

Coping with Stress

Expertise in Matters of the Heart

STRESS

Stress is anything that challenges your mind and body. Whether you are driving in rush-hour traffic, coping with family ups and downs, or anticipating a future problem ... you will encounter stress.

Anytime you interrupt your routine or a train of thought to deal with large or small challenges, you are dealing with stress.

Stress is unavoidable. Living is an ongoing process of dealing with challenges. Life is stressful! Not all stress is harmful. Some stress is actually necessary to healthy living. New and exciting experiences are stressful but rewarding.

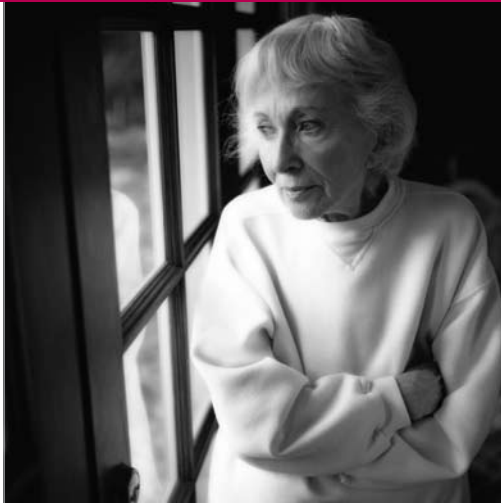
Stress appears to be the most harmful when it goes on for too long without periods of relief. Your body runs in high gear during stressful periods. A common mistake during times of great stress is to feel that, "I just don't have time to take a break because there is too much to do."

Managing your stress is the key. It is not always possible to "get rid of stress" or "avoid stress." It is possible and desirable to manage how you respond to stress.

THE STRESS RESPONSE

When your brain perceives a threat and activates the stress response, stress hormones and chemicals are released and instantly affect every system in your body. This happens whether or not the threat is real.

The stress response helps you avoid hitting another driver with your car. It is also triggered if you are worrying about a future event. Your brain does not see a difference between real and imagined threats when it triggers the stress response.



Every organ system in your body is affected by the stress response. Some of these effects include:

Increased pulse rate

The heart beats faster to increase the blood flow to the brain and the large muscles.

Increased blood pressure

While the heart beats faster, the small arteries in the arms and legs contract and raise your blood pressure. Too much stress can cause chronic high blood pressure, damage to the lining of the arteries, and increased cholesterol buildup in the damaged arteries.

Increased breathing rate

Breathing becomes more rapid to provide more oxygen and release carbon dioxide.

Automatic release of sugars and fats into the bloodstream

Sugars provide quick energy during a stress response. Chronic stress responses make it very hard for diabetics to regulate their blood sugar levels.

Increased muscle tension

The large muscles tense to prepare for physical activity. The muscles in the shoulders, neck, lower back, and legs are affected. You may notice muscle aches after prolonged stress.

A slowing of the digestive system

During a stress response, the central nervous system directs energy away from digestion and slows the digestive system. People may have indigestion, ulcers, and bowel problems.

Mood changes

The stress response makes you more alert mentally and emotionally to deal with problems. Long-term stress responses can increase anxiety, depression, and fatigue.

Suppression of the immune system

The usual mechanism that fights infections in the body is decreased during stress. Infectious illnesses are more likely to develop when we have been under stress for a long time. Colds and flu often follow times of stress.

Changing your behavioral responses

Taking responsibility for your health and staying in good condition help you resist stress. This may require changing your behavior and lifestyle.

Stress management includes: maintaining a nutritious diet, avoiding harmful substances (tobacco, alcohol, drugs), getting adequate exercise, and enough sleep. Stress management also involves spending time doing enjoyable things... recreational hobbies, interests, or activities.

Positive relationships with other people are an important part of stress management. Learning and practicing effective communication skills will help you develop positive and meaningful relationships. These relationships can help reduce the harmful effects of stress.

Managing your stress

STEP 1: IDENTIFY YOUR STRESSORS

Stress can be positive or negative and its effects very personal. One person's negative stress can be another person's exciting experience.

Negative stressors are harmful for your body. Deaths, weddings, vacations, family problems, and health changes are examples of some stressors. Major stressors are more noticeable when they occur. However, the day-to-day stressors may take a bigger toll on your body. Stressors can come from the environment or from your thoughts.

External stressors occur around us. Rush-hour traffic, installing a new computer at work, a neighbor's barking dog, or a political election can all be external stressors that can trigger our stress response. In each of these instances the environment creates the stress and you respond. You might get tight muscles or butterflies in your stomach. You might become frustrated or angry, or you might take the situation in stride. You do not always have the ability to control external stressors because they come from outside you.

It is important to know when you are responding to environmental stressors. This awareness won't always allow you to control the stress, but it will allow you to have more control over how you respond.

Internal stressors come from within you. How you think and feel about yourself, your challenges, and your world can trigger stress responses or can help you manage stress.

You think thousands of thoughts a day: planning thoughts ("I think I'll stop by the store on the way home."), thoughts about our personal comfort ("This steering wheel is hot and the car feels like a furnace."), thoughts about other people ("I wonder if that waitress noticed us over here?"), and thoughts about yourself ("I wonder if my slip is showing?").

These thoughts, or self talk, can help you manage stress or can make you feel more stressed.

Become aware of your self talk.

Negative self talk can produce stress responses. Negative self talk takes a toll on your body. Begin noticing the messages that you send yourself.

Is your self talk negative?

Do you say negative things to yourself? ("I'm so stupid," "I can't," "It won't work," "There is no way I could do that," "This will never turn out right," "I look awful in this.") This type of self talk is negative and rarely produces positive feelings or experiences.

Do you make sweeping statements to yourself?

Do you make general statements or often use words like "always" and "never"? Are your thoughts punctuated with exclamation points? "This is the worst day of my life!", "You never listen to me!", "I always have to wash the dishes!", "I will never feel good again!", "I just can't handle any more of this!"

Do you focus on negative or threatening aspects of an experience?

Do you tend to pick out the negative features of a situation and focus on them? Do you find that you expect perfection and then tend to dwell on any imperfection that may occur? After spending an evening with friends or relatives, do you find yourself focusing mainly upon what's wrong with the people you just left? Do you often expect bad experiences when few actually happen?

Changing negative self talk.

Listen in on your self talk. Notice what you

say to yourself before, during, and even after the stressful moment.

You can't change your self talk unless you notice what you tell yourself. If you find that your self talk is too negative, you can change the intensity of your stress responses by changing the messages you send to yourself.

Example: Assume that you are late for an appointment with your doctor. Since you are already late, you of course hit every red light. You tell yourself how stupid you are for not starting earlier. You imagine your doctor being angry with you. You frown and you tighten your hands on the steering wheel. Your shoulders become tense and you become impatient with the cars in front of you. You start feeling like everything is going against you.

Now let's assume that you notice what you are thinking and what your body is doing. You take a deep breath and tell yourself, "So I'm late ... getting upset and tense will not get me there any quicker. I might as well relax and get there in one piece. I'll just tell Dr. Jones that I am sorry I am late and if I have to wait longer because they took someone ahead of me, that's life. This is not the end of the world." You relax your hands and shoulders, take a couple more deep breaths and decide you will get there when you get there and not before.

In this example you are able to cut a stress response short by listening to your thoughts, and then changing both your thoughts and your behavior.

STEP 2: EVALUATE & ELIMINATE AS MANY STRESSORS AS POSSIBLE

While some external stressors may be impossible to completely get rid of, you have a great deal of control over internal stressors. After you have identified your stressors, take charge of the ones you can control or change.

Is negative self talk a problem?

Work on noticing and then changing the messages you send yourself.

Do you have too much to do and too little time?

Evaluate your activities and make realistic choices about what you have time to do well. Begin to prioritize your activities and keep track of them so that you don't over commit yourself.

Are your personal goals unrealistic?

Evaluate your personal goals. Are they realistic or are you struggling to do more than what is possible? Do you have a plan for how to get from here to there? Is there a more effective and less stressful way for you to move forward?

Do you feel that you are always running to catch up?

Stop and get organized! Make lists and cross off your tasks as you do them. Don't do unnecessary activities. Set a schedule for yourself and evaluate it often. When times of high stress arise, change your schedule by placing some activities on the back burner - or in the trash - if they are no longer needed.

Remember that while you may not always be responsible for the stress in your life, you are responsible for how you respond. By taking responsibility for your personal stress responses, you have taken a big step forward in your own stress management.

STEP 3: DEVELOP TECHNIQUES TO CONTROL OR ALTER YOUR STRESS RESPONSES

You have the ability to change the number and intensity of your daily stress responses. You already have ways that you manage stress, and there are many other effective ways to alter your stress responses. Several good techniques are presented below. Experiment with them and choose the ones that suit you.

Begin with the stress management techniques you know.

Identify what you do to reduce stress. Do you take walks, garden, play golf, listen to music? Anything that you do that gives you a relaxed feeling can be part of your stress management program. Creative or artistic outlets such as dance, theater,

music, painting or crafts can be important features in your stress management program.

Reading for pleasure or walking around a beautiful golf course may be ways for you to relax.

Begin to use these techniques consciously and often, especially during times of increased stress.

Develop a physical exercise program.

The stress response gears your body up for physical activity. Exercise helps return your body to a lower gear. Daily exercise (walking, running, biking, swimming) is an excellent way to relieve stress.

Take deep breaths throughout the day.

Breathing is rapid and shallow during stress. When you change your breathing by taking deep easy breaths, you alter the stress response. Take several deep easy breaths that fill your lungs many times during the day. Relax your shoulder and neck muscles as you exhale. Any time you are waiting at a stoplight or standing in a line, change your stress by taking deep easy breaths.

Learn to relax your body and your mind.

The harmful effects of stress on your body can be reduced by allowing your body and mind to have rest breaks. Relaxation can't be forced; you allow relaxation to occur much in the way you allow yourself to fall asleep. Deep breathing and exercise are two of these techniques, and there are many more:

Progressive muscle relaxation allows you to relax tight muscles. By first tightening muscle groups, it is easier to notice and improve muscle relaxation.

- Take deep, easy breaths during this exercise.
- Begin with your feet and tighten all of the muscles in your feet and ankles.
- Hold the tension for a few seconds and then relax all of those muscles for 30 seconds or so. Notice how your muscles

feel as they relax.

- Tighten and relax your calf muscles in the same way, then your thigh muscles, your buttocks, and your abdominal muscles.
- Allow the lower part of your body to remain relaxed as you focus on the upper body.
- Make a fist with your hand, hold it a few seconds, and then relax.
- Tighten and relax your lower and upper arms.
- Shrug your shoulders towards your ears to tighten them, then relax.
- Tighten your neck muscles and then relax.
- Tighten your face muscles (turn your face into a raisin), then slowly relax.

Massage Therapy. Muscles tense in response to stress. Massage therapy calms the whole body and reduces anxiety. The kneading and pulling movements used in massage help relax tense muscles, stimulate the flow of blood, improve muscle tone, clear away waste products, and reduce muscle tension and pain. Whether you go to a professional masseuse or trade back or foot rubs with your spouse, massage is an excellent technique for dealing with the effects of stressed muscles.

Autogenics. Autogenics allows you to use thoughts to tell your body to relax. Your body can become less stressed when you mentally suggest that it relax.

Sit or lie down comfortably and take deep easy breaths. Close your eyes and run each phrase through your mind two or three times.

- I am relaxed.
- My hands and feet feel heavy and warm.
- My breathing is deep and easy.
- My abdomen is warm and comfortable.
- My forehead is cool and comfortable.
- My hands and feet feel heavy and warm.
- I am relaxed.

Imagery. Imagery uses thoughts to relax your body. It is much like daydreaming

(continued on back)

where your mind may be “a million miles away.”

You can learn to use the power of your imagination to produce calming, energizing, or healing responses in your body. You can use imagery in order to improve management of chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and lung and heart disease; change bad habits and maintain healthy ones.

With guided imagery, you focus your mind on a particular image. While imagery most often uses your sense of sight, adding smells, tastes, sounds, and other sensations makes the guided imagery experience more vivid and powerful.

You will need 10-30 minutes of undisturbed time twice a day to practice imagery exercises. You may need several weeks of practice before you really start to notice benefits.

Don't practice imagery while driving a car or in any situation where your safety requires full alertness and quick responses. Find a comfortable area where you won't be disturbed. Play background music if you think it will help you relax. Whether you are sitting up or lying down, it is good to have your head, neck, and spine straight.

- Begin by closing your eyes. Half-closed eyes are better than eyes that are completely shut if you're quick to fall asleep.
- Take several slow, deep breaths, exhaling completely after each. Relax and enjoy the peace, comfort, and safety of your special place.
- Think about someplace you have felt relaxed and imagine that place.
- Fill in any details you like about your place.
- Allow yourself to feel the way you do when you are actually there.

- Continue your deep breathing until you are ready to end your mental vacation.
- When you are ready to return, take a deep breath and exhale fully. Open your eyes and spend a few moments savoring this relaxed, healthy, comfortable feeling.

Meditation. Meditation allows you to obtain a calm and relaxed mental state. It occurs when you are so focused on a thought or an activity that you block out the things around you. There are many ways to achieve a state of meditation: prayer, focusing on the motion of ocean waves or water running over rocks in a stream, losing yourself in a craft or the garden. The sensation is of your mind being at rest, and free from worrying thoughts or distractions. With practice you can reach a meditative state by allowing yourself to let go of the clatter of thoughts in your mind.

Biofeedback. Biofeedback reduces physical symptoms of stress. Sensors are placed on your body to record the physical changes that take place with stress and with relaxation. The equipment gives you information about what is occurring inside your body.

Biofeedback equipment monitors body temperature, muscle tension, skin responses, and even brain waves. Trained professionals can show you how to change your body's response to stress through relaxation. With practice, anyone can learn to alter the body's physical stress responses.

Healing Touch. This technique can improve your healing and recovery and control any surgical pain by balancing and aligning the energy field in your body. Medical teams in hospitals across the country practice this technique. It is an optional treatment available to you; for information, ask your cardiac rehab nurse.

The healing touch practitioner first assesses your energy field for any differences in body temperature and vibration. Then she makes gentle hand movements around and near your body to improve energy balance and flow, thereby promoting your healing. You remain fully clothed. There is very little direct physical contact.

Summary

It is important for you to reduce the negative effects that stress can have on your body. Choose the techniques that you like the best, and you will be more likely to use them in your daily schedule. The following steps will help you develop an effective program of stress management:

- Notice how stress effects your body. Do you get tight muscles, stomach aches, or do you become grouchy and irritable?
- Identify your stressors. Notice the things that annoy you or make you feel stressed.
- Develop stress management techniques that help you manage your response to stress. If you get tight muscles, try a muscle relaxation technique.
- Continue to monitor and adjust your stress management program to address differing levels of stress. In times of high stress, increase your stress management activities.
- Stress management is an important part of maintaining your physical and mental well being.
- It is usually painless and can even be enjoyable.
- The important thing about stress management is not what you do to relieve stress, but that you do something every day to counter the effects of stress on your body.



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