

Stress Management

Stress is your body's reaction to an event that stimulates you. When you encounter such an event, adrenaline, a stimulant hormone, is released into your bloodstream. Adrenaline, along with other stress hormones, produces a number of changes in the body, which are intended to be protective. While mild to moderate stress can help improve your overall performance, too much can compromise your quality of life. The challenge is to keep yourself at a level of stress that is healthy and enjoyable. This guide provides general information on the causes of stress and techniques to successfully manage it.

What Causes Stress?

The events that cause you stress are unique to you and your life, however, they generally fall into two common types: external and internal. External stressors are environmental factors or events that create stress, such as starting a new job, the death of a loved one, traffic delays, deadlines, dealing with rude people, etc. Internal stressors are specific behaviors, traits or lifestyle choices that stress or upset you, such as being too controlling or self-critical, negativity, working too much, poor eating and exercise habits, etc.

Recognizing Your Stress Signals

While everyone experiences stress in their own unique way, there are some common symptoms. Recognizing your own personal signs of excessive stress is the first step to managing it. Begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- Do I often feel out of control?
- Do I feel constant pressure to achieve?

Beth, a mother of two, is balancing a full-time job with parenting responsibilities and caring for her mother, who has Alzheimer's Disease. "Raising my children, caring for my mother and working full time is stressful," Beth admits. "From 5:30 in the morning until 10:00 at night I'm on the go—making meals, transporting children, helping my mom, meeting the demands of my job and doing regular household chores! Lately I feel I can't get everything done. How can I better manage my stress?"

- Do I have difficulty concentrating?
- Do I have feelings of depression, helplessness, anxiety or panic?
- Do I have difficulty falling asleep or do I wake frequently during the night?
- Do I suffer from frequent headaches?
- Have I experienced a significant loss of or increase in appetite?
- Do I feel unusually tired?
- Do I cry (or feel the desire to cry) often?
- Do I feel faint or dizzy for no apparent reason?
- Do I experience frequent nausea?
- Do I experience shortness of breath or feel tightness in my chest without exertion?
- Do I regularly feel the need to smoke or have a drink to relax?

If you consistently answer “yes” to even one of these questions, your body may be sending you signals that you are stressed. However, these are just a few of the more common symptoms. Take a minute to think back to a time when you were particularly stressed. What stress signals do you recall feeling? Pinpoint those situations, people or places that consistently trigger stress. Make changes to those situations or avoid them as much as possible. For example, if you feel stressed rushing to work each day, adjust your schedule so you leave 15 minutes earlier. This simple exercise in self-reflection can get you on the right path to controlling stress.

Note—If your stress level becomes overwhelming, or you are experiencing serious physical effects (e.g., chest pain, difficulty breathing), depression, heavy drinking or drug use, consult your health care provider immediately.

Managing Your Stress

To successfully manage stressful situations, consider the following tips:

- Believe that you can intervene and reduce stress in your life. While often difficult, you can make positive changes in your life.
- Define your daily, weekly and life goals and frequently assess how well you are meeting them. Try to do one activity each day that helps you meet a goal(s).
- Make time to relax and enjoy a favorite activity. If necessary, restructure your thinking to give yourself permission to take the time.
- Establish and/or rely on a support system of family, friends and/or colleagues. Studies have shown that those people who have more support are less likely to experience detrimental effects of stress.
- Learn to be assertive and express your feelings and needs in interpersonal relationships. Consider taking an assertiveness training course, if necessary.
- Don’t overcommit yourself. Learn to say no.
- Stop unproductive worrying and focus on constructive problem solving. For example, when you start worrying that you’ll never finish your presentation in time, instead think: “If I stay focused and move forward one step at a time, I’ll make progress.”
- Strive to be a good person, not a perfect person. Tell yourself that you do not have to be everything to everyone all the time.
- Eat well-balanced meals: Avoid excessive amounts of sugar, caffeine, fat, salt and food additives. A poor diet can contribute to fatigue and stress.
- Eliminate cigarettes, alcohol and drugs from your lifestyle.
- Get plenty of rest to increase your ability to resist stress.
- Exercise regularly (under the advice of your physician) to help you release tension and withstand the impact of stress.
- Have fun and laugh! Humor can significantly reduce stress. Enjoy the company of others and remember to laugh at yourself.
- Consider participating in a stress management seminar. Ask your employer if they offer any within your organization.

Stress Management Techniques

In addition to the above tips, the following techniques may be helpful. You may choose one or two of the techniques, or try them all. Each can be completed in just a few seconds, or longer if you have the time.

Remove Yourself From Stressful Situations

Once you are aware of your own unique signs of stress, try to remove yourself from whatever is causing the stress. Place your own personal well-being above all other priorities for the moment and stop what you are doing. Although this sounds simple, oftentimes it is difficult to do. Take a couple of conscious, deep breaths (this can be done with your eyes closed), and physically move away from the immediate environment. For example, if you are seated at your desk, move your chair and face away from your desk. If time allows, take a short break to get a glass of water or take a walk.

Breathing Techniques

Normally, breathing is unconscious. When under pressure, experts have found that you use only one third of your lung capacity. When you consciously breathe more deeply, beginning from the diaphragm, you send a greater amount of oxygen to each muscle group in your body, relieving tension.

To practice this technique, stop what you are doing. Lightly rest your hands on your abdomen and note the rise and fall of air from your diaphragm. Close your eyes and take a couple of conscious, deep breaths beginning from your diaphragm.

Relaxation Techniques

When under stress, you typically tense your muscles, causing eventual pain and fatigue. The simple techniques outlined below will help you learn to relax overburdened muscles.

1. Stop what you are doing and, if possible, dim the lights. Sit comfortably with both feet flat on the floor, legs about hip width apart, and place your hands on your thighs, palms down. (Another option is to lie on your back.)

2. Close your eyes and take a couple of conscious, deep breaths.
3. Tense all of the muscles in your face, head and neck. Hold and release. Breathe slowly.
4. Tense all of the muscles in your right hand, arm and shoulder. Hold and release.
5. Constrict all of the muscles in your left hand, arm and shoulder. Hold and release. Take some conscious breaths.
6. Tighten all of the muscles in your chest, back and abdomen. Hold and release. Breathe deeply.
7. Tense all of the muscles in your right leg and foot. Hold and release. Breathe slowly and deeply.
8. Constrict all of the muscles in your left leg and foot. Hold and release. With your next deep breath, completely relax your whole body.
9. Envision that you are inhaling a sense of calm and exhaling any remaining tension from your body.
10. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

By regularly practicing this technique, you may eventually be able to relax from a standstill without first tightening each muscle group.

Visualization Techniques

This technique is particularly useful when you need to mentally “get away” from a stressful situation.

1. Stop what you are doing and, if possible, dim the lights.
2. Sit comfortably with both feet flat on the floor, legs about hip width apart. Place your hands on your thighs, palms down. (Another option is to lie on your back.)
3. Close your eyes and take a couple of conscious, deep breaths.

4. Envision a tranquil scene. This can be a favorite place, a fond memory, or an enjoyable activity (e.g., being at the beach or in the mountains). Consider all the details of this scene: the present sounds, images, scents, and what you are able to touch. While visualizing, relax, and indulge your senses.
5. When you are ready, take a couple of deep breaths and gently open your eyes.

Stretching Techniques

Stretching, even right from your chair at work, is a wonderful way to reduce physical and mental tension. Stretches to try include gentle head rolls, rolling your shoulders, stretching your hands up high over your head, flexing your feet, touching your toes, slowly arching your back one vertebrae at a time and then straightening out the spine.

Remember to breathe while you stretch. Imagine that each inhalation brings a sense of relaxation to the muscles you are stretching. Picture tension leaving your body with each exhalation. Note—Be cautious of your body's limits; you should not feel pain when you stretch properly. During head rolls, do not drop your head back completely. Keep your neck long and avoid "crunching" the vertebrae in the neck. Stretch your face, throat and sternum upward.

Mindfulness Techniques

Stress is often caused by performing one task while simultaneously thinking of numerous other tasks or thoughts. Being mindful means living in the present moment. Mindfulness improves concentration, helps you experience the fullness of each moment and prevents preoccupation with the past or the future.

As soon as you are aware that you are worrying about other tasks and thoughts, stop what you are doing and take a conscious, deep breath. By simply focusing on your breathing, you are easily and quickly bringing your thoughts back to the present.

A daily "to-do" list may help facilitate mindfulness. Set aside a time each day to plan your day. Prioritize your list initially and throughout the day as needed so that tasks are separated into more manageable units. Whenever you begin to lose focus or feel overwhelmed, simply stop and breathe. Look over your list and make any necessary adjustments.

Mindfulness can be difficult to achieve during the transition from home to work. In order to psychologically "flip the switch" at the end of the day, perform an activity that signals the transition from work to home. Examples include unwinding during your car ride home, exercising after work or listening to music. If you bring work home, plan a time to do it and stick to it.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, stay in tune with your body and mind and try to prevent and combat stress by recognizing those factors that contribute to it. If you feel you can no longer manage the stress on your own, contact a professional for help. If your employer offers an education and referral service or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), they can help you locate appropriate resources in your area.

074_StressManagement