

Understanding Stress – and How to Manage It

In ancient times, our stress response (“fight or flight”) likely developed to help us react quickly to danger, such as a charging saber-toothed tiger. Today, it can be triggered by situations in which we’re not in grave danger, such as a tight deadline or a traffic jam.

Stress in small doses can actually be a positive thing – for example, it can help us perform well during a job interview or a music recital. Too much stress, however, isn’t good for us. Chronic stress can put us at risk for health problems, such as heart disease, obesity, depression, and anxiety. Chronic stress can also make a health condition worse.¹

Stress shows in different ways. Some people feel moody or tired. Others sleep too much (or too little) or eat too much (or too little). Stress can even be behind a headache, stomachache or nausea.

Managing stress

We can’t make stress go away. But we can reduce it with these tips:

- **Adopt healthy habits.** Make exercise a part of your routine. (Even better, take a hike: research suggests that walking in nature – instead of in an urban setting – is good for your mental health.²) Eating healthy, getting enough sleep and using relaxation techniques, such as yoga or meditation, can also reduce stress.
- **Take a break.** Tune in to your body to know when you really need a break, whether it’s a walk or a week on a sunny beach. (While you’re on vacation, unplug from your devices to fully recharge. If that’s tough, schedule a limited block of time to check them.)
- **Know what you can and can’t control.** Family members fall ill, work gets crazy and extra guests show up for dinner. Focus your energy on what is within your control and try to let the rest go.

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- **Tap into humor.** When we feel stressed, a good belly laugh can lift our mood. Laughter can lower cortisol – your body’s stress hormone – and boost endorphins, the body’s “feel-good” chemicals, says WebMD.³ Watch a funny movie, read a humorous book or laugh with friends and family.
- **Shift your focus.** On a daily basis, jot down what you’re grateful for. This can help shift your focus from your worries to all the things that are going well in your life.
- **Make time for your passion.** Do you tend to lose track of time when you do a certain activity? Carve out time for it on a regular basis. (If it involves creating something, don’t focus too much on the end result. Just enjoy the process.)
- **Manage your time wisely.** Hone your time management skills. For example, make a list of everything you want to finish that day and rank tasks in order of importance. If you have a big project on your plate, break it up into smaller tasks. Instead of trying to juggle multiple things at once, focus on one thing at a time. Learn to delegate tasks, minimize interruptions and say no.
- **Talk to someone.** Talking with friends and family is a great way to lower stress. Talking can help you release pent-up feelings. Your confidant can also give you support or even suggest new ways of looking at a problem. You can also reach out to a professional for support.
- **Cuddle with a pet.** Research shows that spending time with a pet can boost your mood.⁴
- **Create a calm home.** After a hectic day at work, your home can be a sanctuary. Start by de-cluttering your home. To decorate, choose soft lighting, use soothing colors (think blue, green or neutral hues), and bring in natural elements, such as plants and wood. Turn off the T.V. and turn on a soothing soundtrack, such as the sound of ocean waves or a mountain stream.

Stress is part of life, and as much as we may want to, we can’t avoid it. However, the tips above can help us keep it under control so we can live happier, healthier lives.

Need help?

Call toll-free, 24 hours a day, seven days a week: 1-800-242-6220

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¹U.S. National Library of Medicine, “Stress and Your Health,” 23 November 2014, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003211.htm>.

²Rob Jordan, “Stanford researchers find mental health prescription: Nature,” 30 June 2015, <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2015/june/hiking-mental-health-063015.html>.

³Jeannette Moninger, “10 relaxation techniques that zap stress fast,” WebMD, <http://www.webmd.com/balance/guide/blissing-out-10-relaxation-techniques-reduce-stress-spot>.

⁴“27 ways pets can improve your health,” WebMD, 21 October 2014, <http://pets.webmd.com/ss/slideshow-pets-improve-your-health>.