

Keys for Managing Daily Stress

What is stress

Stress is our response to daily life. The right amount of stress is a positive force; it helps us to do our best work and keeps us alert, energetic, focused and engaged in the world around us. Too much stress, on the other hand, can leave us tense, anxious, and uncomfortable. The key is to maintain an optimum level of stress; enough to keep us motivated, but not too much that we become overwhelmed.

How does stress affect us

Stress affects us in many ways emotionally, physically and behaviorally. Common symptoms of overwhelming stress include:

<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Physical</u>	<u>Cognitive</u>	<u>Behavioral</u>
Apathy	Headaches	Poor concentration	Withdrawal from others
Depression	Stomach pain	Preoccupation	Substance abuse
Anxiety	Backaches	Work mistakes	Gambling
Nervousness	Frequent illness	Poor self-esteem	Out of control spending
Worthlessness	Insomnia	Forgetfulness	Binge eating
Hopelessness	Change in appetite	Thoughts of death	Self-destruction
Irritability	Nausea	Obsessive thoughts	Promiscuity
Hostility	Sexual dysfunction	Loss of productivity	Violence
Insecurity	Chest pain	Excessive worry	Marital problems

Managing stress overload

You cannot avoid stress; it is part of daily life. Yet if high levels of unwanted stress are not properly managed, your health and sense of well being can suffer greatly. For this reason, it's important to develop effective ways to manage stress.

Social support

Social support is the single most important buffer against stress. Social support means spending time with your family and friends. It's important to share your problems and seek advice from people you trust and who care about you.

WARNING: Not all relationships are supportive. Avoid relationships that lack mutual respect or often bring about anger and confrontation.

If you do not have enough supportive relationships, foster them! You can develop supportive relationships by joining clubs, taking a class, getting involved in a service organization, volunteering, or attending church or temple. Find something you enjoy and are interested in and do it.

Thought management

What we think, how we think, what we expect and what we tell ourselves often determine how we feel and how well we manage rising stress levels. You can learn to change thought patterns ("cognitive distortions") that produce stress. Thoughts to watch out for include:

"Should" statements: Expectations that set us up for disappointment.

For example: "My children should always behave when we are out in public."

"Catastrophizing": Giving more importance or significance to an event than it warrants.

For example: "My life will end if I do not get this promotion."

Over generalizations: Applying the meaning of one event to others.

For example: "I'm a failure at my whole job because I missed one deadline."

Identify repetitive negative thoughts then look for evidence that refutes them.

Reframe: Find the positive in an negative event.

Worry time: Set aside a specific time and place to worry, then only worry at that time and place.

Thought stopping: When you catch yourself in a negative (stressful and unproductive) thought yell "Stop!" in your head. You can even try snapping a rubber band on your wrist to reinforce the message.

Relaxation

Relaxation exercises are simple to perform and combine deep breathing, releasing of muscle tension, and clearing of negative thoughts. If you practice these exercises regularly, you can use them when needed to lessen the negative effects of stress. Different types of relaxation exercises include abdominal breathing, imagery, autogenic phrases (repeating a phrase that triggers a physical relaxation, such as "Relax and Let Go") and progressive muscle relaxation. Many commercial audiotapes and books are available that teach these exercises.

Exercise, diet and sleep

Exercise is an excellent way to burn off the accumulated effects of stress. A regular

exercise program should include some aerobic activity and some stretching. Flexible, loose muscles are less likely to become tight and painful in response to stress.

Diet is extremely important. Junk food and refined sugars low in nutritional value and high in calories leave us feeling out of energy and sluggish. Limiting sugar, caffeine, and alcohol can promote health and reduce stress.

Sleep: If you are not sleeping well, you will have less energy and fewer resources for coping with stress. Developing good sleep habits is very important.

Tips:

Do not go to bed until you are tired.

Develop specific bedtime rituals and stick to them.

If you have trouble sleeping do not watch TV, read, or eat in bed.

Do not engage in exercise or strenuous activity immediately before bedtime.

Avoid caffeine.

Do not nap.

Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, including on the weekends.

Delegate responsibility

Stress overload often results from having too many responsibilities. You can free up time and decrease stress by delegating responsibilities. Take a team approach and involve everyone in sharing the load. Try applying these guidelines at home or modifying the to fit your situation at work:

Make a list of the types of tasks involved in the job.

Take time to train someone to do the job or specific tasks.

Assign responsibility to a specific person.

Rotate unpleasant duties.

Give clear, specific instructions with deadlines.

Be appreciative; let people know you are pleased by a job well done.

Allow others to do a job their own way.

Give up being a perfectionist.

Increase quality time

Quality time is the opportunity to engage in special events in order to connect, share and feel close to others. These events create memories, teach life skills, help us acknowledge our achievements, and increase self-esteem. Quality time can be planned: vacations, parties, sporting events, movies, reading together, family chores. They can also be unplanned: talking while in the car, sharing feelings at

bedtime or at dinner time, making a meal together, planning a party for someone else with other members of your family. You need to have quality time with your family; but it is just as important to set aside some quality time for YOURSELF!

You can manage your stress. You may need some time to develop the skills, but the rewards are well worth the effort! Managing stress will help you feel your best both mentally and physically.

This information is provided by the Cleveland Clinic and is not intended to replace the medical advice of your doctor or health care provider. Please consult your health care provider for advice about a specific medical condition. For additional health information, please contact the Health Information Center at the Cleveland Clinic (216) 444-3771 or toll-free (800) 223-2273 extension 43771.