

Tips for Coping with Stress

Stress is an inevitable part of our lives. We have all experienced it to some degree: during an argument with a parent or sibling; while speaking to a large group; while trying to finish a school project. Our experiences in an increasingly complex world constantly require us to adapt to changes and cope with stressors. Learning how to identify and manage stress can help prevent physical and psychological problems, increase your chances of future success and promote a longer, healthier life.

The way we think and respond to life's challenges promotes stress. For example, the more impatient, demanding, controlling or submissive we are, the more we are bound to experience stress. Stress can be a learned response to everyday life events.

Effects of Stress

To a certain degree, feeling stressed is a normal, healthy response to life's events and challenges. The ability to react under stress is crucial for human survival. Many experts define stress as the body's reaction to change. It is natural for our bodies to trigger a fight-or-flight response to potentially dangerous situations. A stressful stimulus promotes a chemical reaction that produces adrenaline and increases energy.

However, over time, the body's continued response to regular stress can lead to an increase in blood pressure and heart rate, heightened anxiety and an overall strain on the system. Unrelieved tension builds up and may cause unhealthy symptoms.

Immediate physiological symptoms of stress include:

- Hyperventilation (rapid, shallow breathing)
- Profuse sweating
- Rapid heartbeat
- Increased urination
- Dizziness and lightheadedness
- Fatigue

Conditions linked to stress include:

- Musculoskeletal pain (e.g., backaches, neck pain)
- Migraines and headaches
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Gastrointestinal disorders (e.g., chronic heartburn, ulcers)
- Skin diseases
- Cardiovascular disorders (e.g., high blood pressure)
- Colitis
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Diabetes
- Asthma

Behavioral symptoms of stress include:

- Irritability
- Social withdrawal

- Anxiety
- Bad habits (e.g., nail biting or teeth grinding)
- Forgetfulness
- Inability to act due to fear or indecision
- Lack of concentration
- Substance abuse

Ways to Cope with Stress

- **Seek support.** Do not wait until you reach your breaking point. If you begin to feel stressed, talk to a therapist, your family, or your friends. They may be able to suggest new ways to alleviate stress. It is important to recognize and admit that you are feeling anxious and stressed. Pay attention to your body's physical signs of stress (e.g., headaches, stomach discomfort). If the stress becomes overwhelming, it may be beneficial to seek professional help.
- **Try to identify the causes of stress.** By recognizing the real reasons behind your tension, you can learn to feel more in control and change the source of the stress. If you are not sure why you feel stressed, retrace your steps: perhaps it stems from a forgotten event from yesterday or last night's disturbing dream.
- **Ask yourself these four questions:**
 1. Is there anything more I can do to improve the situation?
 2. How will this outcome affect my life in the long run?
 3. What can I learn from this?
 4. What advice would I give to someone else in this situation?
- **Accept stress as an everyday part of life.** Often the best way to cope is to “go with the flow“, to accept those stressors that you can not currently change.
- **Laugh and learn.** Instead of getting irritated, laugh at life's annoyances and learn from your mistakes. Humor is a powerful tool in helping to build resilience, the ability to bounce back from negative events.
- **Nurture relationships that matter.** More interpersonal contact with the right people can help relieve stress. Open up to others about your problems, and accept help when it is offered. Spend less time with negative, stress-inducing friends or acquaintances.
- **Develop a timeline of short- and long-term goals.** List challenging but realistic objectives for yourself. Analyze and update these goals over time. Avoid setting unrealistic expectations and too many lofty goals. Attempt challenges that are doable, and tackle the easiest first.
- **Focus on the positives.** Recognize that for everything that may go wrong, there may be multiple things that go right. Be proud of your accomplishments, and celebrate your successes.
- **Switch up your routine.** Monotony also can cause stress. Remember that you can change your life at any moment.
- **Examine your thought patterns.** Often it is our thoughts that determine whether we interpret a situation as stressful. Listen to your inner voice to discover thought patterns that may be contributing to your overall stress level. Write down responses to that inner voice so that you can access these responses the next time you feel stressed.

Personal Life Tips

- **Get enough rest.** Doctors recommend getting at least eight hours of sleep a night.

- **Exercise regularly.** Swimming, running, brisk walking, aerobic exercises and other repetitive fitness activities are especially beneficial.
- **Engage in fulfilling activities.** Take a little time each day for something you like to do: a hobby, a walk with the family dog, an hour with a good book, a fun outing with friends, etc.
- **Avoid caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants.** These common drugs actually can induce stress and anxiety. A simple step like switching to decaffeinated coffee can have a real effect on your stress level.
- **Avoid alcohol, tranquilizers and recreational drugs.** These may contribute to anxiety and depression and an increased sense of loss of control.

Workplace Tips

Many people find making changes in workplace procedures has a beneficial impact on their stress levels. Here are some ideas to consider:

- **Try to exercise during lunchtime, especially for those who sit most of the day.** Simple steps like taking the stairs or walking for 15 minutes after lunch can have a positive effect on your stress level.
- **Learn to delegate responsibilities.** If you are a manager, empower your subordinates to take on more responsibilities and make more decisions. Delegate tasks fairly and reasonably. Remember that as you delegate a task, you have to set aside your need to have it completed exactly the same way you would have done it. Otherwise, you will end up feeling more stressed.
- **Tackle one task at a time if possible.** List your duties in order of priority, and complete one at a time. Tackle the easiest ones first. This can make you feel more organized and in control, leading to a sense of greater accomplishment.
- **Try to be more assertive in your responses to requests.** Be honest, but tactful. Learn to seek alternatives or to say no appropriately when you really do not want to do something asked of you.
- **Do not procrastinate.** Putting important tasks off can lead to increased worry. It is more important to get started than it is to complete the project perfectly.
- **Get organized.** Rearrange your workspace for maximum efficiency. Create lists and schedules to help you meet deadlines. Consider creating a to-do list in your calendar, phone or computer.

Relaxation 101

Try these techniques to help you relax and reduce stress:

- **Breathing exercises:** Drawing slow, deep breaths from the diaphragm (the spot just under your ribcage) promotes a more efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide than chest or shoulder breathing. Exhale slowly and evenly. If you are highly stressed, try this while lying on your back.
- **Yoga and stretching exercises:** These can relieve tension, make your body more limber and flexible and produce an overall calming effect.
- **Meditation and imagery techniques:** By sitting in a comfortable, quiet environment, closing your eyes and freeing your mind from its many concerns for even a few minutes each day, you can learn to achieve relaxation quickly. Try concentrating on an image that symbolizes your stress, such as a giant ball that slowly begins to shrink; alternatively, let your mind go blank. Do not fight stressful thoughts. Instead, think of these thoughts as floating in one ear and out the other and being replaced in your mind by calmer images.
- **Progressive muscle-relaxation techniques:** These involve systematically tensing, relaxing and visualizing each major muscle group. For example, make a fist and hold it tight for at least five seconds. Feel the tension in your hand and arm. Finally, relax your hand, and visualize the tension escaping your body. Do the same with your other hand, your neck, your face, limbs, etc.

Resources

- The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Institutes of Health (NIH): <http://health.nih.gov>
- Mental Health America: www.mentalhealthamerica.net

Here when you need us.

Call: 877-314-5841

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNow SM

Web ID: TARHEELS

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