

# Coping With Stress

**Stress can be caused by** everything from your daily commute, your children, caring for a sick relative, trouble paying a bill, or studying for an exam – to major events like a break up or losing your job. The increasing demands of home and work life mean many people are under enormous stress, and stress in one setting can affect stress levels in other parts of your life.

## How Does Stress Affect Your Body?

Stress can have physical effects on your body that are similar to what happens when you feel physically threatened. Stress can cause shortness of breath, upset stomach, diarrhea, constipation, nausea, aches and pains, tense muscles, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, and trouble sleeping or insomnia. These physical effects can make it hard to think clearly, manage your emotions, and function effectively. The goal of stress management is to bring your nervous system back into balance, giving you a sense of calm and improving your ability to handle whatever or whoever is causing your stress.

There are no “one size fits all” solutions to managing stress and you may need to try more than one method to learn what works best for you.

## Coping With the Physical Effects of Stress

- **Try deep breathing:** Stress often causes our breathing to be shallow, which nearly always causes more stress because it puts less oxygen in the bloodstream and increases muscle tension. The next time you feel uptight, try taking a minute to slow down and breathe deeply. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.
- **Take a mental vacation:** Take a moment to close your eyes and imagine a place where you feel relaxed and comfortable. Notice all the details of your chosen place, including pleasant sounds, smells and the temperature. Or, change your mental "channel" by reading a good book or playing relaxing music to create a sense of peace and tranquility.
- **Take a warm bath or shower:** Wash the stress away and give yourself some time by yourself to reflect and quiet the mind. Soaking in the bathtub can make you feel like you are a world away from your reality.
- **Use aromatherapy:** Originating in ancient China, aromatherapy is based on the healing properties of plants, from which concentrated aromatic oils are extracted. The vapors of these “essential oils” are inhaled and carried via the bloodstream, which controls the release of hormones and emotions.
- **Care for a pet:** Petting an animal can help reduce stress and lower blood pressure.
- **Meditate:** Quiet your mind by engaging in exercises that help you focus on your breathing, an object, or your body sensations. The goal is to relax the mind, body and spirit.

- Practice Yoga or Tai Chi: Relax your muscles, slow your breathing, and focus your mind's attention to the present moment.
- Get a massage: As your muscles relax, so does your entire body, as well as your mind.
- Express your feelings instead of bottling them up: In order to live a less stressful life, learn to calm your emotions. A good cry during periods of stress, or sharing your concerns with someone you trust can be healthy ways to bring relief to your anxiety.

## Changing Your Thinking to Manage Stress

- Keep a journal: One strategy that many people have found effective in coping with stress is keeping a journal, sometimes referred to as a "stress diary." Putting your worries into words may help you see that you don't really have that much to worry about, or it may help you get organized and manage your stress, rather than letting it manage you. Regardless, keeping a journal should help you identify your concerns and establish a plan for moving forward.
  - List the situations that produce stress in your life (e.g., moving to a new location, work or school demands, balancing priorities, job promotion, etc.).
  - Describe how you cope with each type of stressful experience.
  - Evaluate your responses. Are they healthy or unhealthy, appropriate or unproductive?
- Have realistic expectations: Know your limits. Whether personally or professionally, be realistic about how much you can do. Set limits for yourself and learn to say "no" to more work and commitments.
- Reframe problems: See problems as opportunities. As a result of positive thinking, you will be able to handle whatever is causing your stress. Refute negative thoughts and try to see the glass as half full. It is easy to fall into the rut of seeing only the negative when you are stressed. Your thoughts can become like a pair of dark glasses, allowing little light or joy into your life.
- Maintain your sense of humor: This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. Watch a funny movie: the sillier the plot the better. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.
- Don't try to control events or other people: Many circumstances in life are beyond your control, particularly the behavior of others. Consider that we live in an imperfect world. Learn to accept what is, for now, until the time comes when perhaps you can change things.
- Ask yourself "Is this my problem?": If it isn't, leave it alone. If it is, can you resolve it now? Once the problem is settled, leave it alone. Don't agonize over the decision, and try to accept situations you cannot change.

## Planning to Manage Stress

- Manage time: One of the greatest sources of stress is over-commitment or poor time management. Plan ahead. Make a reasonable schedule for yourself and include time for stress reduction as a regular part of your schedule. When you try to take care of everything at once, it can seem overwhelming and as a result, you may not accomplish anything. Instead, make a list of what tasks you have to do, and then complete them one at a time, checking them off as they are completed.

- Give priority to the most important tasks and do those first: If a particularly unpleasant task faces you, tackle it early in the day and get it over with. You will experience less anxiety the rest of the day as a result. Most importantly, do not overwork yourself. Resist the temptation to schedule things back-to-back. All too often, we underestimate how long things will take.
- Schedule time for both work and recreation: Too much studying or working is actually inefficient and can lead to burnout.
- Delegate tasks and break up big projects: Being efficient and effective means you must delegate tasks and prioritize, schedule, budget and plan your precious time. Aim to work in short, intensive periods, which allow you to rest in between. Break big projects into smaller, more manageable tasks so you don't feel overwhelmed and nothing gets done as a result.

## **Changing Lifestyle Habits to Manage Stress**

- Get enough sleep: Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally.
- Connect with others: Develop a support system and share your feelings. Perhaps a friend, family member, teacher, clergy person or counselor can help you see your problem in a different light. Talking with someone else can help clear your mind of confusion so that you can focus on problem solving.
- Exercise regularly: Find at least 30 minutes, three times per week to do something physical. Nothing beats aerobic exercise to dissipate the excess energy. Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. During times of high stress, choose things you like to do. It also is beneficial to have a variety of exercise outlets. Be physically fit in ways appropriate for your age, rather than being sedentary.
- Eat a balanced, nutritious diet: Be mindful of what you put in your body. Healthy eating fuels your mind, as well as your body. Take time to eat breakfast in the morning, it will help keep you going throughout the day. Eating several balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day will give you the energy to think rationally and clearly. Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress.
- Reduce caffeine and sugar: Avoid consuming too much caffeine and sugar. In excessive amounts, the temporary "highs" they provide often end in fatigue or a "crash" later. You'll feel more relaxed, less jittery or nervous, and you'll sleep better. In addition, you'll have more energy, less heartburn and fewer muscle aches.
- Don't self-medicate with alcohol or drugs: While consuming alcohol or drugs may appear to alleviate stress, it is only temporary. When sober, the problems and stress will still be there. Don't mask the issue at hand; deal with it head on and with a clear mind.
- Do something for yourself everyday: Take time out from the hustle and bustle of life for leisure time. Too much work is actually inefficient and can lead to burnout. Recognize when you are most stressed and allow yourself some reasonable breaks. When things feel especially difficult, take a walk or change your scenery. Most importantly, have fun. Do things that make you happy.

## **When professional help is needed for stress management**

There's a fine line between feeling stressed out while still being able to function effectively, and the debilitating, even paralyzing phenomenon we think of as burnout or breakdown. The difference is between handling your stress on your own, and being unable to figure out what to do because the pressures of life have become so overwhelming. It's time to seek professional help if you:

- Feel that stress is affecting your health.
- Feel that it will never end.
- Feel so desperate that you think about quitting your job, running away, taking a drug overdose, or injuring yourself.
- Feel depressed, sad, tearful, or that life is not worth living.
- Lose your appetite and find it difficult to sleep.
- Are managing your stress level by eating, sleeping, drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking, or using recreational drugs.
- Have worries, feeling and thoughts that are difficult to talk about.
- Hear voices telling you what to do.