



Stress: Coping With Life's Stressors

Stress sometimes gets the better of us. Coping strategies for big stressful life changes or negative situations can help you keep a positive self-image — and your equilibrium.

Why is it important to learn to cope with stress?

Coping usually involves adjusting to or tolerating negative events or realities while you try to keep your positive self-image and emotional equilibrium. Coping occurs in the context of life changes that are perceived to be stressful. Psychological stress is usually associated with negative life changes, such as losing a job or loved one. However, all changes require some sort of adaptation. Even positive changes — such as getting married or having a child — can be stressful.

Changes are stressful because changes require us to adjust and to adapt. Experiencing too many changes within a brief time period often creates the idea that we aren't in control of events. This perception

contributes to [low self-esteem](#) and may even contribute to the development of [anxiety](#) or [depression](#). In some cases, physical illnesses may develop or get worse when a person's capacity to adapt to change is overwhelmed by too much change.

Coping involves adjusting to unusual demands, or stressors. This requires giving a greater effort and using greater energy than what's needed in the daily routines of life. Prolonged mobilization of effort can contribute to elevated levels of stress-related hormones and to eventual physical breakdown and illness.

Stressors that require coping may be acute, like moving to a new home or experiencing the onset of marriage problems. Stressors also occur that are of longer duration, such as chronic pain, chronic illness or long-lasting financial problems.

The effect of many acute stressors that come within a relatively brief period of time may be cumulative and profound. Those who experience a marital separation, the death of an aging parent and a change in job within a brief period of time may struggle to maintain their physical and emotional health.

What are some common coping strategies?

Some common coping mechanisms may challenge you to:

- Lower your expectations.
- Ask others to help or assist you.
- Take responsibility for the situation.
- Engage in problem solving.

- Maintain emotionally supportive relationships.
- Maintain emotional composure or, alternatively, expressing distressing emotions.
- Challenge previously held beliefs that are no longer adaptive.
- Directly attempt to change the source of stress.
- Distance yourself from the source of stress.
- View the problem through a religious perspective.

Experts agree that coping is a process rather than an event. You may alternate between several of the above coping strategies in order to cope with a stressful event.

People differ in particular styles of coping or prefer to use certain coping strategies over others. These differences in coping styles usually reflect differences in personality. Rigidity in coping is less likely to help than is flexibility in coping — being able to fit the most appropriate coping strategy to the demands of different situations.

However, some situations that require coping are likely to elicit (bring out) similar coping responses from most people. For example, work-related stressors are more likely to elicit problem-solving strategies. Stressors that are perceived to be changeable are more likely to elicit problem-solving strategies while stressors perceived to be unchangeable are more likely to elicit social support seeking and emotion-focused strategies.

What can we do to protect ourselves against stress and enhance our prospects for successful coping? Perhaps the most important strategy is to maintain emotionally supportive relationships with others. A vast field of research demonstrates that emotional support buffers individuals against the negative impact of stress.

It's especially important to evaluate your overall lifestyle when encountering significant stress. Engage in stress-reducing activities to help your overall approach to coping with stressors. Try to:

- Get enough good quality sleep.
- Eat a well-balanced diet.
- [Exercise](#) on a regular basis.
- Take brief rest periods during the day to relax.
- Take vacations away from home and work.
- Engage in pleasurable or fun activities every day.
- Practice relaxation exercises such as yoga, prayer, meditation or [progressive muscle relaxation](#).
- Avoid use of caffeine and alcohol.



✓ Medically Reviewed

Last reviewed on 11/24/2020.

Learn more about the [Health Library](#) and our [editorial process](#).

References ▼

Appointments **866.588.2264**

APPOINTMENTS & LOCATIONS

[REQUEST AN APPOINTMENT](#)

Actions

[Appointments & Access](#)
[Accepted Insurance](#)
[Events Calendar](#)
[Financial Assistance](#)
[Give to Cleveland Clinic](#)
[Pay Your Bill Online](#)
[Refer a Patient](#)
[Phone Directory](#)
[Virtual Second Opinions](#)
[Virtual Visits](#)

Blog, News & Apps

[Consult QD](#)
[Health Essentials](#)
[Newsroom](#)
[MyClevelandClinic](#)
[MyChart](#)

About Cleveland Clinic

[100 Years of Cleveland Clinic](#)
[About Us](#)
[Locations](#)
[Quality & Patient Safety](#)
[Patient Experience](#)
[Research & Innovations](#)
[Community Commitment](#)
[Careers](#)
[For Employees](#)
[Resources for Medical Professionals](#)

Site Information & Policies

[Send Us Feedback](#)
[Site Map](#)
[About this Website](#)
[Copyright, Reprint & Licensing](#)
[Website Terms of Use](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Notice of Privacy Practices](#)
[Non-Discrimination Notice](#)

