

Managing Stress

Stress occurs when you believe that demands placed on you such as work, parenting or relationships — exceed your ability to cope. That is, you don't have the resources to manage these demands effectively.

Resources that affect stress include time, money, personal skills and personal relationships.

Stress can be beneficial at times, providing a boost of drive and energy to problem solve or meet deadlines. However, an extreme or excessive amount of stress over a prolonged period of time has many health consequences. These include a weakened immune, cardiovascular, neuroendocrine and central nervous system which can lead to poor immunity, anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure, emotional and personal relationship stress.

Research shows that stress also contributes to the development of major illnesses such as heart disease, depression and obesity.

By using positive and healthy tools to manage stress, many of the negative health consequences can be reduced. Everyone is different, and so are the ways they choose to manage their stress. Some people prefer pursuing hobbies such as gardening, playing music and creating art, while others find relief in more solitary activities: meditation, yoga and walking.

Here are some healthy techniques that psychological research has shown to help reduce stress in the short- and long-term.



Take a break from the stressor

It may seem difficult to get away from a big work project, a crying baby or a growing credit card bill. But when you give yourself permission to step away from it, you allow yourself to have time to do something else, to feel less overwhelmed. It's important to not avoid your stress (those bills have to be paid sometime), but even just 20-minutes to take care of yourself is helpful.



Exercise

The research keeps growing — exercise benefits your mind just as much as your body. We hear about the long term benefits of a regular exercise routine, although a 20-minute walk, run, swim or dance session in the midst of a stressful time can reduce the feelings of stress significantly.



Smile and laugh

Our brains are interconnected with our emotions and facial expressions. When people are stressed, they often hold a lot of the stress in their face. So laughing and smiling is a great way to relieve some of that tension and improve the situation.



Get social support

Call a friend, send an email or make time to catch up. When you share your concerns or feelings with another person it can help to relieve stress. It is important to share these feelings with someone you trust and can understand and validate how you are feeling. Be selective in who you reach out to, you need to be able to trust them and you do not want them to add to your stressed and negative state of mind.



Meditate

Meditation helps the mind and body to relax and focus. Mindfulness can help people see new perspectives, develop self-compassion and forgiveness. When practicing a form of mindfulness, people can release emotions that may have been causing the body physical stress. Much like exercise, research has shown that even meditating briefly can reap immediate benefits. If you are not sure where to start, there are some useful free apps (Smiling Mind, Headspace) that provide guided meditation exercises ranging from two minutes upwards.



Learn relaxation

Where would a stress management list be without relaxation techniques? Many studies have showed an important link with relaxation tools such as progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, guided imagery, and self hypnosis are all useful for managing stress.



Improve your planning

Stress management research by Robert Epstein has made it clear that stress can be managed through planning. Start making your daily checklists, dust off your planners, and take action by organizing your weekly activities. This may extend to getting some professional input particularly if finances are the issue.



Develop a forgiving style

The strength of forgiveness has been shown to have a powerful buffering effect on stress. Those who are highly forgiving of themselves and others have a far less chance of having a mental illness. One team of researchers, led by Loren Toussaint, explains that forgiveness takes the bad connection between mental illness and stress and makes it almost zero. Without forgiveness, we experience stress in a more raw, unblocked way.



Use reframing

This is a mental activity that involves looking at a stressor or negative situation and explaining it (realistically and honestly) in a positive or neutral way. Many times, when something bad happens to us, we get emotionally wrapped up in the negative. But, this is a bit dishonest as it's usually not the whole picture. There's usually another vantage point. Try asking yourself, "if my friend was in this situation, what would I say to encourage them to see the situation differently and feel more positive?"

THANK
YOU

Unleash your gratitude

The practice of gratitude or counting daily blessings has a big impact on stress. Studies have also shown that it's helpful to keep up with gratitude when facing troubling emotions.

