

Stress Management

Your busy lifestyle is stressful at times, isn't it?

Have you ever worried about how much your stress negatively affects your energy and health?

You've got good reasons to be worried. Consider these facts:

- Stress is responsible for more than 25 billion lost workdays annually.
- An estimated 1 million workers are absent each day with stress-related complaints.
- 43% of all adults suffer stress-related adverse health effects.
- 75%–90% of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related complaints or disorders.
- Stress has been linked to all the leading causes of death, including heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis, and suicide.

So, to stay on top of your game and be healthy, it's important to understand the sources of stress in your life and what you can do to manage them.

What is Stress?

Stress is not the actual events in your life. Stress is your body's reaction to those events. When you are faced with a stressful situation, your body produces a "stress response" to give you the extra energy you need to deal with that situation. Hormones that are produced by the hypothalamus, pituitary, and adrenal glands mediate this stress response.

These hormones suppress bodily functions that are not urgently needed at that moment of stress, such as digestion, while enhancing those functions that help you cope with the situation, such as increased heart rate. This is known as the "fight or flight" response. Once the stressful situation has passed, your hormone production and body functions return to a more normal balanced state.

This stress response is essential to life because it allows you to handle the challenges that arise in our ever-changing world. It becomes a problem when the stress response is triggered too frequently. In this case, your body continuously pumps out stress hormones, which can put you out of balance and deplete your body's reserves. It is this chronic stress that makes you feel "stressed out" and can lead to inability to concentrate, memory problems, and serious health problems.

Be aware of these distress signals, which also include insomnia, headaches, upset stomach, colds/flu, excessive tiredness, etc.

What Triggers a Stress Response?

Probably more things than you ever imagined. It's not just things like bad traffic or aggravating clients, coworkers or boss. In fact, there are four main categories of stress triggers, any of which can produce the same hormone-mediated response.

Psychological Triggers

- Aggravation
- Anger
- Anxiety

Environmental Triggers

- Chemical/Toxin exposure
- Infection/ Allergens
- Intestinal permeability (leaky gut)
- Food sensitivities
- Noise
- Flashing light

Metabolic Triggers

- Nutrient deficiency
- Inflammation
- High sugar/ carb or trans-fat diet
- High caffeine products

Physiological Triggers

- Accidents
- Burns
- Pain
- Surgery
- Poor sleep

With all these possible causes, it's easy to see why so many of us are so stressed out!

No One Can Avoid Stress Completely

So what can you do? Avoiding stressful situations is obviously the best solution, but there's no need to quit your job or abandon your children. There are other ways to manage the body's stress response and minimize the negative effects of stress to achieve a balanced lifestyle.

9 Proven Stress Management Techniques

In order to reduce stress, you must first allow enough time to properly take care of yourself. Taking good care of yourself involves building a

foundation of good health that enables normal physical and mental functioning and includes getting plenty of sleep, eating a balanced diet, and exercising regularly.

1. Sleep

Sleep is essential in restoring health and vitality to your mind and body. Studies show that people who sleep 7 to 8 hours each night live longer, healthier lives than those who sleep fewer hours. With the right amount of sleep, you will feel more energetic and better able to cope with stressful situations. Without enough sleep you may suffer from increased tension and fatigue, which can result in the impairment of faculties such as concentration and reflexes.

If you have difficulty relaxing at bedtime, you may find herbal relaxation aids such as valerian to be helpful.

See "Sleeping Well" in this Resources section for more information and great ideas.

2. Diet

Building a foundation of health also includes consuming a nutritious, balanced diet. A good diet will help prepare your body for daily stress. Remember, food protects us. An unhealthy, imbalanced diet will only make you feel sluggish and less able to cope with life's everyday demands.

3. Exercise

Along with adequate sleep and a healthy diet, it is important for you to exercise regularly to help treat nervous tension that is associated with stress. Incorporating 10-30 minutes of moderate physical activity into your daily schedule may significantly reduce stress-related tension.

Studies show that simply taking 10 minutes out of your busy schedule and going for a brisk walk can work wonders in reducing your level of stress. It may be difficult for you to begin a regular schedule of exercise, but within weeks you should notice an increase in stamina, energy, and overall wellbeing.

See the “Exercise” recommendations in this Resources section.

4. Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a well-researched form of mind-body medicine that has been shown to relieve pain, reduce adverse effects from surgery and medical procedures, help people cope with chronic illnesses, and stimulate healthy responses in the body. Guided imagery techniques have been shown in dozens of medical studies to promote relaxation, reduce anxiety, and support healthy lifestyle changes. They are used widely in medicine, nursing, and psychology.

Imagery is simply a natural way that your brain stores and processes information. In fact, you use imagery whenever you remember, plan, daydream, or worry. You can also learn to use imagery to relax your body and mind, and to help you resolve stressful situations.

Guided imagery will teach you to use your imagination to help relax, reduce stress, and solve problems that are causing stress. The same mind-body connections that can create tension, insomnia, anxiety, and over-eating in response to stress can be used to create a sense of calm, good sleep, and healthy lifestyle habits. Like any skill set that you learn, you will benefit from practicing guided imagery techniques regularly for a period of time.

Use an audio CD program with lessons.

Practice 1 or 2 times a day for 3 weeks to really learn these techniques well, and they will serve you in a wide variety of stressful situations for years to come!

5. Relaxation Techniques

When we are under stress we carry a great deal of physical and emotional tension in our bodies that can negatively impact mental and physical functioning. Relaxation allows you to release the tension associated with your workplace, family, and social life.

During relaxation, we divert our thoughts of everyday problems and focus on pleasant, peaceful thoughts to feel calm and tranquil.

True relaxation can be measured by enhanced health, improved mental capacity, and increased vitality.

Physical changes such as decreases in heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and perspiration are also indicators of true relaxation. Many people find that practicing relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, deep breathing, regular massage therapy, or other forms of body work can reduce physical and emotional tension.

- **Yoga** practice is centered on proper breathing, stretching, and the holding of postures to release stored tension in the body, which also increases your strength, flexibility, and ability to relax.
- **Meditation** is a simple method of calming your mind and body, while enhancing mental focus, mental clarity, and your ability to cope with stress.

- **Deep breathing** is deep, unhurried breathing, which helps you slow down and provides oxygen throughout your body—releasing emotional and physical tension.
- **Massage** helps release muscular tension and rids your body of stored toxins that adversely affect health and vitality, while helping you relax.

6. Choose to Have a Positive Attitude

It is very important to be aware of your mental attitude and emotional health.

Choosing to have a positive attitude is essential to dealing with stress. It is easy to let a constant influx of negative thoughts cloud our minds and prevent us from thinking positively. After all, we are constantly fed bad news about various tragedies via television, radio, and newspapers as well as news from friends and family, which can become overwhelming. Therefore, we need to “shut off” these voices and seek uplifting, inspirational outlets such as books, music, or a movie to prevent us from being affected by negativity.

Maintaining a sense of humor is correlated with positive attitude because it helps us cope with even the most unexpected stress in life. When we laugh, it helps to normalize our body functions. Our brains produce neurotransmitters that relieve tension and promote a positive attitude. Studies have shown that people suffering from ulcers and excessive stomach acid literally stop overproducing acid when they are smiling or laughing.

Because of serious events in our lives, it is important to have an outlet that brings us

enjoyment. Engage in activities that inspire you to smile, laugh, and think positively.

7. Practice Effective Communication

Practicing effective communication is essential to maintaining healthy relationships with our family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. By doing so, we can help avoid unnecessary stressful events. It is normal for bad feelings and stress to develop between well-intentioned people due to poor communication that often results in misunderstandings. Whenever possible, it is important to quickly diffuse these misunderstandings by effectively communicating your concerns.

Practicing effective communication requires more than just learning to be a good speaker it also requires learning how to be a good listener.

The greatest obstacle to effective communication is making assumptions about what you have heard, or assuming that the other person adequately understands what you have said. The easiest way to impair a relationship is to not listen to someone when they really feel a need to talk.

8. Manage Your Time Efficiently

Learning how to manage time more efficiently can prevent the stress that occurs when we are not able to complete an important task on time.

Effective time management involves taking time to plan our schedules, accomplishing our tasks on time, and allowing time for relaxation.

People who use these time management skills know how to pace themselves and take breaks when needed. When you feel there is not

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enough time to complete a task, it is important for you to ask for assistance or learn how to say NO. Keeping a calendar of realistic goals can help you manage your time.

9. Develop Leisure Activities

One of the best outlets for stress is to pursue a satisfying hobby or indulge in a leisure activity. This can bring you fulfillment and gratification, which causes positive emotions associated with decreased stress levels.

There are many activities you can do in or around your home, such as creating arts and crafts, joining a social group with similar interests, or volunteering to help others. In addition, taking weekend trips periodically and at least one relaxing vacation per year are important in preventing an accumulation of tension.

Get Started!

- Take the time to plan your own stress management program. Write out your goals by centering them on the various aspects of your life, such as family, career, education, leisure, and finances.

- Also, keep a calendar to schedule your stress management activities such as exercise and relaxation routines.
- Practice creates mastery!



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