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Stress

Causes of stress fall into two categories: external and internal. External stress can be caused by major life events such as moving, changing jobs, the death of a family member, or a divorce. It can also be caused by everyday pressures such as money worries, deadlines, arguments, family concerns, and not getting enough sleep.

Internal stress comes from inside. People are often less aware of internal stress, although it can play an even greater role in the stress of daily life. Internal stressors include:

- Values and beliefs
- Faith/Religion
- Goals
- Self-image

Although all these things can be positive, they cause stress when people feel they are not living up to their own expectations in these areas.

Symptoms

When you feel stressed, your body automatically increases blood pressure, heart rate, metabolism, and blood flow to your muscles. This response helps your body react to high-pressure situations.

When you are constantly reacting to stress, it can affect your health, well-being, and relationships. Too much stress can cause symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, backaches, and constipation or diarrhea.

Chronic stress can make you more accident prone; lead to alcohol, tobacco, or drug use; and contribute to high blood pressure and heart disease.

If tension, mood swings, or other bad feelings are interfering with your daily life, it may be more than stress. Stress that depresses your mood or ruins your ability to experience joy may be the result of an anxiety disorder or depression. See your doctor if you are experiencing these symptoms.

Self-Care Steps for Stress

Research has found that people who effectively manage the stress in their lives have three things in common:

- They consider life a challenge, not a series of hassles.
- They have a mission or purpose in life and are committed to fulfilling it.
- They do not feel victimized by life. They have control over their lives, even with temporary setbacks.

Steps to Manage Stress

- Identify the things in your life that cause stress. Try to avoid them, but if you can't, have a plan for dealing with them.
- Reduce internal stress by setting realistic goals and expectations for yourself.
- Share some of your responsibilities. A shared burden is lighter to carry -- and you may develop a new friendship or learn another way of problem solving.
- Exercise regularly to relieve muscle tension and stress. Stretches and walking are especially helpful.
- Find some humor in even the worst situation -- even when you have to force yourself.
- Organize your time and don't procrastinate. Focus on the individual steps for getting a job done, so you don't feel overwhelmed.
- Talk with a friend or family member. Sharing your thoughts and fears will make them less overwhelming and easier to handle.
- Get a pet to take care of and love.
- Practice deep breathing. Breathe in slowly from your diaphragm. Hold each breath for a few seconds, then exhale slowly.
- Learn progressive muscle relaxation to relieve tension. Tense and then relax every muscle in your body. Begin with your head and neck, and work your way down to your toes.
- Sit quietly and repeat to yourself a "cue" word, such as peace, that will make you feel calm.
- Listen to relaxation tapes or music.
- Relax in a warm bath.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and all street drugs.
- Help other people. The sense of well-being you receive will help you put life's events in better perspective.
- Balance the different areas of your life (work, relationships, play, spirituality).
- Sign up for a team sport or take up a new hobby.
- Take time to focus on the spiritual part of life, including nature or religion.
- Get a massage from qualified massage therapist, or possibly a good friend or family member.
- Learn more about stress and how to cope with it. Contact your local clinic or community education program to find out if they offer classes on stress management or relaxation.

Holiday Stress

The holiday season can be a particularly stressful time. Busy schedules, family get-togethers, and added financial pressures can increase the stress of everyday life. Follow these tips to deal with stress during the holidays:

- Have realistic expectations. Don't expect everything to be perfect. Don't count on the holidays to make family tensions or disagreements disappear.
- Know your financial limits and budget your spending. Don't feel like you have to buy everyone an expensive gift.
- Don't try to do too much. You shouldn't have to rearrange your whole schedule to deal with the holidays. Ask others for help when you need it.
- It's okay to say no. Don't feel that you need to accept every invitation you receive.
- If you've recently experienced a breakup, death in the family, or other tragedy, holidays can be especially stressful. Ask friends and family to be understanding if you don't feel like participating in the festivities.

Decision Guide for Stress

Symptoms/Signs	Action
Occasional stress*	Use self-care
Signs of anxiety or depression	See provider

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Handle Stress Before It Handles You

No one is immune to stress. It's a part of life, whether the physical stress of a harried schedule, or the mental stress of money problems.

People respond to and rate stress differently, but stress is usually defined as a negative feeling, according to the National Mental Health Association (NMHA).

Much of the stress we complain of or react to is tied to everyday responsibilities, the NMHA says. And not all stress is easily recognizable by us. But our bodies respond automatically: increasing blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, metabolism and blood flow to your muscles, the NMHA says. This response is valuable when fleeing a dangerous situation, but when you face stress daily, the result can affect your health, weakening your immune system and leaving you more susceptible to illness.

By understanding what is causing you stress, you may be able to make changes to help you feel more in control.

Impact of stress

People are affected differently by stress. Some feel overwhelmed about lack of time, others are more irritable and less patient, and some are unable to focus well.

Stress can cause physical, emotional and behavioral problems that can affect your health, as well as your personal and professional relationships, the NMHA says. Too much stress can cause relatively minor illnesses such as insomnia, backaches or headaches, and can contribute to potentially life-threatening diseases like high blood pressure and heart disease. Stress also is strongly linked to depression.

How to cope

Dealing effectively with stress takes determination, persistence and time, the NMHA says. Here are suggestions for coping with stress; some may help immediately, but others may help in the long term. Learn to accept or change stressful situations when you can.

Learn to say no

If you feel overwhelmed by your (or your family's) hectic schedule, figure out what you can eliminate -- and learn to say no to new responsibilities, the NMHA says. Tell family and friends why you are making changes, and be willing to listen to other people's suggestions.

Pass up perfection

You're not superman or superwoman, so don't expect perfection from yourself -- or others, the NMHA says. Be realistic about what you can accomplish, and don't hesitate to ask for help if you need it.

One at a time

Focus on one task you need to do at a time. Decide which is the most urgent and tackle that one first. From there, go down your list one at a time. This will help keep you from feeling overwhelmed.

Have a support system

It's OK to lean on others. Taking time to talk with friends and family about what's bothering you can make a real difference, the NMHA says. Instead of simply complaining about issues, talk about ways to solve the problems causing your stress. And, if your stressors become overwhelming, your next step should be turning to a mental health professional.

Exercise and enjoy your leisure time

Step away from your stress by setting aside time for exercise, leisure and relaxation. Don't use leisure time as a reward for completing work or chores. Build it into your schedule all through the year.

Some people like quietness and can use relaxation exercises such as meditation to ease their stress because they find it refreshing and restorative. Other people like to be active and are more apt to find physical activities, such as walking, running or other exercise, to be beneficial.

Whichever style is appropriate for you, it's important to make time to de-stress regularly. In the long run, using small moments to escape your stressors can protect you from many of the damaging effects of stress.

Here are other ways to increase your coping ability:

- Concentrate on the present. Don't dwell on problems in your past or worries about your future.
- Maintain a daily routine. A familiar pattern can increase security when stress seems to be taking over.
- Take deep-breath breaks several times a day. Even brief stress breaks of 10 to 15 minutes can be helpful.
- Get regular, adequate amounts of sleep. Most people need from six to 10 hours per night.

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20 Ways to Reduce Stress

If your boss, coworker, or workload has you down in the dumps, try one of the proven relaxation methods below to blow off some steam in a healthy way:

1. **Concentrate on your breath.** Close your eyes and start breathing deeply and slowly. Let the breath out for a count of five. Repeat this practice ten times, focusing on the way the breath feels in the body. Feel the ribcage expand and relax, and feel your mind relax.
2. **Stretch the stress away.** Raise your arms above your head, then reach out to the right side of the room for four counts, and then to the left side of the room for four counts. Next, reach straight up. Reach all the way through your fingers to stretch your back and shoulder muscles. Then, take your arms back down and release your neck by moving your right ear toward your right shoulder. Then move your head back up to center, and move your left ear toward your left shoulder. Lastly, open your mouth as wide as you can and yawn.
3. **Walk it off.** Take a walk at lunch or during a break. Walk around the building or climb the stairs.
4. **Eat a healthy snack.** Keep fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods on or around your desk. They contain stress-busting B and C vitamins.
5. **Visualization.** Put a flower or blade of grass on your desk and spend a few moments each hour contemplating it. Imagine the cells within it teeming with life, or imagine you are a ladybug climbing up the flower or the grass, taking in its color and smell.
6. **Drink healthy liquids.** Switch your regular coffee drink for some healthy fruit juice, low calorie vitamin water, or electrolyte-infused water.
7. **Treat yourself.** Enjoy a banana, orange, or tangerine. Peel it slowly and enjoy the fragrance. Allow your thoughts to focus on the way the fruit smells, tastes, looks, and feels. Savor each bite. Don't do anything else while you're eating the fruit.
8. **Take time to laugh.** Write down some funny jokes where you can see them or find humorous points of the present situation.
9. **Talk to your coworkers.** While on break, chat with colleagues about hobbies and activities outside of work.
10. **Imagine a peaceful place.** Close your eyes and think of yourself resting on a beach, in a meadow, or at a spa. Take in the scene completely, thinking about how it would feel if you really were there.
11. **Take a minute.** Look out a window and let your thoughts take flight.
12. **Break time.** Take a break from your work and think about your life outside of your job. Think about something enjoyable you will do when you get home.
13. **Journey outside during breaks.** Sit next to trees or flowers. Enjoy the way their leaves float in the breeze.
14. **Take a meditation break.** Close your eyes, deepen your breath, and focus on peaceful feelings for five or ten minutes. When you open your eyes, take the peaceful feelings with you as you go back to work.
15. **Make a cup of hot tea or broth.** Enjoy the smell and the warmth.
16. **Complete something you've been putting off.** Notice how good you feel having completed it.
17. **Make time for play.** Do a crossword, play solitaire, or another game during a break.
18. **Massage yourself.** Rub your shoulders, neck, and scalp. Close your eyes and imagine the muscles releasing.
19. **Release tension through movement.** Follow this exercise: Sit up straight, then drop your upper torso, arms, and head between your knees. Exhale and then inhale as you roll up, starting from the base of your spine.
20. **Adjust.** Focus on your posture and adjust it if necessary. Place your feet flat on the floor, lower back supported against the chair, shoulders moving down, chest moving up, and chin parallel with the floor. Breathe through this posture.

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