

# **Stress Management**

## **Stress**

Stress is your body's response to changes in your life. We all feel stress at one time or another. It's a normal and healthy reaction to change or a challenge. But stress that goes on for more than a few weeks can affect your health. Keep stress from making you sick by learning healthy ways to manage it.

Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the demands of life. A small amount of stress can be good, motivating you to perform well. But many challenges daily, such as sitting in traffic, meeting deadlines and paying bills, can push you beyond your ability to cope.

Your brain comes hard-wired with an alarm system for your protection. When your brain perceives a threat, it signals your body to release a burst of hormones that increase your heart rate and raise your blood pressure. This "fight-or-flight" response fuels you to deal with the threat.

Once the threat is gone, your body is meant to return to a normal, relaxed state. Unfortunately, the nonstop complications of modern life and its demands and expectations mean that some people's alarm systems rarely shut off.

## **LEARN TO RECOGNIZE STRESS**

The first step in managing stress is recognizing it in your life. Everyone feels stress differently. You may get angry or irritable, lose sleep, or have headaches or stomach upset. What are your signs of stress? Once you know what signals to look for, you can start to manage them.

Also, identify the situations that cause you stress. These are called stressors. Your stressors could be family, school, work, relationships, money, or health problems. Once you understand where your stress is coming from, you can come up with ways to deal with your stressors.

## **What happens to the body during stress?**

The body's autonomic nervous system controls your heart rate, breathing, vision changes and more. Its built-in stress response, the "fight-or-flight response," helps the body face stressful situations.

When a person has long-term (chronic) stress, continued activation of the stress response causes wear and tear on the body. Physical, emotional and behavioural symptoms develop.

### **Physical symptoms of stress include:**

Aches and pains.

Chest pain or a feeling like your heart is racing.

Exhaustion or trouble sleeping.

Headaches, dizziness or shaking.

High blood pressure.

Muscle tension or jaw clenching.

Stomach or digestive problems.

Trouble having sex.

Weak immune system.

### **Stress can lead to emotional and mental symptoms like:**

Anxiety or irritability.

Depression.

Panic attacks.

Sadness.

Often, people with chronic stress try to manage it with unhealthy behaviours, including:

Drinking alcohol too much or too often.

Gambling.

Overeating or developing an eating disorder.

Participating compulsively in sex, shopping or internet browsing.

Smoking.

Using drugs.

### **Stress Management Activities**

Some of the most important activities for stress management include optimizing sleep, eating, and exercise.

#### **Sleep**

Insufficient sleep contributes to greater HPA axis activation. That's why stress management should include improving the duration and quality of sleep. To start, be sure to block out blue light (from TVs, phones, and computers) at least 30 minutes before bed. You might also try getting blue-light-blocking glasses or getting a sleep-inducing red light bulb (which improves sleep) for your bedside lamp.

### **Diet**

Dieting or restricting calories increases HPA activation. So if you're aiming to manage stress be sure to eat enough nutritious food to fuel all your body's systems.

### **Exercise**

Because exercise increases the demand for energy and cortisol, avoid high-intensity exercise when trying to get your stress under control. Instead, do low-intensity exercises like walking, swimming, or yoga.

### **Stress Management Skills**

In addition to making sure we do stress management activities, we can also build up our stress management skills. Here are some skills that can help you beat stress.

#### **Try meditation**

Multiple studies have shown that meditation can decrease cortisol in the context of stressful situations. This suggests that building our meditation skills may help to manage stress.

#### **Find opportunities to be kind to others**

Expressing positivity towards others, for example with compassion, gratitude, and loving-kindness can buffer us against stress. So finding ways to be kind may indeed be a good stress reducer.

#### **Shift your mindset**

When we are stressed, we can view the situation as a challenge that we can handle or a threat that we are afraid of. The research suggests that viewing a situation as a challenge (and not a threat) reduces our stress. So try to remind yourself that "You can do this! And you're stronger than you think!"

### **Stress Management Techniques**

Changing our minds is just one avenue for stress management. We can also practice stress management techniques that capitalize on the body-mind connection. Here are some science-based stress management techniques to try:

### **Progressive muscle relaxation**

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing a group of muscles as you breathe in and quickly releasing tension as you breathe out. Proceed through one set of muscles at a time. For example, start with the hands, then the forearms, then the biceps, then the shoulders, and so on. Research has shown that progressive muscle relaxation can lower cortisol, so it may be a helpful technique to try.

### **Breathing exercises**

One effective way to activate the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest and digest system) is with deep breathing. For example, cycling slow breathing (2-4 breaths per minute) then fast (30 breaths per minute), and then ending with three long “Om”s, can reduce anxiety. Breathing techniques like this and others can help turn off your stress response.

### **Cold water dunk**

Another way to activate the parasympathetic nervous system is by submerging our bodies in cold water. So, if you’re feeling stressed, jump in a cold shower or pool to tamp down your stress.

## **FIND HEALTHY STRESS BUSTERS**

There are many healthy ways to manage stress. Try a few and see which ones work best for you.

**Recognize the things you can't change.** Accepting that you can't change certain things allows you to let go and not get upset. For instance, you cannot change the fact that you have to drive during rush hour. But you can look for ways to relax during your commutes, such as listening to a podcast or book.

**Avoid stressful situations.** When you can, remove yourself from the source of stress. For example, if your family squabbles during the holidays, give yourself a breather and go out for a walk or drive.

**Get exercise.** Getting physical activity every day is one of the easiest and best ways to cope with stress. When you exercise, your brain releases chemicals that make you feel good. It can also help you release built-up energy or frustration. Find something you enjoy, whether it is walking, cycling, softball, swimming, or dancing, and do it for at least 30 minutes on most days.

**Change your outlook.** Try to develop a more positive attitude toward challenges. You can do this by replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones. For example, rather than thinking, "Why does everything always go wrong?" change this thought to, "I can find a way to get through this." It may seem hard or silly at first, but with practice, you may find it helps turn your outlook around.

**Do something you enjoy.** When stress has you down, do something you enjoy to help pick you up. It could be as simple as reading a good book, listening to music, watching a favourite movie, or having dinner with a friend. Or, take up a new hobby or class. Whatever you choose, try to do at least one thing a day that's just for you.

**Learn new ways to relax.** Practising relaxation techniques is a great way to handle daily stress. Relaxation techniques help slow your heart rate and lower your blood pressure. There are many types, from deep breathing and meditation to yoga and tai chi. Take a class, or try learning from books, videos, or online sources.

**Connect with loved ones.** Do not let stress get in the way of being social. Spending time with family and friends can help you feel better and forget about your stress. Confiding with a friend may also help you work out your problems.

**Get enough sleep.** Getting a good night's sleep can help you think more clearly and have more energy. This will make it easier to handle any problems that crop up. Aim for about 7 to 9 hours each night.

**Maintain a healthy diet.** Eating healthy foods helps fuel your body and mind. Skip the high-sugar snack foods and load up on vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low-fat or nonfat dairy, and lean proteins.

**Learn to say no.** If your stress comes from taking on too much at home or work, learn to set limits. Ask others for help when you need it.

### **What are some strategies for stress relief?**

You can't avoid stress, but you can stop it from becoming overwhelming by practising some daily strategies:

Exercise when you feel symptoms of stress coming on. Even a short walk can boost your mood.

At the end of each day, take a moment to think about what you've accomplished — not what you didn't get done.

Set goals for your day, week and month. Narrowing your view will help you feel more in control of the moment and long-term tasks.

Consider talking to a therapist or your healthcare provider about your worries.

### **What are some ways to prevent stress?**

Many daily strategies can help you keep stress at bay:

Try relaxation activities, such as meditation, yoga, tai chi, breathing exercises and muscle relaxation. Programs are available online, in smartphone apps, and at many gyms and community centres.

Take good care of your body each day. Eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep help your body handle stress much better.

Stay positive and practice gratitude, acknowledging the good parts of your day or life.

Accept that you can't control everything. Find ways to let go of worry about situations you cannot change.

Learn to say "no" to additional responsibilities when you are too busy or stressed.

Stay connected with people who keep you calm, make you happy, provide emotional support and help you with practical things. A friend, family member or neighbour can become a good listener or share responsibilities so that stress doesn't become overwhelming.

### **How long does stress last?**

Stress can be a short-term issue or a long-term problem, depending on what changes in your life. Regularly using stress management techniques can help you avoid most physical, emotional and behavioural symptoms of stress.

### **When should I talk to a doctor about stress?**

You should seek medical attention if you feel overwhelmed if you are using drugs or alcohol to cope, or if you have thoughts about hurting yourself. Your primary care provider can help by offering advice, prescribing medicine or referring you to a therapist.

### **References:**

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