

Stress!!!

What it is, how it affects you and how to manage it

Modern life is full of frustrations, deadlines, and demands. For many people stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad though. Stress within your comfort zone can help you perform under pressure, motivate you to do your best, even keep you safe when danger looms. However, when stress becomes overwhelming it can damage your health, mood, relationships, and quality of life. You can protect yourself by understanding how the body's stress response works, recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress overload, and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

Many health problems are caused or exacerbated by stress, including:

- Pain of any kind
- Heart disease
- Digestive problems
- Sleep problems
- Depression
- Weight problems
- Auto immune diseases
- Skin conditions, such as eczema

You can see how stress can have a negative effect on you, however, we all respond to stress differently so there's no "one size fits all" solution to managing stress. If you feel like the stress in your life is out of control, it's time to take action. Stress management can teach you healthier ways to cope with stress, help you reduce its harmful effects, and prevent stress from spiraling out of control again in the future.

What is Stress?

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol which ready the body for emergency action. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus.

This is known as the "fight or flight" stress response and it's your body's way of protecting you. When working properly, stress helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, or urging you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident.

Stress can also help you rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV. When it goes beyond your comfort zone, stress stops being helpful and can start causing major damage to your mind and body.

What stress is doing to you and why it's important to manage it.

The body's autonomic nervous system often does a poor job of distinguishing between daily stressors and life-threatening events. If you're stressed over an argument with a friend, a traffic jam on your commute to work, or a mountain of bills, your body may still react as if you're facing a life-or-death situation.

When you repeatedly experience the fight or flight stress response in your daily life, it can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, speed up the aging process, and leave you vulnerable to a host of mental and emotional problems. This repeated or "chronic" stress on your body may lead to stress overload which can have long term health effects.

These are some of the common warning signs and symptoms of chronic stress. The more signs and symptoms you notice in yourself, the closer you may be to stress overload.

Cognitive Symptoms

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

Emotional Symptoms

- Moodiness
- Irritability or short temper
- Agitation, inability to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Depression or general unhappiness

Physical Symptoms

- Aches and pains
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Loss of sex drive
- Frequent colds

Behavioral Symptoms

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Keep in mind that the signs and symptoms of stress overload can also be caused by other psychological or medical problems. If you're experiencing any of the warning signs of stress, it's important to see a doctor to help determine if your symptoms are stress-related.

Is it normal to feel this way? – How to recognize stress

Recognizing stress is the first step in lessening its impact. Many of us spend so much time in a stressed state that we have forgotten what it feels like to be fully relaxed and alert. Being stressed out feels normal.

Your body reacts to how you are feeling emotionally, and quite often will send you signals that you should listen to. When you're excited about something, you may feel a burst of energy. When you're happy, you laugh easily. When you are stressed, your body lets you know that too. Try to get in the habit of paying attention to your body's clues.

- **Observe your body and how it feels.** Are your muscles tight or sore? Is your stomach upset or nervous? Are your hands clenched?
- **Observe your breath.** Is your breath shallow? Place one hand on your belly, the other on your chest. Watch your hands rise and fall with each breath. Notice when you breathe fully or when you "forget" to breathe.

These are signs that your body is reacting to the stress that you are feeling. It is easy to ignore these signals and tell yourself "you're fine", "you can handle this". However, repeatedly ignoring these signals can have negative long term effects.

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you or forces you to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be self-generated, for example, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life. Below is a list of common external and internal stressors

Common External Stressors

- Major life changes
- Work or school
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial problems
- Being too busy
- Children and family

Common Internal Stressors

- Chronic worry
- Pessimism
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations/perfectionism
- Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
- All-or-nothing attitude

What causes excessive stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. Your morning commute may make you anxious and tense because you worry that traffic will make you late. Others, however, may find the trip relaxing because they allow more than enough time and enjoy listening to music while they drive.

It's easy to identify sources of stress following a major life event such as changing jobs, moving homes, or losing a loved one, but pinpointing the sources of everyday stress can be more complicated. It's all too easy to overlook your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that contribute to your stress levels. Sure, you may know that you're constantly worried about work deadlines, but maybe it's your procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that is causing the stress. Identifying sources of everyday stress is the first step in addressing the issues.

Start a stress journal

A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the way you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, keep track of it in your journal. As you keep a daily log, you will begin to see patterns and common themes. Write down:

- What caused your stress (make a guess if you're unsure)
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally
- How you acted in response
- What you did to make yourself feel better

To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:

- Do you explain away stress as temporary ("I just have a million things going on right now") even though you can't remember the last time you took a breather?
- Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life ("Things are always crazy around here") or as a part of your personality ("I have a lot of nervous energy, that's all")?
- Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it, your stress level will remain outside your control.

How do you react to stress?

Internally, we all respond to the "fight-or-flight" stress response the same: blood pressure rises, the heart pumps faster, and muscles constrict. When stressed, our bodies work hard and drain our immune system.

Externally, however, people tend to respond to stress in different ways. Some people seem to be able to roll with life's punches, while others tend to crumble in the face of far smaller obstacles or frustrations. Some people thrive on the excitement and challenge of a high-stress lifestyle, some become angry and agitated and yet others may space out and withdraw.

How do you currently cope with stress?

Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life. Your stress journal can help you identify them. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.

Unhealthy ways of coping with stress

These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but they cause more damage in the long run:

- Smoking
- Drinking too much
- Bingeing on junk or comfort food
- Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Using pills or drugs to relax
- Sleeping too much
- Procrastinating
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)

Factors that influence your stress tolerance

Your ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including the quality of your relationships and support network, your life experiences, your emotional intelligence, and genetics.

- **Your support network** - Social engagement is the body's most evolved strategy for responding to stress, so it's no surprise that people with a strong network of supportive friends and family members are better able to cope with life's stressors.
- **Your exercise levels** - Your physical and mental health are intrinsically linked, so the better you take care of your body, the greater resilience you'll have against the symptoms of stress. Exercising regularly (for 30 minutes or more on most days) can lift your mood and help relieve stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration. It can also serve as a distraction to your worries, allowing you to find some quiet time and break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress and anxiety.
- **Your diet** - The food you eat can also have a profound effect on your mood and how well you cope with life's stressors. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience foods, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress while eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and healthy fats, especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with life's ups and downs.
- **Your sense of control** - It may be easier to take stress in stride if you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges. If you feel like things are out of your control, you're likely to have less tolerance for stress.
- **Your attitude and outlook** - Optimistic people are often more stress-hardy. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, and accept that change is a part of life.
- **Your ability to deal with your emotions** - You're extremely vulnerable to stress if you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or overwhelmed by a situation. The ability to bring your emotions into balance helps you relieve the effects of stress more quickly.
- **Your knowledge and preparation** - The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. If you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

I know I am stressed, but what can I do? - How to manage stress

You may feel there's nothing you can do about stress. The bills won't stop coming, there will never be more hours in the day, and your work and family responsibilities will always be demanding. Even though you may feel powerless in the face of stress, you still have control over your lifestyle, thoughts, emotions, and the way you deal with problems. Stress management involves changing the stressful situation when you can, changing your reaction when you can't, taking care of yourself, and making time for rest and relaxation. No matter how stressful your life seems, there are steps you can take to relieve the pressure and regain control.

The first step is to recognize the true sources of stress in your life, which you can do by keeping a Stress Journal as noted earlier. Once you identify what causes you stress you need to make sure you are taking positive steps to deal with it. The following Stress Management Strategies can help you develop positive responses to the stress in your life. Whether it is the daily stressors such as traffic jams and work stress, or the bigger issues such as a divorce or financial problems, using these techniques can help you ease the effect the stress is having on you.

When it comes to managing and reducing stress, it's important to be familiar with your specific fight-or-flight stress response.

- **Overexcited stress response** – If you tend to become angry, agitated, or keyed up under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that quiet you down.
- **Under excited stress response** – If you tend to become depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that are stimulating and that energize your nervous system

Stress management strategy #1: Get moving

Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress, but you don't have to be an athlete or spend hours in a gym to experience the benefits. Just about any form of physical activity can help relieve stress and burn away anger, tension, and frustration. Exercise releases endorphins that boost your mood and make you feel good, and it can also serve as a valuable distraction to your daily worries.

While the maximum benefit comes from exercising for 30 minutes or more, you can start small and build up your fitness level gradually. Short, 10-minute bursts of activity that elevate your heart rate and make you break out into a sweat can help to relieve stress and give you more energy and optimism. Even very small activities can add up over the course of a day. The first step is to get yourself up and moving. Here are a few easy ways:

- Put on some music and dance around
- Take your dog for a walk
- Walk or cycle to the grocery store
- Use the stairs at home or work rather than an elevator
- Park your car in the farthest spot in the lot and walk the rest of the way
- Pair up with an exercise partner and encourage each other as you workout
- Play an activity-based video game with your kids

Managing stress with regular exercise

Once you're in the habit of being physically active, try to incorporate regular exercise into your daily schedule. Activities that are continuous and rhythmic—and require moving both your arms and your legs—are especially effective at relieving stress. Walking, running, swimming, dancing, cycling, tai chi, and aerobic classes are good choices.

Pick an activity you enjoy, so you're more likely to stick with it. Instead of continuing to focus on your thoughts while you exercise, make a conscious effort to focus on your body and the physical (and sometimes emotional) sensations you experience as you're moving. Adding this mindfulness element to your exercise routine will help you break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that often accompanies overwhelming stress. Focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements, or notice how the air or sunlight feels on your skin. Getting out of your head and paying attention to how your body feels is also the surest way to avoid an injury.

When you've exercised, you'll likely find it easier to put other stress management techniques to use, including reaching out to others and engaging socially.

Stress management strategy #2: Engage socially

Reach out and build relationships

- Reach out to a colleague at work
- Have lunch or coffee with a friend
- Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly
- Accompany a friend to the movies or a concert
- Meet new people by taking a class or joining a club
- Call or email an old friend
- Go for a walk with a workout buddy
- Schedule a weekly dinner date
- Get to know a coworker or neighbor that you see regularly, but have never talked to
- Help others by volunteering

Social engagement is the quickest, most efficient way to rein in stress and avoid overreacting to internal or external events that you perceive as threatening. There is nothing more calming to your nervous system than communicating with another human being who makes you feel safe and understood. This experience of safety—as perceived by your nervous system—results from nonverbal cues that you hear, see and feel.

The inner ear, face, heart, and stomach are wired together in the brain, so socially interacting with another person face-to-face—making eye contact, listening in an attentive way, talking—can quickly calm you down and put the brakes on defensive stress responses like “fight-or-flight.” It can also release hormones that reduce stress, even if you're unable to alter the stressful situation itself. Reach out to family and friends and connect regularly in person. The people you talk to don't have to be able to fix your stress; they just need to be good listeners. Opening up is not a sign of weakness and it won't make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your bond.

Of course, it's not always realistic to have a pal close by to lean on when you feel overwhelmed by stress, but by building and maintaining a network of close friends you can improve your resiliency to life's stressors. And remember, it's never too late to build new friendships and improve your support network.

Identify the stressor and choose the best way to react – Using the 4 A's

While stress is an automatic response from your nervous system, some stressors arise at predictable times—your commute to work, a meeting with your boss, or family gatherings. When handling such predictable stressors, you can either change the situation or change your reaction.

The next four **Stress Management Strategies** will teach you positive ways to address the predictable stressors, and help you determine which technique is best for the situation. When deciding which option to choose in any given scenario, it's helpful to think of the four A's:

- Avoid
- Alter
- Adapt
- Accept

Stress management strategy #3: Avoid unnecessary stress

It's not healthy to avoid a stressful situation that needs to be addressed, but you may be surprised by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

- **Learn how to say “no”** – Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress. Distinguish between the “shoulds” and the “musts” and, when possible, say “no” to taking on too much.
- **Avoid people who stress you out** – If someone consistently causes stress in your life, limit the amount of time you spend with that person, or end the relationship.
- **Take control of your environment** – If the evening news makes you anxious, turn off the TV. If traffic makes you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online. Determine what stressors you can eliminate and do so.

Stress management strategy #4: Alter the situation

If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- **Express your feelings instead of bottling them up** - If something or someone is bothering you, be more assertive and communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you've got an exam to study for and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you only have five minutes to talk. If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the stress will increase.
- **Be willing to compromise** - When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.
- **Manage your time better** - Poor time management can cause a lot of stress, but if you plan ahead and make sure you don't overextend yourself, you'll find it easier to stay calm and focused.

Stress management strategy #5: Adapt to the stressor

How you think can have a profound effect on your stress levels. When you have negative thoughts, your body reacts as if it were in the throes of a tension-filled situation. Regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude towards stressful situations.

- **Reframe problems** - Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.
- **Look at the big picture** - Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.
- **Adjust your standards** - Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with “good enough.”

Stress management strategy #6: Accept the things you can't change

Many sources of stress are unavoidable. You can't prevent or change some stressors such as; the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or the loss of a job. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept that it is beyond your control. Acceptance may be difficult, but if there is nothing you can do about the situation, the sooner you can accept it the less stress you will suffer as a result.

- **Don't try to control the uncontrollable** - Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- **Look for the upside** - When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
- **Learn to forgive** - Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

Stress management strategy #7: Make time for fun and relaxation

Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. Don't feel guilty about taking care of yourself, it not only benefits you but those around you as well. If you are happy and relaxed, you will be more productive and pleasant to be around both at home and at work. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors. Use the strategies below to help you relax and reduce stress.

- **Do something you enjoy every day** - Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano, or working on a hobby.
- **Set aside relaxation time** - Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don't allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries, and remember- no guilt!
- **Keep your sense of humor** - This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Develop a "stress relief toolbox"

Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury. Come up with a list of healthy ways to relax and recharge, and try to implement one or more of them each day, even if you're feeling good. Here are some ideas:

- Go for a walk
- Spend time in nature
- Call a good friend
- Write in your journal
- Take a long bath
- Light scented candles
- Play a game with friends or family
- Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea
- Play with a pet
- Work in your garden
- Get a massage
- Curl up with a good book
- Listen to music
- Watch a comedy

Stress management strategy #8: Adopt a healthy lifestyle

In addition to regular exercise, there are other healthy lifestyle choices that can increase your resistance to stress.

- **Eat a healthy diet** - Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress, so be mindful of what you eat. Start your day right with a good breakfast, and eat nutritious meals throughout the day to keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced,
- **Reduce caffeine and sugar** - The temporary "highs" caffeine and sugar provide often end with a crash in mood and energy. By reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugary snacks in your diet, you'll feel more relaxed and you'll sleep better.
- **Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs** - Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief is only temporary. Don't avoid or mask the issue at hand; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind.
- **Get enough sleep** - Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress as it may cause you to be irritable and over react or to think irrationally.

We all wish we could snap our fingers and save ourselves from the stresses of life such as: traffic jams, chaotic meetings, or a toddler's tantrums. Unfortunately, it isn't that simple, we are all going to experience stressful situations, but every one of us has the power to reduce the impact it has on our lives and our bodies.

You have just read about the impact stress can have on your body and a number of techniques to minimize the impact. Mastering these stress management techniques won't happen overnight, but with practice, you can learn to spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds. Like any skill, it takes time, self-exploration and above all, practice. But think of it as an education with a huge payoff!



Stress Self-Assessments

Take the assessments below to determine how you handle the stress in your life, as well as the physical impact it may be having on you. (***This form is not to be turned in to HR, it is for your information only***)

How well do you handle stress in your life?

1. I have people I confide in when I'm feeling under pressure who make me feel better. **Y / N**
2. I feel comfortable expressing how I feel when something is bothering me. **Y / N**
3. In general, I feel in control of my life, and feel I'm able to handle what comes my way. **Y / N**
4. I find reasons to laugh and feel grateful, even when going through difficulties. **Y / N**
5. No matter how busy I am, I make it a priority to sleep, exercise, and eat right. **Y / N**
6. I'm able to calm myself down when I start to feel overwhelmed. **Y / N**

Each "yes" answer represents an important stress coping skill. Each "no" represents an area to work on to become more resilient.

Using the table below, assess the frequency that you experience these common symptoms of stress. The more frequent and the greater the number of symptoms you experience, the more you need to work to relieve your stress levels.

	Frequency of symptoms						
Symptoms	Almost all the time	Once or twice daily	Every night or day	2-3 times per week	Once a week	Once a month	Never
Headaches							
Tense muscles, sore neck and back							
Fatigue							
Anxiety, worry, phobias							
Difficulty falling asleep							
Irritability							
Insomnia							
Bouts of anger/hostility							
Boredom, depression							
Eating too much or too little							
Diarrhea, cramps, gas, constipation							
Restlessness, itching, tics							