

Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

STRESS

What leads to stress?	Results of stress	What reduces stress?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work problems • Personal loss (death, separation, divorce, etc) • Medical problems • Family problems • Irregular sleep schedule • Daily hassles • Lifestyle choices • Stressful personality traits • Negative self-talk • Physical environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Depression • Social isolation • Headaches • Alcohol Abuse • Irritability • Loss of motivation • Insomnia • Change in Appetite • Difficulty concentrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease caffeine • Regular exercise (at least 30 minutes, three times a week) • Adequate sleep • Relaxation exercises • Leisure time • Take a time-out • Problem-solving • Refute negative thoughts • Look at things more positively • Time & money management

What is stress?

Stress is the "wear and tear" our bodies experience as we adjust to life changes. Stress has physical and emotional effects on us and can create both positive and negative feelings. Some good things about stress include (1) increasing motivation to action; (2) increasing awareness of what is going on; and (3) helping us to see things in a different way. Some bad things about stress include (1) feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression; and (2) health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. Stress can either help or hinder us, depending on how we react to it.

What Does the Stress Reaction Consist of?

Stress is caused by adrenaline—a stimulant hormone—released into the blood stream. Adrenaline produces a number of changes in the body designed to protect us. For example, adrenaline causes "the fight-or-flight response" to provide the strength and energy to either fight or run away from danger. Adrenaline changes our bodies in ways such as an increase in heart rate and blood pressure, faster breathing, muscle tension, increased mental alertness, increased blood flow to the heart and muscles, and changes in digestion.

Stress (continued)

Too much adrenaline in our bodies causes physical symptoms such as tense muscles, concentration problems, anxiety, dizziness, and rapid heartbeats. If we don't control our adrenaline levels, it is easier to develop both acute and chronic illnesses because our immune system becomes weaker.

What leads to stress?

Lots of things cause stress because we all react differently to the same stress conditions. What stresses you out may not stress me out, and what stresses me out may not be that big a deal to you.

Here are some things that can make you more likely to feel stressed:

- Social and financial problems
- Medical illness
- Lack of social support
- Family history

A stress condition can be real or imagined. No matter what, our brain reacts the same way to both by releasing adrenaline. The brain doesn't know the difference between real and imagined stress. It could happen while watching a horror movie or when one is worried about a dangerous situation.

What are the symptoms of stress?

Everyone experiences stress. Relationship problems, chronic health problems, pressure at workplaces, traffic, and meeting deadlines can trigger stress. People react to it in different ways. In some people, negative feelings and anxieties that caused by stress tend to last for a long time and get worse. Learning to understand and manage stress can prevent the counter effects of stress.

It is important to recognize if you are under stress. Many times, even when we are stressed, we fail to realize that we are reacting under stress. This also happens when we are stressed out for so long that we get used to them. In other words, it doesn't seem to be a stressful situation anymore even though we really are stressed out. The body constantly tries to tell us we're stressed through symptoms such as a rapid heartbeat, dizzy spells, tight muscles, or body aches. It is important to pay attention to such symptoms and learn how to manage the situation.

Stress contributes to headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, changes in appetite, allergies, insomnia, backaches, frequent colds, fatigue, high blood pressure, asthma, diabetes, heart problems, and much more. In fact, many adults visit primary care physicians for stress-related problems but don't even realize that stress is making the problems worse.

How to manage stress

Relaxation (Deep Breathing)

Relaxation can help you manage stress and stay alert, energetic and productive. When you relax, you reduce tension from your body and mind. If you're experiencing a lot of stress in your life, you should take the time to relax to reduce the negative effects on your health.

After practicing relaxation skills, you may experience the following benefits:

- Less headaches, nausea, diarrhea and pain

Stress (continued)

- Less anger, crying, anxiety, worry, and frustration
- More energy
- Improved concentration
- Greater ability to handle problems
- More efficiency in daily activities

As you learn to relax, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations caused by stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, it is easier to switch to relaxation mode.

Have you ever noticed how you breathe when you're stressed? Stress causes rapid, shallow breathing. Breathing like this causes rapid heart rate and perspiration. If you can get control of your breathing, you can actually control your stress. Deep breathing can help you.

Practice this basic technique three times a day, every day, and whenever you feel tense:

- **Inhale.** With your shoulders relaxed, inhale as slowly and deeply as you can while you count to six. If you can, use your diaphragm to fill your lungs with air.
- **Hold.** Keep the air in your lungs as you slowly count to four.
- **Exhale.** Slowly breath out as you count to six.

Repeat. Do the inhale-hold-exhale cycle several times. Each time you do it, exhale for longer counts

Change your thinking

When we are stressed, our thinking tends to be mostly negative, sometimes unreasonably so. If we can figure out which thoughts aren't very realistic or are overly critical, and replace them with realistic and positive thoughts, we can cope better with stress. When we are stressed, though, it can sometimes be hard to think about positive things. The challenge is to learn how to stop our negative thinking and change our thoughts to be more positive.

You can learn to turn negative thoughts into positive ones. The process is simple, but it takes time and practice. Throughout the day, stop and evaluate what you're thinking. If you find that your thoughts are negative, try to find a way to put a positive spin on them. Start by following one simple rule: Don't say anything to yourself that you wouldn't say to anyone else.

Examples of typical negative self-talk and how you might change them include:

Stressful thinking	Positive thinking
I've never done it before.	It's an opportunity to learn something new.
It's too complicated.	Let's look at it from a different angle.
I don't have the resources.	Necessity is the mother of invention.
There's not enough time.	Let's re-evaluate some priorities.
There's no way it will work.	I can try to make it work.
I don't have the expertise.	I'll find people who can help me.
It's too radical a change.	Let's take a chance.

Stress (continued)

No one bothers to communicate to me.	I'll see if I can open the channels of communication.
I'm not going to get any better at this.	I'll give this another try.

If you notice you have lots of stressful thoughts, don't expect to become an optimist overnight. Remember: practice makes perfect. If you keep changing your thoughts, you will eventually reduce your stress.

Exercise

Exercise increases your overall health and your sense of well-being and has some direct stress-busting benefits because it pumps up your endorphins—your brain's feel-good chemicals—and helps us to release built up stress energy.

It helps you deal with your stressors. Exercise helps alleviate daily tensions and might also help you learn to better cope with your stressors. After a fast-paced game of racquetball or several laps in the pool, you'll often find that you've forgotten the day's problems.

It improves your mood. Regular exercise can increase self-confidence and lower the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Remember: “walk before you run.” Start small and work your way up; you don't have to run a marathon to benefit from exercise. Any increase in physical activity—even a 15-minute walk—can reduce your stress. The most important thing is that you're doing something you enjoy!

Recommended Reading

- “Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy Revised and Updated” by David D. Burns, M.D. 1999, New York, NY: Avon Books.
- “Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers, 2nd Edition: An Updated Guide To Stress, Stress Related Diseases, and Coping” (“Scientific American” Library) (Paperback) by Robert M. Sapolsky 2004.
- “The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook, Fourth Edition” (Paperback) by Edmund J. Bourne. 2005, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- “Coping with Anxiety: 10 Simple Ways to Relieve Anxiety, Fear & Worry” (Paperback) by Edmund J. Bourne. 2003, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.
- “Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think” (Paperback) by Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky. 1995, Guilford Publications, Inc.