



Managing Stress

Some stress is normal and even healthy for you. It can be useful when you need to focus or act quickly, for example. It releases hormones that speed up your heart, make you breathe faster, and give you a burst of energy. But it has its bad side too, of course, especially if it is ongoing or severe. In this chapter, we'll look at stress—its good and its bad points—and talk about ways in which one can deal with stress that may seem to be overwhelming at times.

Stress—the Good and the Bad

Not all stress is bad. It can be positive when it results in energy being directed toward growth, action, and change. For example, there is stress associated with the birth of a child or a job promotion.

However, when you have too much stress, it lasts too long or it's linked with negative experiences, stress can be harmful to your health.

- **Immune system**—Chronic stress tends to dampen your immune system, making you more susceptible to colds and other infections.
- **Digestive system**—Stress can cause a stomach ache or even diarrhea. This happens because stress hormones slow the release of stomach acid and the emptying of the stomach.
- **Nervous system**—Stress can produce persistent feelings of anxiety, irritability and agitation. High stress levels have been linked with clinical depression. Excessive amount of stress can cause sleep disturbances, loss of sex drive, and loss of appetite.
- **Cardiovascular system**—Stress can also raise your heart rate, blood pressure, and blood cholesterol levels. These are risk factors for heart attack and strokes.

- **Other systems**—Stress is often linked to other health problems such as the worsening of skin conditions. It can also be a trigger for asthma attacks.

Ways to Reduce Stress

You can't eliminate stress in your life, but there are certainly ways to reduce it.

1. Learn to say no. Don't commit to things that don't matter to you.
2. Do one thing at a time. When you "multi-task," you try to do too many things at one time and each task often takes more time than if you focused on it alone.
3. Decide what's most important and what can wait. It's rare that everything has to be done "right now." Set priorities.
4. Get organized. Make lists and keep track of deadlines. Don't try to remember a whole host of things. Writing down things you have to do often relieves stress because you don't have to worry about remembering them in your head.
5. Don't procrastinate. This just makes you worry about getting things done. If you can, do them now.
6. Save some time for yourself. Try to leave work at the office.
7. Get enough sleep. Stress can seem worse than it is when you're tired all the time.
8. Talk to others. It's amazing how simply sharing things that are bothering you with a friend or family member can help relieve stress and put things in perspective. Sometimes just hearing yourself talk something out helps you find a solution or realize that the situation isn't as onerous as you might have thought.
9. Consider seeking help from a professional such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor (1.866.743.6551), a physician, a trusted member of the clergy, etc.

Coping with Stress

Since we really can't avoid stress, we need to learn to cope with stress as best we can. Some people find they can "de-stress" by getting some physical activity like exercise or yoga. Others find listening to music helps while others like to chat with a friend or loved one. We all need to find what "works for us" as a way to help cope with the stresses in life.

Of course, there are unhealthy ways to deal with stress. Eating too much or too little, yelling at people, smoking or drinking alcohol, and avoiding people are all unhealthy ways to deal with stress. In fact, they often just introduce new problems that must be dealt with.

Learning to Relax

Relaxation has many health benefits. It can help improve how your body reacts to stress by:

- slowing your heart rate
- reducing blood pressure
- slowing your breathing rate
- increasing blood flow to your major muscles
- reducing muscle tension

When you learn to relax, you may experience the following benefits:

- fewer signs and symptoms of illness (such as headaches and nausea)
- fewer emotional responses (such as anger, anxiety, apprehension and frustration)
- more energy
- improved concentration
- a greater ability to tackle problems
- more efficiency in daily activities

So, how do you actually relax? Let's take a look at a few ways to do so.

Relaxed Breathing

The next time you feel under stress, notice how you are breathing. You'll notice that your breathing is rapid and shallow. You might also notice that your heart beats faster and you perspire.

We know that, if you can get in control of your breathing, many of the other physical signs of stress can start to go away.

Here is a "relaxed breathing technique" the Mayo Clinic advises to use when you feel tense.

Relaxed Breathing Technique

- Inhale. With your mouth closed and your shoulders relaxed, inhale slowly and deeply through your nose to the count of six. Allow the air to fill your diaphragm (the muscle between your abdomen and your chest). This will push your abdomen out.
- Pause for a second.
- Exhale. Slowly release the air through your mouth as you count to six.
- Pause for a second.
- Repeat this process several times.

Some Stress Relieving Tips

Here are some additional tips to help reduce stress:

1. Maintain a regular program of healthy eating, good health habits and adequate sleep.
2. Exercise regularly.
3. Balance work and play. All work and no play can make you feel stressed. Plan some time for hobbies and recreation. These activities relax your mind and are a good respite from life worries. Plan one or more vacations during the year. Don't do work on your vacation.
4. Laugh a lot. When events seem too overwhelming, keep a sense of humor. Laughter makes our muscles go limp and releases tension. It's difficult to feel stress in the middle of a belly laugh. Learn to laugh as a relaxation technique.

5. Find ways to learn to accept things that you cannot control. For example, you can't control the weather, traffic, etc. The best you can do is to minimize their effect on your day and your spirits. As the old saying goes, "You can't control the wind, but you can adjust the sails."
6. View changes as positive challenges, opportunities or blessings.

Resources You Can Use

Here are some resources you can use to deal effectively with stress.

Organization	Phone or Website
Employee Assistance Program (United Behavioral Health)	1.866.743.6551 Mental health, work & life changes, stress, depression - liveandworkwell.com
Stress Website	http://stress.about.com/