



Stress Management Made Simple

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. 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 table to the right 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

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.

<u>Cognitive Symptoms</u>	<u>Emotional Symptoms</u>
Memory problems	Moodiness
Indecisiveness	Agitation
Inability to concentrate	Restlessness
Trouble thinking clearly	Short temper
Poor judgement	Irritability, impatience
Seeing only the negative	Inability to relax
Anxious/racing thoughts	Feeling tense & on edge
Constant worrying	Feeling overwhelmed
Loss of objectivity	Sense of loneliness, isolation
Fearful anticipation	Depression
	General unhappiness
<u>Physical Symptoms</u>	<u>Behavioural Symptoms</u>
Headaches or backaches	Eating more or less
Muscle tension, stiffness	Isolating self from others
Nausea	Procrastination
Insomnia	Neglecting responsibility
Chest pain, rapid heart rate	Sleeping too much/too little
Weight gain or loss	Picking fights with others
Skin breakouts (hives, eczema)	Nervous habits (nail biting, pacing)
Loss of sex drive	Overreacting to problems
Frequent colds	Overdoing activities (exercising, shopping)
Irritated eyes	Teeth grinding, jaw clenching
Dizziness	

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. Remember, stress can come from both positive and negative experiences. If you are dealing with a specific event or situation, this strains our coping skills and adaptive resources, and 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. While major life events can be stressful, they are also relatively rare. It's not every day you file for divorce or have a baby. However, you may battle traffic, argue with your family or worry about your finances on a daily basis. Because these small upsets occur so regularly, they end up affecting us the most.



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.

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

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

Health Effects

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

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". Talk to your doctor, a counsellor or the employee assistance program at your workplace about issues that are bothering you.

Stress in the Workplace

What is workplace stress? Resource: www.helpguide.org
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. 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, and 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

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 you 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.

Eliminate Self-Defeating Behaviours

✓ **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.

✓ **Eat well and Stay Active...**

Staying active will help you to remain positive, and to better deal with workplace pressures and stressors. Keep your body and mind running well with exercise and eat a well balanced diet.

✓ **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.



✓ **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:

- ✓ Get time away. If you feel stress building, take a 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.

- ✓ On the drive to work, listen to music, humour – anything that isn't related to work.
- ✓ School yourself to wake and get ready, not for work, but for your day.
- ✓ Take an alternate route to work. The change in scenery will help you stay alert & 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. 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, natural 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.

Family Stress Management

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. 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. Mealtime is 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 & make the activity an "event" where each member contributes to making it a successful & 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 & 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, be a good listener, and show them that solving the problem is important to the family.
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!

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 breaths 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.
- ✓ 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. Exercise can cancel out the effects of stress on your body.



Stress Prevention cont'd.

- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Arrange your life so you feel in control. It's important to feel in control of your schedule and your lifestyle. How we view situations we find ourselves in can play a role in how we cope positively with crisis. 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.

Relaxation & Stress Relieving Exercises

Deep Breathing:

Here's How

Sit or stand in a relaxed position.

Slowly inhale through your nose, counting to five in your head. Let the air out from your mouth, counting to eight in your head as it leaves your lungs. Repeat several times.

✓ As you breathe, let your abdomen expand outward, rather than raising your shoulders. This is a more relaxed method, 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.

Here's How:

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.

✓ **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.

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. 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, 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.

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.

Using Imagery to Minimize Stress

Try to use guided imagery or visualization two or three times a day. You may find it easiest to do in bed in the morning and at night before falling asleep. 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, 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, the pounding hammer is replaced by the murmur of cicadas and crickets, the blinding white light softens to a sunset. 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 repeat to yourself, "*I can relax . . . the tension is slipping away.*"

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

By tensing and relaxing all the muscle groups in your body, you 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!

Additional Stress relieving Tips

Music: When dealing with stress, the right music can actually lower your blood pressure, relax your body, and calm your mind.

Sex: 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.

Yoga: Yoga 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. 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.

Resource: Exercise and Stress Relief: Using Exercise as a Stress Management, Health Canada website, Heart and Stroke foundation.