

Stress: Coping with everyday problems

Stress is a natural part of life. These expressions are familiar to us: “I’m stressed out.” “I’m under too much stress.” “Work is one big stress.”

You may feel physical stress, which is the result of too much to do, not enough sleep, a poor diet or the effects of an illness. Stress can also be mental, such as when you worry about money, a loved one’s illness or retirement; or when you experience an emotionally devastating event, such as the death of a spouse or being fired from work.

However, much of our stress comes from less dramatic everyday responsibilities. Obligations and pressures that are both physical and mental are not always obvious to us. In response to these daily strains, your body automatically increases blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, metabolism, and blood flow to your muscles. This response, known as the “fight or flight” response, is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to a high pressure situation. However, when you are constantly reacting to stressful situations without making adjustments to counter the effects, you will feel stress that can threaten your health and well-being.

How do I know if I am suffering from stress?

Each person handles stress differently. Some people actually seek out situations which may appear stressful to others. A major life decision, such as changing careers or buying a house, might be overwhelming for some people, while others may welcome the change. Some find sitting in traffic too much to tolerate, while others take it in stride. The key is determining your personal tolerance levels for stressful situations.

Stress can cause physical, emotional and behavioral disorders that can affect your health, vitality and peace-of-mind, as well as personal and professional relationships. Too much stress can cause relatively minor illnesses such as insomnia, backaches or headaches as well as such potentially life-threatening diseases as high blood pressure and heart disease.

Tips for reducing or controlling stress

Be Realistic. If you feel overwhelmed by some activities (yours or your family’s) learn to say NO! Eliminate an activity that is not absolutely necessary. You may be taking on more responsibility than you can or should handle. If you meet resistance, give reasons why you’re making changes. Be willing to listen to others’ suggestions and be ready to compromise.

Shed the “superman/woman” urge. No one is perfect, so don’t expect perfection from yourself or others. Ask yourself, “What really needs to be done? How much can I do? Is the deadline realistic? What adjustments can I make?” Don’t hesitate to ask for help if you need it.

What You Need to Know...



Meditate. Just 10 to 20 minutes of quiet reflection may bring relief from chronic stress as well as increase your tolerance to it. Use the time to listen to music, relax and try to think of pleasant things or nothing at all.

Visualize. Use your imagination and picture how you can manage a stressful situation more successfully. Whether it's a business presentation or moving to a new place, many people feel visual rehearsals boost self-confidence and enable them to take a more positive approach to a difficult task.

Take one thing at a time. For people under tension or stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable. The best way to cope with this feeling of being overwhelmed is to take one task at a time. Pick one urgent task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one. The positive feeling of "checking off" tasks is very satisfying. It will motivate you to keep going.

Exercise. Regular exercise is a popular way to relieve stress. Just 20 to 30 minutes of daily physical activity benefits both the body and the mind.

Hobbies. Take a break from your worries by doing something you enjoy. Whether it's gardening or painting, schedule time to indulge your interest.

Healthy lifestyle. Good nutrition makes a difference. Limit intake of caffeine and alcohol (alcohol actually disturbs regular sleep patterns), get adequate rest, exercise and balance work and play.

Share your feelings. A conversation with a friend lets you know that you are not the only one having a bad day, caring for a sick child or working in a busy office.

Stay in touch with friends and family. Let them provide love, support and guidance.

Don't try to cope alone.

For more information, contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at 414.276.3122, or via Email: info@mhawisconsin.org.

Mental Health America is a United Way of Greater Milwaukee Agency.



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