaks or feelings of helplessness)

Procrastination

Inefficiency

Stress can lead to burnout—emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of low personal accomplishment that leads to decreased effectiveness at work. For example, in a recent study from the prestigious journal *Archives of Internal Medicine*, over 45% of practicing physicians are experiencing at least one symptom of burnout, which can lead to dangerous mistakes and lapses in judgment that could affect a patient's health. A similar pattern of burnout is undoubtedly found in many other occupations, demonstrating the importance of stress management in the workplace.