



PATIENT EDUCATION
Stress Management

EDUCATION
learning EXCELLENCE CARING INTERACTION
HEALTHY LIVING
BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS
PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

What Is Stress?

Stress is a natural, normal part of daily life. In short, stress is a physical and emotional response to a particular situation. With the birth of a child, a job promotion, the loss of a loved one, or a conflict at work, we experience stress as we readjust our lives to cope with each new situation. Stress can also be caused by internal expectations and daily frustrations.

As a positive influence, stress can result in energy that can be directed toward growth, action, and change. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of frustration, anger, tension, and depression.

You are in control of how you respond to stressful situations, people, and things.

During the stress response, several hormones prepare your body to respond to stress. Your heart beats faster, your breathing quickens, and your blood pressure rises. Your body's stress response can save your life in times of danger. But when these physical responses occur routinely due to ongoing tensions in your life, they may make existing health problems worse.

Negative stress may lead to health problems such as headaches, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke, or to emotional distress such as anxiety or depression. Stress may tax relationships, heighten irritability and decrease one's ability to handle even simple tasks.

While you may not be able to control the kind of stress that you experience, you can control how you handle stress (your reaction) and you can work on reducing stressors (the things that cause stress) in your life. By keeping stress in check, you can avoid negative health effects and lead a more balanced, healthy life.

In general:

- Stress is highly individualized. What causes stress in one person may not cause it in another. Some people actually thrive under stress, while others struggle to manage the effects of stress.
- Stress can result from life events that are beyond our control, or stress can be the result of one's attitude toward daily frustrations.
- Stress can be short term (acute) or long term (chronic). Acute stress is a reaction to an immediate, often unexpected situation — for example, a surprise or a threat. Chronic stress involves situations that are ongoing, such as relationship problems, workplace pressures, and financial or health worries.

- Stress can be as close as the evening news.
- Stress can also be caused by technology that is intended to make life easier. Techno-stress is caused by cell phones, laptop or palm-sized computers, e-mail, voice mail, and pagers, which allow us to be available at virtually anytime.
- Everyone experiences stress — even children. It is not uncommon for children to have highly structured schedules, and kids report worrying about everything from friendships to homework to achievement in sports to family relationships.



Signs and Symptoms That May Signal Stress Overload

These signs and symptoms may indicate you are on stress overload. Put a check next to any sign or symptom that you experience frequently, that is most distressing you, or that leaves you feeling like you can't function normally. The more boxes you check, the more impact stress may have on your health.

Share your signs and symptoms with your health care provider. This may be a helpful tool in assessing your overall health.

Physical symptoms	Thoughts and feelings	Behaviors
<input type="checkbox"/> Chest pain <input type="checkbox"/> Increased perspiration <input type="checkbox"/> Clenched jaw <input type="checkbox"/> Indigestion or heartburn <input type="checkbox"/> Cold, sweaty palms <input type="checkbox"/> Insomnia <input type="checkbox"/> Constipation or diarrhea <input type="checkbox"/> Nausea <input type="checkbox"/> Dry mouth <input type="checkbox"/> Racing or pounding heart <input type="checkbox"/> Dry or itchy skin or skin rash <input type="checkbox"/> Rapid, shallow breathing <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of appetite <input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue <input type="checkbox"/> Rise in blood pressure <input type="checkbox"/> Frequent illness <input type="checkbox"/> Stomach cramps or pains <input type="checkbox"/> Frequent urination <input type="checkbox"/> Tight throat <input type="checkbox"/> Grinding of teeth <input type="checkbox"/> Trembling or shakiness <input type="checkbox"/> Headache <input type="checkbox"/> Weight change <input type="checkbox"/> Impaired sexual function	<input type="checkbox"/> Anger <input type="checkbox"/> Irritability <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of direction <input type="checkbox"/> Apathy <input type="checkbox"/> Mood swings <input type="checkbox"/> Cynicism (pessimism, doubt) <input type="checkbox"/> Nightmares <input type="checkbox"/> Defensiveness <input type="checkbox"/> Panic <input type="checkbox"/> Depression <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling of impending danger or doom <input type="checkbox"/> Restlessness <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling of insecurity <input type="checkbox"/> Sadness <input type="checkbox"/> Helplessness <input type="checkbox"/> Suspiciousness <input type="checkbox"/> Hopelessness <input type="checkbox"/> Worthlessness	<input type="checkbox"/> Angry outbursts <input type="checkbox"/> Increased complaining <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding social activities <input type="checkbox"/> Increased crying <input type="checkbox"/> Being late <input type="checkbox"/> Increased smoking <input type="checkbox"/> Increased use of alcohol or drugs <input type="checkbox"/> Change in religious practices <input type="checkbox"/> Change in sleep patterns <input type="checkbox"/> Increased use of sick time <input type="checkbox"/> Decreased interest in sex <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty concentrating <input type="checkbox"/> Neglecting responsibility <input type="checkbox"/> Excessive worrying <input type="checkbox"/> Nervous twitch or habit <input type="checkbox"/> Forgetfulness <input type="checkbox"/> Overeating <input type="checkbox"/> Impatience <input type="checkbox"/> Poor job performance <input type="checkbox"/> Increased arguing <input type="checkbox"/> Poor personal hygiene <input type="checkbox"/> Increase in accidents or injuries <input type="checkbox"/> Procrastination <input type="checkbox"/> Inability to enjoy activities you used to like

Stressors and Stress Responses

Are you doing:

- Too much?
- For too many?
- With too little?

Evaluating your stressors can help you manage when stress hits.

Managing stress doesn't mean eliminating stressors from your life. Managing stress means developing positive strategies for dealing with stressful situations or relationships so that you can avoid the negative consequences of stress overload.

If you think of stress as your reaction to an event, rather than the event itself, it becomes easier to identify healthy ways to manage stress. While you may not be able to control some of the stressors in your life, you can control your response to them.

Prioritize

Is it important?

Plan

What can I do about it?

Pace

What do I need to do today?

What can I let go of today?

Identify and evaluate stressors

Look at your life and what causes you stress. Stressors fall into four basic categories: things you can or can't control and things that are or are not important. While you can't control or prevent some stressors, you can control others. And while some stressors are important, others aren't.

Use the chart below as a tool to evaluate your stressors and to prioritize your time and energy (add your stressors to the examples). Concentrate on the things you can change. For situations that are beyond your control, look for ways to adapt to or avoid them. Work to recognize when it's best to "let go" — for example, don't waste your time and energy stressing out over things that aren't important.

	Can control	Can't control
Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-care (rest, exercise, healthy diet) • • • • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The actions and attitudes of key people in your life • • • •
Not important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tasks that can be delegated to others • • • • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The weather • • • •

Evaluate your stress response

Many people fall into the habit of making unhealthy choices when faced with stress. How you respond to a stressor is your choice. With planning and practice, you can control your responses to stressful situations. Consider the following unhealthy and healthy responses.

Unhealthy responses	Healthy responses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Angry outbursts • Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or drugs • Increased eating or shopping • Neglecting responsibility • Excessive worrying • Procrastination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take time for exercise • Learn and use relaxation techniques • Get adequate sleep • Learn to prioritize • Set realistic goals • Care for yourself first

Take control

- Identify healthy strategies for dealing with stressors you can control.
- Change your view of a stressor that is beyond your control.
- Focus on self-care (exercise regularly, eat well, connect to support systems, take time for pleasurable activities).
- Practice relaxation techniques and other positive habits such as time management, anger management, positive self-talk, and realistic thinking.
- Know when to “let go.”

Effectively Managing Stress

What can I do?

- *Change my environment?*
- *Change my response?*
- *Or change both?*

There are three basic ways you can approach a stressor: change your environment, change how you react, or change both. Even if changing your environment is unlikely, you can reduce your stress – and your health risk – by learning how to cope more effectively. You can start small. Changing your response to even one or two main stressors can have a positive impact on your overall stress level.

Preventing and relieving stress by practicing healthy lifestyle habits is another way to reduce stress. Adopting even one new healthy habit and practicing it regularly can help to fight the harmful effects of stress. Experts agree that a combination of healthy lifestyle habits and stress management strategies can significantly reduce stress levels.

The stress management strategies that follow offer a range of coping techniques that you can use to address the things that cause you the most stress.

Be open to humor.

Give yourself permission to smile or laugh, especially during difficult times. Seek humor in everyday happenings. When you can laugh at life, you feel less stressed.

Practice positive self-talk

Self-talk is the endless stream of thoughts that run through your head every day. Some people refer to this process as automatic thinking.

Your automatic thoughts may be positive or negative. Some are based on logic and reason. Others may be misconceptions that you formulate from lack of adequate information or distorted information. The goal of positive self-talk is to weed out the misconceptions and challenge them with rational and positive thoughts.

Here are some common forms of irrational thinking. Try to identify and challenge these types of thoughts:

- **Filtering.** You magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones. For example, you had a great day at work. You completed your tasks ahead of time and were complimented for doing a speedy and thorough job. But you forgot one minor step. That evening, you focus only on your oversight and forget about the compliments you received.

- **Personalizing.** When something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself. For example, you hear that a family picnic has been canceled and you assume that the change in plans is because no one wanted to be around you.
- **Catastrophizing.** You automatically anticipate the worst. You refuse to go out with friends for fear that you'll make a fool of yourself. Or one change in your daily routine leads you to think the day will be a disaster.
- **Polarizing.** You see things only as either good or bad. There is no middle ground. You feel that you have to be perfect or you are a failure.

You can learn positive self-talk. The process is simple, but it takes time and practice. Throughout the day, stop and evaluate what you're thinking. And find a way to put a positive spin on your negative thoughts. Start by following one simple rule: Don't say anything to yourself that you wouldn't say to someone else. Be gentle and encouraging. If a negative thought enters your mind, evaluate it rationally and respond with affirmations of what is good about yourself.

Eventually, your self-talk will automatically contain less self-criticism and more self-acceptance. Your spontaneous thoughts will become more positive and rational.

Exercise at least three times a week to positively affect mood and reduce stress levels.

Exercise regularly to evoke feelings of self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment, which can ease stress levels and remind you that you control the way you respond to your stressors.

Exercise

While most people know that regular exercise is part of a healthy lifestyle, exercise can also decrease the production of stress hormones, which in turn may counteract the stress response. Exercise can also serve as a "time-out" from your stressors. For example, taking a walk away from a stressful situation can help you regroup and focus on healthy stress management strategies.

If you haven't been exercising regularly, check with your health care provider before beginning a vigorous exercise program. The same is true if you have a history of cardiovascular disease or risk factors for it such as high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes or being a smoker.

Regardless of your health, start your program slowly and build up gradually. Overdoing it will increase your risk of injury and cause sore muscles. And it may make you want to quit. Give yourself the opportunity to succeed in small steps.

Eat healthy

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Although there isn't one perfect diet for everyone, the general principles of healthy eating include:

- Eating more fruits, vegetables and whole grains.
- Reducing saturated fat and cholesterol.
- Limiting sugar and salt.
- Eating moderate-sized portions.
- Drinking caffeinated and alcoholic beverages in moderation, if at all.

Eat well to give your mind and body the fuel needed to function. When you are functioning well, you are able to better manage stressors.

Practice relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques are easy to do and good for releasing tension. But like all new skills, they take practice. Be persistent and you will reap the benefits of taking time to relax.

Perform relaxation techniques for 5 to 10 minutes at a time. Practice them whenever you feel stressed or when you need to take a break.

Here are some simple relaxation strategies. You may want to ask your health care provider about other relaxation methods, such as progressive muscle relaxation.

Autogenic relaxation (autogenic means coming from within)

- Sit or lie in a comfortable position and close your eyes. Allow your jaw to drop and your eyelids to relax.
- Mentally scan your body, starting with your toes and working slowly up through your legs, buttocks, torso, arms, hands, fingers, neck and head, or vice versa. Focus on each part. Wherever you feel tension, imagine it melting away.
- Allow thoughts to flow through your mind, but don't focus on any one thought. Tell yourself that you are relaxed and calm, that your hands are heavy and warm, your heart is beating calmly, and you feel perfectly at peace.
- Once you are relaxed, imagine yourself in a favorite place of great beauty and stillness.
- As you become skilled at this technique, you'll be able to recall the image of your favorite place anytime and anywhere, eliciting a relaxation response from your body.

Meditation

Use meditation techniques once or twice daily to calm your nerves and focus on reducing your stress level.

- Get into comfortable clothes.
- Choose a quiet space where you won't be interrupted.
- Sit comfortably.
- Close your eyes, relax your muscles, and breathe slowly and naturally.
- Slowly repeat a focus phrase, such as "I am calm." When other thoughts intrude, bring your attention back to your focus phrase.
- When you are finished, sit quietly for a minute or two to make the transition back to your normal routine.

Don't feel guilty...

About taking time for relaxation or leisure activities.

Taking time for yourself is a sure way to reduce stress in your life.

- *Read a book.*
- *Pursue a hobby.*
- *Socialize with friends.*
- *Have some fun with your family.*

Take time for yourself

In our fast-paced society, stress often is simply a matter of cramming too much activity into too little time — and taking too little time for yourself. Rather than trying to find a way to fit everything in, try to find a way to leave some things out.

Here are some suggestions for simplifying and balancing your life:

- **Review your commitments.** Look at all the ways you spend your time, and then decide what's most important to you.
- **Learn to say no.** It's okay not to take on every task that comes your way or attend every event to which you're invited.
- **Ask for help.** Don't try to do everything yourself. Look for opportunities to delegate or share responsibilities.
- **Cut down on information overload.** Take a break from the TV news. Screen your phone calls with an answering machine or caller ID. Limit unwanted intrusions into your life.
- **Control clutter.** Keep only the things you really like or need.
- **Schedule time for yourself.** If the only way you can find time to meditate, exercise, or take a bubble bath is to make an appointment for yourself in your calendar — then do it!

Make changes in your life one step at a time. Incorporate small changes every week until you reach the balance that feels right for you.

Cut stressors at home

You want your home to be your personal haven, not another source of stress. Try these tips to lighten your stress load at home:

- Delegate or pay someone to do yardwork, housework, tax preparation and other tasks that bog you down. Spend this time with your family or pursuing a hobby.
- Plan menus a week to a month ahead. Use part of your weekend to cook and freeze meals.
- Make a family calendar and display all activities for three months in advance.
- Use paper plates on occasion.
- Develop contingency plans: “If you get home before I do...”
- Eliminate clutter. Fight paper glut with a simple, three-box filing system: one box for bills, one for other items that need attention within the month, and one for items to be filed.
- Redefine clean. Decide how much time each day you can spend cleaning your house. If you only want to spend half an hour a day cleaning, spend five minutes in each room. Say goodbye to the concept of sparkling this or spotless that.

You probably accept the responsibility to meet deadlines imposed upon you by others. But it's just as important for you to meet the requirements for relaxation demanded by your health.

Cut stressors at work

You'll enjoy your job more and go home more relaxed if you practice these tips:

- Organize your work space.
- Use commuting time to listen to books on tape or humorous monologues. Read or meditate if you ride the bus or carpool.
- Go for a brisk walk during your lunch hour or midday breaks.
- Use a headset to listen to music that relaxes you or helps you focus.
- Don't skip meals. Keep healthy snacks in your work area.
- Deal with your most unpleasant tasks early in the day. The remainder of the day will be less stressful.
- Do one thing at a time.
- Group small jobs together.
- Use blocks of time to chip away at major tasks. Try working on them 10, 20, or 30 minutes a day until they are done.
- Rely on a calendar or planning book.
- Prepare. Prepare. Prepare. When you feel knowledgeable about material you are presenting, your comfort level goes up.

At the end of the day, reorganize and get ready for tomorrow.

Conclusion: Focus on the Positive

Be present in the moment...

Focus on the joys of daily living.

Don't let stressors take over.

Look for ways to enjoy more and worry less.

Engage in activities you love. Ride a bike. Sing. Watch the clouds. Spend time with friends and loved ones.

Not managing stress well can make you feel helpless and defeated, but there are good reasons to try to maintain a positive, optimistic outlook. A number of studies have suggested that people who have positive attitudes cope better with stress and live healthier lives. While no one knows exactly why, it may be as simple as having an optimistic outlook, believing things will get better, and believing you have the power to help yourself.

Think of it this way: Worry and pessimism are draining, whereas hope and optimism are energizing and empowering.

Changing from negative to positive

Most people do not feel positive all of the time. Fortunately, you can learn to be more positive. Learn to recognize and challenge negative and distorted thoughts, and change how you think and behave in a positive way.

Another way to be more positive is to surround yourself with positive, supportive people you can depend on to give helpful advice and feedback. Negative people, those who believe they have no power over their lives, may increase your stress levels and may make you doubt your ability to manage stress in healthy ways.

People who look on the bright side tend to take better care of themselves because they believe they have control over their health. They make healthier lifestyle choices, such as eating a well-balanced diet and exercising regularly. They tend to handle stressful situations better than those who think they have no control. They may even live longer.

You have a choice. You can do everything in your power to manage the stress in your life. That means taking care of yourself and following the guidelines outlined here. Evaluate what causes you stress and determine what you can change. Learn healthy ways to cope with stress to feel a sense of control. Make positive choices concerning how you respond to stressors. Your reward will be feeling more empowered and more in control of the stress in your life.

Resources

If you would like more individualized instruction in applying stress management techniques or learning to relax, ask your health care provider for a referral to classes offered in your medical institution.

If you have questions about this information, contact your health care provider.

When is stress not just stress?

While everyone copes with stress on a daily basis and even feels stress overload on occasion, there are medical conditions that may be signaled by some of the signs and symptoms of stress.

One example is a **panic attack** — a sudden episode of intense fear that prompts physical reactions in your body. If you are experiencing frequent panic attacks — four or more a month — or if fear of having them affects your activities, you may have a condition called panic disorder. Common symptoms include a racing heartbeat, dizziness, light headedness, nausea, hot flashes or chills and an overwhelming sense of terror. If you think you may be experiencing panic attacks, discuss your symptoms with a member of your health care team.

Another example is **depression**. It is not unusual to feel down occasionally. However, after a short time, most people begin to feel better. It's when those sad, lonely, irritable, tired feelings don't go away that you may be experiencing depression.

Symptoms of depression include:

- Persistent sadness.
- Irritability.
- Overwhelming feelings of anxiety.
- Loss of interest or pleasure in life.
- Neglect of personal responsibilities or personal care.
- Changes in eating habits.
- Changes in sleeping patterns.
- Fatigue and loss of energy.
- Extreme mood changes.
- Feeling helpless, hopeless or worthless.
- Physical symptoms (for example, headaches or chronic pain) that don't get better.
- Increased alcohol or drug use.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.

Talk to your health care provider if you find yourself experiencing any of the above symptoms for a prolonged period. **If you find yourself thinking about suicide or making a suicide plan, immediately seek medical help.**

BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal patient of Mayo Clinic for more than 40 years. She was a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family's activities in oil, gas and ranching, even as she assembled a museum-quality collection of antiques and fine art. She was best known by Mayo staff for her patient advocacy and support.

Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. Mrs. Lips had a profound appreciation for the care she received at Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.



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