

Creating Health & Nutrition

De-stress for Health

Tip

Take a few slow, deep breaths when feeling overwhelmed to trigger the body's relaxation response.

Everyone feels stressed at one point or another. But what is stress? How does it impact your health? And what can you do to manage it?

What Is Stress?

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When you perceive something as dangerous—whether there is actual danger or not—the body's defense system goes into action. This automatic response is called the "fight-or-flight" reaction or the "stress response," and involves a rapid release of hormones and chemicals like adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine to prepare the body to defend itself. This response is the body's way of protecting you from danger. When functioning correctly, it helps you concentrate, energizes you, and keeps

you alert. But, when it exceeds a certain level, stress stops being beneficial and can impact the body, mind, and health.

Causes of Stress

An event or situation that triggers the stress response is called a "stressor." We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as being stuck in traffic or a draining work schedule. However, anything that puts high demands on the body can be stressful. Whether or not a situation causes you stress is largely influenced by your perception. Something that is stressful to you may not be to someone else. For example, giving an oral presentation may make you anxious and tense, but you may have a friend who enjoys the spotlight and attention that comes with speaking in front of others. The key is how we perceive situations and internalize them.

The Effects of Chronic Stress

Long-term, chronic stress occurs when the stress response persists for too long or when the source of stress is constant. Over time, sustained pressure on

the body from habitual stress may lead to serious chronic health issues, such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, obesity, and other illnesses, as well as mental health disorders like depression or anxiety.

Coping Responses

Everyone copes with stress differently, and some coping strategies can do more harm than good. Many coping responses provide temporary relief, but in the end only make stress worse. These are referred to as negative coping responses. Some examples include excessive alcohol consumption, negatively using drugs, smoking, yelling or fighting, excessive food intake, or excessive video gaming. On the other hand, positive coping responses provide longer-lasting relief and can help manage stress rather than momentarily covering it up. See the blue box for positive coping responses and stress management strategies.

Common Stressors

Employment and School

- Starting a new job
- Job loss
- Work-life balance
- Exams and deadlines

Major Life Changes

- Marriage
- Divorce or breakup
- Retirement
- Moving
- Having a baby

Finances

- Debt
- Trouble paying bills
- Money management problems

Health

- Illness or injury
- Death of a family member or friend



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Stress Management Tips

- 1. Get moving.** When you exercise, your brain releases chemicals that make you feel good. Just 30 minutes of physical activity per day can help boost your mood and reduce stress.
- 2. Connect with others.** Having a strong social support network is crucial to coping with stress. Supportive friends or family can help solve problems, provide advice on how to manage stress, or offer a listening ear when you need to talk. Don't let stress get in the way of being social!
- 3. Get a good night's sleep.** A good night's sleep can help reduce blood pressure and high levels of stress hormones in the body. This can help you deal with stress more easily when it occurs. Aim for about 7 to 9 hours each night.
- 4. Learn new ways to relax.** Practicing relaxation techniques is a great way to combat stress. Relaxation techniques help slow your heart rate, clear your mind, and lower your blood pressure. There are many types, from deep breathing and mindfulness meditation to yoga and tai chi. Take a class or learn from books, videos, or online sources.
- 5. Adopt a positive mindset.** Develop a more positive attitude toward negative situations. One way to do this is by challenging negative thoughts and replacing them with more optimistic ones. For example, rather than thinking, "Why does everything always go wrong?" change this thought to, "I know I can find a way to get through this." You can't always control a situation, but you can control how you respond to it.
- 6. Eat a healthy diet.** Eat more vegetables, fruits, and whole grains as well as legumes, nuts, and seeds. Choose fat-free or low-fat dairy and lean meats. Limit foods high in saturated fat and added sugar.
- 7. Do something you enjoy.** When feeling stressed, participating in an enjoyable activity can help you feel better. Suggestions include reading a book, listening to music, watching your favorite TV show, or getting together with a friend. Whatever you choose, try to take a break at least once every day to do something for yourself.
- 8. Get organized.** Use organizational strategies to help better manage your time. For example, a "to do" list helps prioritize everything on your plate and allows you to focus on the most important task at hand or what is most time sensitive. Additionally, approaching a large project one step at a time can make it more manageable.
- 9. Avoid stressful situations.** If possible, remove yourself from the source of stress. For example, if you know that being around a certain person causes you stress, limit spending time with them. Ask yourself how you can improve the situation and then take action.
- 10. Learn to say no.** Overcommitment is a common cause of unnecessary pressure and strain. If your stress comes from taking on too much at home or work, it is time to set some boundaries. Learning to say "no" is a powerful skill that will allow more time and energy for the people and activities that are truly important in your life.

Examine Your Choices

Source of stress	How stress affects me	What I do now	What I plan to do/change
Long hours at work	Trouble sleeping; no time to cook healthy meals	Get no more than 5 hours of sleep; order takeout for meals	Try relaxation techniques like mindfulness before bed; prep meals for the week on Sunday

My goal: For the next 7 days, I will practice a relaxation technique each night before bed and aim to be in bed by 10:00 p.m. every night.

Sources

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Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research and extension programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Produced by Ag Communications and Marketing
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Code EE0204 07/20pod