helpguide.org

Improving Your Ability to Handle Stress

13-16 minutes

Improving Your Ability to Handle Stress

Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But when you're constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price. If you frequently find yourself feeling frazzled and overwhelmed, it's time to take action to bring your nervous system back into balance. You can protect yourself — and improve how you think and feel — by learning how to recognize the signs and symptoms of chronic stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

What is stress?

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When you sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or-flight" reaction or the "stress response."

The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident.

Stress can also help you rise to meet challenges. It's what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV. But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.

Fight-or-flight response: what happens in the body

When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which rouse the body for emergency action. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical

changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus—preparing you to either fight or flee from the danger at hand.

The effects of chronic stress

Your nervous system isn't very good at distinguishing between emotional and physical threats. If you're super stressed over an argument with a friend, a work deadline, or a mountain of bills, your body can react just as strongly as if you're facing a true life-or-death situation. And the more your emergency stress system is activated, the easier it becomes to trigger and the harder it becomes to shut off.

If you tend to get stressed out frequently—as many of us do in today's demanding world—your body may be in a heightened state of stress most of the time. And that can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can suppress your immune system, upset your digestive and reproductive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and speed up the aging process. It can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.

Health problems caused or exacerbated by stress include:

1. Depression and anxiety

2. Pain of any kind

3. Sleep problems

4. Autoimmune diseases

5. Digestive problems

6. Skin conditions, such as eczema

7. Heart disease

8. Weight problems

9. Reproductive issues

10. Thinking and memory problems

Signs and symptoms of stress overload

The most dangerous thing about stress is how easily it can creep up on you. You get used to it. It starts to feel familiar — even normal. You don't notice how much it's affecting you, even as it takes a heavy toll. That's why it's important to be aware of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress overload.

Cognitive symptoms

- Memory problems

- Inability to concentrate

- Poor judgment

- Seeing only the negative

- Anxious or racing thoughts

- Constant worrying

  Emotional symptoms

- Depression or general unhappiness

- Anxiety and agitation

- Moodiness, irritability, or anger

- Feeling overwhelmed

- Loneliness and isolation

- Other mental or emotional health problems

  Physical symptoms

- Aches and pains

- Diarrhea or constipation

- Nausea, dizziness

- Chest pain, rapid heart rate

- Loss of sex drive

- Frequent colds or flu

  Behavioral symptoms

- Eating more or less

- Sleeping too much or too little

- Withdrawing from others

- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities

- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax

- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Causes of stress

The situations and pressures 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 puts high demands on you can be stressful. This
includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house,
going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be internal or self-generated, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

Finally, what causes stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. While some of us are terrified of getting up in front of people to perform or speak, for example, others live for the spotlight. Where one person thrives under pressure and performs best in the face of a tight deadline, another will shut down when work demands escalate. And while you may enjoy helping care for your elderly parents, your siblings may find the demands of caretaking overwhelming stressful.

Common **external** causes of stress include:

- Major life changes

- Work or school

- Relationship difficulties

- Financial problems

- Being too busy

- Children and family

Common **internal** causes of stress include:

- Pessimism

- Inability to accept uncertainty

- Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility

- Negative self-talk

- Unrealistic expectations / perfectionism

- All-or-nothing attitude

Top 10 stressful life events

According to the widely validated Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale, these are the top ten stressful life events for adults that can contribute to illness:

1. Death of a spouse

2. Divorce

3. Marriage separation

4. Imprisonment

5. Death of a close family member

6. Injury or illness

7. Marriage

8. Job loss

9. Marriage reconciliation

10. Retirement

What's stressful for you?

Whatever event or situation is stressing you out, there are ways of coping with the problem and regaining your balance. Some of life's most common sources of stress include:

Stress at work

While some workplace stress is normal, excessive stress can

interfere with your productivity and performance, impact your physical and emotional health, and affect your relationships and home life. It can even mean the difference between success and failure on the job. Whatever your ambitions or work demands, there are steps you can take to protect yourself from the damaging effects of stress, improve your job satisfaction, and bolster your well-being in and out of the workplace.

Job loss and unemployment stress

Losing a job is one of life's most stressful experiences. It's normal to feel angry, hurt, or depressed, grieve at all that you've lost, or feel anxious about what the future holds. [Job loss and unemployment](#) involves a lot of change all at once, which can rock your sense of purpose and self-esteem. While the stress can seem overwhelming, there are many things you can do to come out of this difficult period stronger, more resilient, and with a renewed sense of purpose.

Caregiver stress

The demands of caregiving can be overwhelming, especially if you feel you're in over your head or have little control over the situation. If the stress of caregiving is left unchecked, it can take a toll on your health, relationships, and state of mind — eventually leading to burnout. However, there are plenty of things you can do to rein in the [stress of caregiving](#) and regain a sense of balance, joy, and hope in your life.

Grief and loss

Coping with the loss of someone or something you love is one of

life's biggest stressors. Often, [the pain and stress of loss can feel overwhelming](). You may experience all kinds of difficult and unexpected emotions, from shock or anger to disbelief, guilt, and profound sadness. While there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain that, in time, can ease your sadness and help you come to terms with your loss, find new meaning, and move on with your life.

How much stress is too much?

Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's important to know your own limit. But just how much stress is "too much" differs from person to person. Some people seem to be able to roll with life's punches, while others tend to crumble in the face of small obstacles or frustrations. Some people even thrive on the excitement of a high-stress lifestyle.

Factors that influence your stress tolerance level include:

Your support network. A strong network of supportive friends and family members is an enormous buffer against stress. When you have people you can count on, life's pressures don't seem as overwhelming. On the flip side, the lonelier and more isolated you are, the greater your risk of succumbing to stress.

Your sense of control. If you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, it's easier to take stress in stride. On the other hand, if you believe that you have little control over your life—that you're at the mercy of your environment and circumstances, with limited ability to make changes—stress is more likely to knock you off course.

Your attitude and outlook. The way you look at life and its

inevitable challenges makes a huge difference in your ability to handle stress. If you're generally hopeful and optimistic, you'll be less vulnerable. Stress-hardy people tend to embrace challenges, have a stronger sense of humor, believe in a higher purpose, and accept change as an inevitable part of life.

Your ability to deal with your emotions. If you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or troubled, you're more likely to become stressed and agitated. Having the ability to identify and deal appropriately with your emotions can increase your tolerance to stress and help you bounce back from adversity.

Your knowledge and preparation. The more you know about a stressful situation—including how long it will last and what to expect—the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less stressful than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

Improving your ability to handle stress

Get moving. Upping your activity level is something you can do right now to help relieve stress and start to feel better. Regular exercise can lift your mood and serve as a distraction from worries, allowing you to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress. Rhythmic exercises such as walking, running, swimming, and dancing are particularly effective, especially if you exercise mindfully (focusing your attention on the physical sensations you experience as you move).

Connect to others. The simple act of talking face-to-face with

another human can trigger hormones that relieve stress when you're feeling agitated or insecure. Even just a brief exchange of kind words or a friendly look from another human being can help calm and soothe your nervous system. So, spend time with people who make you feel good and don't let your responsibilities keep you from having a social life. If you don't have any close relationships, or your relationships are the source of your stress, make it a priority to build stronger and more satisfying connections.

Engage your senses. Another fast way to relieve stress is by engaging one or more of your senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, or movement. The key is to find the sensory input that works for you. Does listening to an uplifting song make you feel calm? Or smelling ground coffee? Or maybe petting an animal works quickly to make you feel centered? Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you.

Learn to relax. You can't completely eliminate stress from your life, but you can control how much it affects you. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the polar opposite of the stress response. When practiced regularly, these activities can reduce your everyday stress levels and boost feelings of joy and serenity. They also increase your ability to stay calm and collected under pressure.

Eat a healthy diet. The food you eat can improve or worsen your mood and affect your ability to cope with life's stressors. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience food, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress while eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with life's ups

and downs.

Get your rest. Feeling tired can increase stress by causing you to think irrationally. At the same time, chronic stress can disrupt your sleep. Whether you're having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night, there are plenty of ways to improve your sleep so you feel less stressed and more productive and emotionally balanced.

Authors: Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., Melinda Smith, M.A., Robert Segal, M.A., and Lawrence Robinson. Last updated: July 2018.

Donate