



STRESS MANAGEMENT MADE SIMPLE

All About Stress

We are constantly trying to juggle a balance between our personal life, our work life, and our family life, and establish harmony in all aspects of our lives. We all face different challenges and obstacles, and sometimes the pressure is hard to handle. When we feel overwhelmed, under the gun, or unsure how to meet the demands placed on us, we experience stress. In small doses, stress can be a good thing. It can give you the push you need, motivating you to do your best and to stay focused and alert. But when the going gets too tough and life's demands exceed your ability to cope, stress becomes a threat to both your physical and emotional well-being.

Signs and Symptoms of Stress

To get a handle on stress, you first need to learn how to recognize it in yourself. Stress affects the mind, body, and behaviour in many ways. The specific signs and symptoms of stress vary widely from person to person. Some people primarily experience physical symptoms, such as low back pain, stomach problems, and skin outbreaks. In others, the stress pattern centers around emotional symptoms such as crying lags or hypersensitivity. For some, it can change the way they think or behave.



The following table lists some of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress. Use it to identify the symptoms you typically experience when you're under stress. Once you identify your red flags, you can take early steps to deal with the stressful situation before it, or your emotions, spiral out of control.

Stress Warning Signs & Symptoms

Cognitive Symptoms

Memory problems
Indecisiveness
Inability to concentrate
Trouble thinking clearly
Poor judgement
Seeing only the negative
Anxious/racing thoughts
Constant worrying
Loss of objectivity
Fearful anticipation

Emotional Symptoms

Moodiness
Agitation
Restlessness
Short temper
Irritability, impatience
Inability to relax
Feeling tense & on edge
Feeling overwhelmed
Sense of loneliness, isolation
Depression, general unhappiness

Physical Symptoms

Headaches or backaches
Muscle tension, stiffness
Nausea
Insomnia
Chest pain, rapid heart rate
Weight gain or loss
Skin breakouts (hives, eczema)
Loss of sex drive
Frequent colds
Irritated eyes
Dizziness

Behavioural Symptoms

Eating more or less
Isolating self from others
Procrastination
Neglecting responsibility
Sleeping too much/too little
Picking fights with others
Nervous habits (nail biting, pacing)
Overreacting to problems
Overdoing activities (exercising, shopping)
Teeth grinding, jaw clenching



Stress is Individual

The potential causes of stress are numerous and highly individual. What you consider stressful depends on many factors, including your personality, general outlook on life, problem-solving abilities, and social support system. Something that's stressful to you may provide enjoyment for someone else. For example, your morning commute may make you anxious and tense because you worry that traffic will make you late. Others, however, may find the trip relaxing because they allow more than enough time to arrive on time and enjoy listening to music while they drive.

The pressures and demands that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that forces us to adjust can be a stressor. This includes positive events such as getting married or receiving a promotion. Regardless of whether an event is good or bad, if the adjustment it requires strains our coping skills and adaptive resources, the end result is stress.

Major life changes

Major life events are stressors. Whether it be a divorce, a child leaving home, a planned pregnancy, a move to a new town, a career change or a diagnosis of cancer, the faster or more dramatic the change, the greater the strain. Furthermore, the more major life changes you're dealing with at any one time, the more stress you'll feel.

Daily hassles and demands

While major life changes are stressful, they are also relatively rare. After all, it's not every day that you file for divorce or have a baby. However, you may battle traffic, argue with your family members, or worry about your finances on a daily basis. Because these small upsets occur so regularly, they end up affecting us the most.

Daily Causes of Stress Include

Environmental stressors – Your physical surroundings can set off the stress response. Examples of environmental stressors include an unsafe neighbourhood, pollution, noise (sirens keeping you up at night, a barking dog next door), and uncomfortable living conditions.

Family and relationship stressors – Problems with friends, romantic partners, and family members are common daily stressors. Marital disagreements, dysfunctional relationships, rebellious teens, or caring for a chronically-ill family member or a child with special needs can all send stress levels skyrocketing.

Work stressors – In our career-driven society, work can be an ever-present source of stress.

Social stressors – Your social situation can cause stress. For example, poverty, financial pressures, racial and sexual discrimination or harassment, unemployment, isolation, and a lack of social support all take a toll on daily quality of life.

Internal Causes of Stress

Not all stress is caused by external pressures and demands. Your stress can also be self-generated. Internal causes of stress include:

- Uncertainty or worries
- Self-criticism
- Perfectionism
- Low self-esteem
- Excessive or unexpressed anger
- Pessimistic attitude
- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of assertiveness

Risk Factors for Stress

The presence of a stressor doesn't automatically result in disabling stress symptoms. The degree to which any stressful situation or event impacts your daily functioning depends partly on the nature of the stressor itself and partly on your own personal and external resources.



Effects of Chronic Stress

Chronic stress wears you down day after day and year after year, with no visible escape. Under sustained or severe stress, even the most well-adjusted person loses the ability to adapt. When stress overwhelms our coping resources, our bodies and minds suffer.

Health Effects

The physical wear and tear of stress includes damage to the cardiovascular system and immune system suppression. Many medical conditions can be caused or exasperated by stress including:

- Chronic Pain
- Ulcers
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- PMS
- Infertility
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Migraines
- Heartburn
- Heart disease
- Asthma
- Obesity
- Autoimmune diseases
- Skin Problems

Handling Stress

We all know what it's like to face overwhelming stress. Make it your mission to manage your stress before it takes a major toll on your mind and body. Pay attention to physical cues - are you grinding your teeth at night? Are your shoulders always tight? When did that heartburn start? Try to avoid stress in the first place. Learn to say no, as in "No, I can't take on another project" and "No, I can't run the bake sale this year." Talk to your doctor, a counsellor or the employee assistance program at your workplace about issues that are bothering you.

Stress in the Workplace

Resource: www.helpguide.org

What is workplace stress?

The responses our bodies and minds have to the demands placed on them is a normal part of life and a normal part of any job. Without stress, we wouldn't meet deadlines, strive to hit sales or production targets, or line up new clients. Meeting the demands and challenges of a job is part of what makes work interesting and satisfying, and it's often what allows people to develop new skills and advance in their careers. In the workplace, we regularly experience stress-causing situations, react to them with heightened tension, then return to a more relaxed state when the crisis, big or small, is resolved. However, problems occur when stress is so overwhelming or constant that the tension never abates and we never get to relax.

Stress Reduction in the Workplace

There are many things individually or collectively you can do to reduce workplace stress. Work with your employer or human resources on the following:

✓ **Get a job description...**

If your employer hasn't provided a specific, written description of your job, ask for one or ask to negotiate one. With a clear job description, your expectations are spelled out, as are your boss's. This can also help you better manage your tasks and time.

✓ **Change your job internally...**

If you like where you're working but your job is too stressful, ask if the company can tailor the job to your skills or move you to a less pressured slot.

✓ **Get support...**

Talk to human resources or other employees about ways they handle on the job stresses.



deal with workplace pressures and stressors. Keep your body and mind running well with exercise and eat a well balanced diet.

Eliminate Self-Defeating Behaviours

Many of us make job stress worse with patterns of thought or behaviour that keep us from relieving pressure on ourselves. If you can turn around these self-defeating habits, you'll find employer-imposed stress easier to handle.

✓ *Resist perfectionism...*

When you set unrealistic goals for yourself or try to do too much, you're setting yourself up to fall short. Do your best in a time efficient manner and if you can, have someone else review your work to make suggestions and corrections. Often when you are too particular or in too much of a rush you tend to miss important facts and dates.

✓ *Clean up your act...*

If you're always running late, set your clocks and watches fast and give yourself extra time. If your desk is a mess, file and throw away the clutter; just knowing where everything is saves time and cuts stress.

✓ *Learn time management...*

Prioritize your day and give yourself deadlines on projects. Pick apart projects or job tasks and make sure you organize timelines for completion. Book reminders on your calendars and review your calendar every day before you start. Set daily, weekly and monthly goals. Write a daily log of tasks and completion dates.

✓ *Flip your negative thinking...*

If you see the downside of every situation and interaction, you'll find yourself drained of energy and motivation. Try to think positively about your work, avoid negative-thinking co-workers, and pat yourself on the back about small accomplishments, even if no one else does.

✓ *Eat well and Stay Active...*

Staying active will help you to remain positive, and to better

✓ *Document everything...*

If you document your day to day tasks, file email conversations in order, and document meetings with managers and co-workers, you always have reference to important discussions. If you have a meeting with someone, document the facts and send a copy to everyone. This way if things are miss-understood they can be corrected. Include completion dates and assigned tasks.



Find Ways to Dispel Stress

Tips for reducing stress:



break. Walk away from the situation. Take a stroll around the block, sit on a park bench, or spend a few minutes meditating. Exercise does wonders for the psyche, but even just finding a quiet place and listening to your iPod can reduce stress.

- ✓ Talk it out. Sometimes the best stress-reducer is simply sharing your stress with someone close to you. Talking through it and getting support and empathy from someone else is often an excellent way of blowing off steam and reducing stress.
- ✓ Cultivate allies at work. Just knowing you have one or more co-workers who are willing to assist you in times of stress will reduce your stress level. Just remember to reciprocate and help them when they are in need.
- ✓ Find humour in the situation. When you, or the people around you, start taking things too seriously, find a way to break through with laughter. Share a joke or funny story.



Prevention:

Change your focus

You may not be able to cut back on hours at work, but you can work to live and not live to work. Because of the number of hours many employees work per week, the job can easily

become all-encompassing. We wake and get ready for work, drive to work, spend eight or more hours at work, and finally drive home from work. Learning to keep work in focus during work hours and life in focus after hours will take you a long way towards managing workplace stress.

School yourself to wake and get ready, not for work, but for your day. On the drive to work, listen to music, humour – anything that isn't related to work.

- ✓ Take an alternate route to work. The change in scenery will help you stay alert to the road and keep your mind off the job.
- ✓ Plan your work and work your plan. Devote every paid minute to your job. Deviate from your work plan only when absolutely necessary.
- ✓ Take your allotted breaks. Remember: the opposite of stress is relaxation. Don't work through lunch or coffee breaks. This also means don't think or talk about work during your breaks.
- ✓ Instead of coffee, drink water, juice, or electrolyte infused drinks. Dehydration often is the cause of fatigue. Coffee and soft drinks that contain caffeine may seem to "keep you going", but in reality they add to stress and don't keep your body hydrated.
- ✓ Keep a copy of *Stress Management Tips and Stress Relieving Exercises* nearby, and refer to it when you need to get through a stressful occurrence.



Family Stress Management

Bills, kids, household chores, spousal relationships... all can cause family stress. However, learning to cope with daily family stressors can strengthen your family bond, and can make it easier to handle a family crisis as well.

The Strong Family Unit

In today's society when both partners in a family have

careers and children are involved in diverse extra-curricular activities, it's very easy for the family unit to break down, resulting in a number of separate individuals living under one roof. Each individual becomes isolated, facing his/her own problems and left to solve them on their own. The stress for one member of a family, stresses, and often divides the entire family. When one part is stressed, the whole family unit can collapse. The solution is to work through problems as a family, but for the solution to be effective, the family unit needs to be strong.


Take Time for the Family

Family togetherness doesn't mean constantly holding hands. It is quality time spent together that reduces daily family stress and builds strong families that can weather both small storms and large crises.

- ✓ Work at household chores together. Completing simple household chores as a family has several advantages. Doing dishes, raking the yard, spring cleaning, or holding a garage sale offers the family time to communicate, lightens the load for individual family members, and lets individuals build skills and self-esteem.
- ✓ Share a meal. Share at least one meal each day. Dinner time these days is often hectic with individuals having conflicting work and activity schedules. If this is true in your family, start having family breakfasts. Mealtimes are a great time to tune into individual schedules and plan family activities. If you can't do it every day, schedule it as a regular family "event"
- ✓ The family "event" can be a special activity as complex as a family vacation or as simple as a trip to

the local park or a family movie night. Plan the activity as a family and make the activity an "event" where each member contributes to making it a successful and enjoyable occasion.

When managing individual stressors that affect the family, keep a few tips in mind:

1. Don't avoid discussion. If it's a problem for you or a problem that you notice is causing stress in another family member, chances are it's a stressor for the entire family as well. Talk it out and work towards finding a solution.
2. Don't trivialize. Whether the problem is as significant as a spouse losing a job or as unimportant to you as the death of your daughter's pet frog, the problem is a stressor for the individual that can ultimately cause stress for the family. Let the individual talk it out because a  them that solving the problem is
3. Don't lay blame. When there's a problem it really doesn't matter who's at fault. Define the problem and work towards a solution.
4. Respect privacy. If a family member brings a problem to you in confidence, respect it. Don't air it for discussion without their agreement. If you are unable to agree to keep the confidence, be honest in your refusal. For instance, often parents reach decisions about children together. If a child says, "But, don't tell Dad," your

response might be, “I’m sorry, but Dad and I don’t keep secrets. He needs to know about this. Would you like us to tell him together or would you rather not be there when I tell him?”

Building a strong family unit that effectively manages day-to-day stressors not only makes your home a place for each member to relax, recharge, and rejuvenate but also builds the skills necessary for the family to come together in a crisis and effectively manage family stress.

Stress Prevention and Relief Tips!

Although you may not think of exercise as stress relieving (if you’ve ever walked a treadmill for a stress test), a healthy body is a great way to combat stress. Of course, a full-blown exercise regime can’t be completed at your desk, but there are several things that you can do to relieve tension and reduce stress. Even if your job is physically taxing, the exercises below are designed to help you unwind, relax, and reduce stress.

- ✓ Blow it off. Deep breathing is often overlooked as an exercise. It is an excellent stress reducer. Breathe in while tucking in your stomach and feel the air as it expands your lungs and your chest. Breathe in to the count of four and hold it for two counts. Then exhale to the count of four. Take two to four deep breathes several times a day.
- ✓ Get up and stretch. Visualize the stress flooding from your back, legs, your shoulders, and pouring out through your fingertips and toes. Add to your stretches by taking the time to learn a few yoga positions. Check out yoga books and videos as well as yoga classes.
- ✓ AT WORK: There are programs you can download to your computer that illustrate on-screen stretches throughout the day. Using this reminder to stretch can help with relaxation and stress relief. Search on the internet for *stretching computer programs for work*. Take a short walk after lunch or in lieu of a coffee break. A brisk ten or fifteen minute walk each day is not only physically beneficial, but can help to move your focus from your problems to the scenery along your route.
- ✓ Squeeze a stress ball to let out any anger & frustrations.





lifestyle. How we view situation

Stress Relief Tips Cont'd.

- ✓ Try doing a body scan. Start at your toes and “tell” them to relax. As they start to relax, move to your feet, ankles, calf muscles, knees, thighs and so on up your torso to your shoulders and finally to the top of your head. Alternatively, start at the top of your head and work your way down. Progressive relaxation is especially beneficial when stress keeps you from getting a good night’s sleep.
- ✓ Dance! Join an aerobics class, tai chi, or just turn on the tunes and dance. Dancing has a double advantage in that along with exercise, music is a great stress reducer.
- ✓ Exercise! With your doctor’s approval, it’s important to get regular vigorous. Exercise can cancel out the effects of stress on your body.
- ✓ Relax regularly! An effective stress management technique is to use deep relaxation, which helps to neutralize the negative effects of stress. Practice the relaxation response for about 20 minutes per day.
- ✓ Realize that your attitudes & perceptions play a key role in managing stress. Keep positive quotes & photos close by, & remind yourself of what you are grateful for.
- ✓ Have realistic expectations. One of the most helpful things we can do is figure out what is realistic for us to accomplish each day. Many of us create our own stress by setting our expectations unrealistically high.

we find ourselves in can play a role in how we cope positively with crisis. Try to always focus on the positive.

- ✓ Build & maintain a working support network. This system can help support you in times of need, & allow you the opportunity to do the same for others. Remember: stress can create tunnel vision, an inability to look at alternatives & options, & make you feel that people are “out to get you” or that they’re purposely being difficult to aggravate you. Share your perceptions with the important people in your life. Do they see the situation the same way you do? Do they have ideas about what you can do about it?
- ✓ Spend time with your loved ones. Strong families tend to spend time together often. Unfortunately, when families get under stress, a natural tendency is for the individuals to go off on their own. One of the healthiest things a family can do when under stress is to purposely plan to spend some time together. Balance your commitment to your children, your job, your loved ones, & yourself. Seek the happy middle ground that is healthy for yourself and for your family.

Only you can determine the amount of stress that is good for you. The amount of stress you need to operate effectively is very personal. Determine how much stress is healthy in your life, and monitor it so that you don’t take on less or more than is healthy and productive for your lifestyle.

- ✓ Arrange your life so you feel in control. It’s important to feel in control of your schedule and your



Relaxation & Stress Relieving Exercises

Deep Breathing:

Here's How:

1. Sit or stand in a relaxed position.
2. Slowly inhale through your nose, counting to five in your head.
3. Let the air out from your mouth, counting to eight in your head as it leaves your lungs. Repeat several times.

Tips:

- ✓ As you breathe, let your abdomen expand outward, rather than raising your shoulders. This is a more relaxed and natural way to breathe, and will help your lungs to fill more fully with fresh air.
- ✓ Repeat the above exercise just a few times to release tension, or for several minutes as a form of meditation.
- ✓ If comfortable, you can make your throat a little tighter as you exhale so the air comes out like a whisper. This type of breathing is used in some forms of yoga and can add additional tension relief.



Meditation:

Meditation builds on deep breathing. When you meditate, your brain enters an area of functioning that is similar to sleep, but carries some added benefits you can't achieve as well in any other state, including the release of certain hormones that promote health. Additionally, clearing your head of negative or stressful thoughts keeps your mind from working overtime, thus helping to reduce stress levels.

Close your eyes, relax, and sit comfortably. Clear your mind. Trying not to think about anything can be quite difficult – a great way to make it easier is to focus on your breathing. Feel the sensation of air entering and exiting your lungs, hear the sound as it passes through your nostrils, or the sounds in the background.

Tips:

Keep Your Mind Clear: As thoughts enter your mind (and they will), simply notice them, and let them go.

Many perfectionists expect their minds to stay clear and if thoughts do enter, they feel they may be “doing it wrong”. A better strategy is to congratulate yourself for noticing the thoughts, and simply let them go; this is what makes your meditation effective.

Repeat Regularly : Try this a few times a week at first, and work your way up to nearly every day. Meditation can make a big difference in your health, emotional well-being and overall stress levels.

Start Slow: While it's best to meditate every day (or even a few times a day), for best odds of success, start small and work your way up.

Don't Give Up: It's better to shoot for 5 or 10 minute sessions, several times a week. You can always work your way into longer sessions, but it's the regularity of practice that counts, especially in the beginning.



Your imagination can be a powerful tool to help you combat

Guided Imagery:

To promote a more immersive experience, try playing natural sounds in the background.

Here's How:

Get into a comfortable position, perhaps similar to one you would use for meditation . If a lying down position would likely cause you to fall asleep, try sitting cross-legged, or recline in a comfy chair. Close your eyes and use deep breathing. Focus on breathing *in* peace and breathing *out* stress. As you begin to relax, envision yourself in the midst of the most relaxing environment you can imagine. For some, this may be floating in the cool clear waters off a remote tropical island. For others, it may be sitting by a fire in a secluded snow cabin deep in the woods, sipping hot cocoa, and reading a favourite novel while wrapped in a plush blanket. As you imagine your scene, try to involve all of your senses. What does it look like? How does it feel? What scents are involved? Do you hear the roar of a fire, the splash of a waterfall, or the sounds of chipper birds? Make your vision real, and stay here for as long as you like. Enjoy your 'surroundings', and let yourself be far from what stresses you. When you're ready to come back to reality, count back from 10 or 20, and tell yourself that when you get to 1, you'll feel serene and alert, and enjoy the rest of your day.

stress, tension, and anxiety. You can use visualization to harness the energy of your imagination, and it does not take long. In just a few weeks, many are able to master the technique. Try to use guided imagery or visualization two or three times a day. Most people find it easiest to do in bed in the morning and at night before falling asleep, though with practice, you'll eventually be able to visualize whenever and wherever the need arises.

Another type of visualization involves using an image that you associate with tension, and replacing it with an image for relaxation. For example, you might visualize tension as



a taut rope, the sound of thunder, the color red, pitch darkness, persistent hammering, or blinding white light. These images of tension can soften and fade into images of relaxation. For instance, the taut rope loosens, the thunder subsides and is replaced by a light rain, red turns to orchid, the darkness begins to lighten, the pounding hammer is replaced by the murmur of cicadas and crickets, the blinding white light softens to a sunset.

Remember:

Your thoughts have a direct influence on the way you feel and behave. If you tend to dwell on sad or negative thoughts, it's likely that you are not a very happy person. Likewise, if you think that your job is consistently stressful enough to give you a headache, you probably will come home with throbbing temples each day. This is just one example of the power the mind exerts over the body.

When you feel a muscle becoming tense, imagine that it is one of these tension

images. Then let it transform into a relaxation image as you count down from 10 to 1. When you reach 1, you can relax . . . the tension is gone.



can relieve tension and feel much more relaxed in minutes, with no special training or equipment.

Here's How:

Start by tensing all the muscles in your face, holding a tight grimace for ten seconds, then completely relaxing for ten seconds. Repeat this with your neck, followed by your shoulders, etc. You can do this anywhere, and as you practice, you will find you can relax more quickly and easily, reducing tension as quickly as it starts!



Sex

You probably already know that sex is a great tension reliever, but have you officially thought of it as a stress-relieving practice? Perhaps you should. The physical benefits of sex are numerous, and most of them work very well toward relieving stress. Sadly, many people have less sex when their stress levels are high.

Music

Music therapy has shown numerous health benefits for people with conditions ranging from mild (like stress) to severe (like cancer). When dealing with stress, the right music can actually lower your blood pressure, relax your body, and calm your mind.

Yoga

Yoga is one of the oldest self-improvement practices around, dating back over 5 thousand years! It combines the practices of several other stress management techniques such as breathing, meditation, imagery and movement. Not only is it great for your mental health, but it goes a long way in improving your physical health as well.

Yoga's Effects On the Body

- reduced stress

- sound sleep
- improvement of many medical conditions
- allergy and asthma symptom relief
- lower blood pressure
- smoking cessation help
- lower heart rate
- spiritual growth
- sense of well-being
- reduced anxiety and muscle tension
- increased strength and flexibility
- slowed aging process

What's Involved In Yoga?

The practice of yoga involves stretching the body to form different poses, while keeping breathing slow and controlled. The body becomes relaxed and energized at the same time. There are various styles of yoga, some moving through the poses more quickly, almost like an aerobic workout, and other styles focusing more on relaxing deeply into each pose. Some have a more spiritual angle, while others are used purely as a form of exercise. Virtually everyone can see physical benefits from yoga, and its practice can provide psychological benefits, such as stress reduction and a sense of well-being, and spiritual benefits, such as a feeling of connectedness with God or a higher power.



Remember, keeping your stress level in check is a sure way to improve your overall quality of life, and to get yourself on the path to healthy longevity. Set yourself daily, weekly, and monthly goals to incorporate stress management techniques in your own lifestyle, and begin to reap the physical, mental, and emotional benefits of a happier, healthier you!

Resource: Exercise and Stress Relief: Using Exercise as a Stress Management Tool

By Elizabeth Scott, M.S., About.com, November 4, 2007 Health's Disease and Condition content is reviewed by Steven Gans, MD