

Coping with Stress

Stress can take its toll on your health, both emotionally and physically. The longer stress continues, the more damage it can do. Depression, anxiety, irritability, fatigue, high blood pressure, heart disease, digestive problems, aches and pains, unhealthy weight gain or loss, and trouble sleeping can all result from unresolved stress. Eventually, relationships may become strained or lost, and work or school may become too difficult to maintain. So, coping with stress is important for maintaining wellness.

The good news is, stress can be managed and reduced. Many strategies are healthy and are proven to work. Unfortunately, some are self-destructive and can compound the effects of stress.

Some healthy ways to cope with stress:

- **Practice Deep Breathing:** This can help relax your mind and body. Concentrate on your breathing. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose. Let your stomach expand and imagine it filling up like a balloon. Let your diaphragm push down into your abdomen. Hold the breath for a moment then let it out slowly through your mouth. Repeat as often as necessary.
- **S.T.A.R.:** **S**top, **T**hink, **A**ct appropriately, and **R**elax. Whenever you encounter a stressful situation, this technique can help you perform without becoming overwhelmed. Immediately stop your train of thought and clear your mind (imagining a stop sign helps). Focus like a laser on the task at hand. Identify the actions that you can take that are appropriate and responsible, and take them. Then, relax and let it be, because you have done your part.
- **Talk to Someone:** Tell someone you trust what's on your mind. Keeping something all bottled up inside only increases stress, but getting it off your chest can be a relief. Often, another person can give you a perspective or idea you've never considered. Seek support from people who care about you, such as family members, friends, and support group peers. If you aren't comfortable talking to someone who is close to you, or if confidentiality is an issue, find a professional such as a therapist or religious leader.
- **Journal:** Writing in a journal can be a good way to safely express thoughts and feelings. Sometimes you're not even sure how you're feeling until you start writing. You may surprise yourself. And you may write things that you're not comfortable telling other people yet. Sorting things out on paper can bring a sense of relief and give you a way to step back and gain insight into your own thoughts. You can use this insight to help you deal with your feelings and take positive actions. When you write, be completely honest and don't worry about grammar or spelling. Just use stream of consciousness and write the way you would talk.
- **Meditate:** Meditating can help refresh your mind and body when you feel stressed-out. Set aside a half hour and find a quiet place where you know you won't be disturbed by anything or anyone. Get into a comfortable position and clear your mind of everything except a single peaceful image or sound. Some people like to play a CD with very relaxing music or nature sounds. You may want to practice some deep breathing to help you relax. Focus on the image or sound and let go of the physical world. Let yourself feel free and at peace. After 20 minutes or so, gradually allow yourself to be aware of your surroundings again. Hopefully, you will feel refreshed and less tense. Of course, there are many variations on meditating – develop one that works for you.
- **Practice the Progressive Relaxation Technique:** This form of meditation can help you relax physically. Go to the quiet place where you won't be disturbed and get comfortable. Starting with your feet, flex and relax each muscle group in your body, slowly working your way up to your head. Hold the tension for 3 to 5 seconds, then relax and take a slow, deep breath. Gradually work each muscle group one at a time from bottom to top until you finish with your head and face. Try this technique when your muscles feel stiff or tense from stress.

- **Exercise:** Exercising can be a great way to work tension and restlessness out of your system. It can also improve your blood pressure and cardiovascular strength, making it easier for you to tolerate stress. Exercise can even cause your body to release endorphins (a type of hormone), which may make you feel calmer. Your workout doesn't have to be fancy – something like a regular brisk walk can make a big difference. Please consult your doctor before starting any exercise program.
- **Develop Healthy Eating Habits:** A sensible diet can give your body the strength and balance it needs to successfully endure stress. And like exercise, the right diet can decrease your chances of developing heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes - diseases that become even more dangerous when combined with stress. Choose foods you know are healthy, like fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains. Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated. Avoid the “foods” and beverages you know are just junk. Read nutrition labels to stay informed about the contents and nature of the food you're buying. Also, keep portions small and eat regularly – never skip a meal. This helps ward off hunger and gives your body a more constant blood sugar level, and thus a more constant energy level, throughout the day. Reducing hunger and fatigue puts you at less risk for feeling stressed-out. For expert help on setting up the right diet program for you, see a professional dietician, and as always, please consult your doctor before changing your diet. *Note: If you're thinking about trying dietary supplements or herbal remedies, be extremely cautious. These are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and are not FDA-approved for safety or effectiveness. Some can be very dangerous, especially when combined with certain prescription medicines you may be taking. Always consult your doctor before considering any non-prescription supplement or remedy.
- **Get Sufficient Rest:** The body needs rest and sleep so it can replenish its energy and repair damage. Trying to function on too little rest can put great stress on the mind and body. Most people need about 8 hours of sleep per night, though some may need less or more. To get the most restful sleep, go to bed and get up at the same times each day. Develop a bedtime routine to help you wind down. Make sure your bedroom is dark and quiet. Exercise during the day, but don't exercise or eat a large meal within 3 hours of bedtime, and avoid caffeine. If you have trouble sleeping for an extended period of time, or if you are sleeping a lot but still feel tired all day, and your ability to perform normal daily activities is impaired, please see your doctor.
- **Pray/Practice Faith:** For those with a religious faith, communicating with your higher power can provide a lot of comfort during difficult times. Talking to God means talking to someone who you know understands and cares. Tell God what's bothering you and let Him carry the burden for you. For more guidance or to help you focus, read an inspirational religious passage or talk to a religious leader. Having faith that God has a plan and is on your side can be a great relief.
- **Make Lists:** Trying to keep track of everything you have to do and remember can create a lot of anxiety. But simply making a list can help you organize your affairs on paper, rather than having them flying around in your head. Examples of helpful lists include: a daily to-do list, a shopping list, and a list of things you want to tell your doctor. Write down everything you need to remember or accomplish and focus on one item at a time. As you address each item, cross it off the list. You might even be surprised how good it feels to physically scratch off a task that you've completed.
- **Be Creative:** When talking and journaling aren't enough, using your creativity can be another good way to express yourself. Drawing, painting, writing a story or poem, playing an instrument, or building something with your hands are just some of the possible artistic outlets for dealing with stress. Do whatever helps you cope, and don't worry about how talented you are – you're not trying to produce a work of art; you're just trying to relieve some stress. When you begin, you might not be sure what to create. But as with journaling, you may surprise yourself, and you may gain insight into your feelings that helps you take positive action. And don't be afraid to try something new – you never know what you'll find helpful or enjoyable.
- **Seek a Healthy Escape:** Do something fun! Facing your problems and dealing with them can be healthy, but dwelling on them can make you feel worse. So take a break for a while and read a book or see a movie. Practice your hobby. Watch the ballgame or your favorite TV show, or surf the Internet. Call some friends and go out to dinner. Take a walk around the mall. Whatever you

do, enjoy it and let it take your mind off your troubles. The diversion just might refresh your mind and leave you better able to cope when you face the “real” world again.

- **Listen to Relaxing Music:** Music can have an effect on mood. To help deal with stress, choose music that you find relaxing. If it has lyrics, you could even try singing along to help release some tension. Any music that you enjoy can be beneficial. Or you could try listening to recordings of nature sounds, which many people find soothing.
- **Enjoy Nature:** There’s something soothing about nature. Taking a break from your indoor, high-tech world to enjoy the natural world can help relieve stress. Go to the local park and take a walk or sit and watch the animals. Go on a picnic or take a ride through the countryside. Go to the beach or go hiking or fishing. Build a snowman. Or just play with your pet in the yard. Leave your cell phone turned off so the “real” world can’t disturb your peaceful outing.
- **Take a Warm Bath or Shower:** Warm water can be great for easing tension. It can relax your muscles and dilate your blood vessels, which can increase circulation. A few minutes of solitude can refresh the mind as well.
- **Squeeze a Stress Ball or Chew Gum:** These can be good physical outlets for releasing stress. Stress balls are sold in stores, or you can just use a nerf ball or a pillow. Gum is the little stress ball you chew.
- **Seek Professional Treatment:** If you feel overwhelmed by stress or it is interfering with your ability to function normally, it may be appropriate to seek help from a professional. Stress can lead to problems such as depression and anxiety that are best treated with the guidance of a therapist or psychiatrist. Stress can also take a toll on your physical health, causing problems such as high blood pressure and digestive illnesses, which require medical treatment. There are a lot of effective treatments available that may help you deal with the emotional and physical consequences of stress, so talk to your doctor.

Some self-destructive ways to cope with stress:

- **Use Alcohol or Drugs:**
- **Overeat:**
- **Smoke:**
- **Gamble:**
- **Injure/Torture Yourself:**
- **Isolate:**
- **Abuse/Blame Others:**
- **Do Nothing:**