

What is stress?

Stress is a response to change, threat or long-term frustration. Stress affects people of all ages; a child starting school, a student facing exams, an adult who loses a job or starts a new one, parents coping with family difficulties and seniors nearing retirement.

Some stress is actually good for you, helping to mobilize your mind and body to perform to the best of your ability. However, too much stress, especially prolonged, increases the risk of a number of diseases including heart disease, asthma and duodenal ulcers. It can also put pressure on relationships at work and at home.

What are the symptoms of stress?

Common symptoms of stress include excessive worrying, anxiety, argumentativeness, over/under-eating, restlessness, disturbed sleep, apathy, withdrawal, constant headache and backache, excessive drinking, chain-smoking and drug use.

How can I prevent stress?

While it may not be possible—nor worthwhile—to get rid of stress completely, there are approaches and new living habits you can develop to help manage stress.

Try these tips to help prevent and manage stress in your life: Avoid letting minor difficulties distract you from what's important; resist taking on too many commitments; talk with friends or family about things that concern you; take part in a regular activity or exercise; eat a balanced diet; make time to be with friends and family; organize and prioritize tasks and finances; keep a diary or journal of your thoughts and feelings; don't let

yourself be persuaded into taking on more than you wish to handle; break difficult jobs into stages and look at each stage separately; learn relaxation techniques and maintain a good balance of professional and personal responsibilities.

In addition, knowing how to cope with difficult situations can result in better stress management.

How can I cope with difficult situations?

When finding yourself in a difficult situation, try implementing the following coping strategies: avoid letting minor difficulties take your focus away from what is important to you; set realistic expectations of yourself and others and look at the positive side of the situation.

How do I create a plan of action?

Write down a problem that triggers your stress at home, at work or with your relationships. Write down all the things that you could do to solve the problem and ask other people what they would do, then choose the option you think has the best chance of succeeding in the long-term as well as the short-term. Finally, decide how you can put the chosen solution into practice.

What are some relaxation techniques?

Relaxation Breathing

Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes if you wish. Concentrate on your breathing—in through the nose, out through the mouth. Imagine the air you breathe spreading energy—giving oxygen to every muscle in your body.

As you breathe out, say the word 'relax.' Concentrate on the 'floating' feeling in your legs and arms. Yoga and meditation are other beneficial relaxation techniques that incorporate relaxation breathing.

Progressive Muscular Relaxation

This method involves consciously relaxing the large muscles of your body. The theory is that a relaxed body means a relaxed mind.

There are several different versions. Try this one for about 20 minutes daily:

- Sit or lie in a relaxed position with eyes closed; breathe naturally.
- Clench fists hard so arms feel tense. Ease the tension slowly as you breathe out, like slackening taut elastic. Say 'relax' to yourself.
- Do the same in turn with lower legs, thighs, trunk, stomach, back and head.
- After doing this a few times, move onto the next phase: don't tense first, just relax. Let each part of you in turn feel heavy and relaxed. Associate each 'out' breath with the word 'relax.'
- Add a little imagination: imagine a peaceful scene (a quiet place on the beach) and imagine yourself there, at peace. Stay in this imaginary place for a while—imagine each detail in turn.

Exercise

Many people find physical activity or exercise is the best way to manage stress. It has the added advantage of improving general health.

You do not need to exercise vigorously to gain benefits. Any physical activity, such as walking or mowing the lawn, can help.

If you wish to take up more strenuous activity and you are not used to exercise, or are more than 40 years old, have a medical check-up first and discuss exercise plans with your family doctor.

Contact the National Heart Foundation for more information on exercise and physical activity.

Coping with Stress

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