



Tips for Handling Stress

We all feel stressed from time to time. Stress can sometimes be a good thing, like the stress of working on a deadline can motivate us to complete a task. But stress can also be debilitating, especially when it is uncontrolled. Extreme stress can lower our quality of life and can weaken our bodies, making us more susceptible to disease.

What are the symptoms of stress?

They are not the same for everyone, but some common symptoms include:

- fatigue
- poor concentration
- appetite changes
- increased drinking of alcohol or cigarette smoking
- changes in bowel or bladder habits
- body aches and pains
- changes in sleeping routine
- behavioral or emotional changes

Identify your stress “triggers”

We can't completely avoid stress, but we can improve how we deal with it. The first step is to identify your stress triggers and unhealthy responses.

- Keep a daily diary noting events and activities that put a strain on your energy and time or that trigger anger or anxiety.
- After a week, identify two or three events that were upsetting and any unhealthy ways you dealt with them.
- Then develop strategies and set goals to change those behaviors.
- Focus on positive experiences – those that are mentally or physically refreshing or produce a sense of accom-

plishment. Do this by including these experiences in your diary.

Relaxation techniques

There are many ways to handle stress. What works for one person may not work for someone else.

You can use the following techniques:

Mental imaging involves mental exercises that make muscles feel heavy and warm. To do this, sit or lie in a comfortable position in a quiet room. Close your eyes and concentrate on a muscle group and see that muscle relax in your mind. Do this for five to ten minutes twice a day, moving from head to toe.

Deep breathing, or diaphragmatic breathing, can also help you relax and can be done almost anywhere. For deep breathing, sit or lie in a comfortable position and breathe in slowly and deeply, pushing your stomach out as you inhale. Do this 10 times in a row about 5 times a day.

Progressive muscle relaxation is similar to mental imaging, but it requires you to first tighten the muscle and then fully relax. Make yourself comfortable and then focus on a muscle

group. Tighten the muscle for 15 to 20 seconds, then relax slowly and feel the difference. Do this for all of the muscle groups twice a day, taking about 12 to 15 minutes.

Some healthy ways to handle stress are to:

- **Exercise** for 30 minutes at least three times a week.
- **Find ways to relax**, such as taking walks, talking with friends, listening to music, and watching movies.
- **Try to develop a positive attitude** toward the stressful situations that you cannot avoid.
- **Set realistic goals** and expectations.
- **Get 6 to 10 hours of sleep** a night.
- **Eat three to six small, well-balanced meals** a day.
- **Drink less coffee and alcohol.**
- **Drink six to seven glasses of water** daily.
- **Overcome negative thoughts** with humor and positive thinking.
- **Seek professional help** when you experience extreme stress.

If you need help

See your physician to develop a stress management routine that is right for you. Your physician is your best source for medical advice.

