



# STRESS

No one likes to be stressed out – especially when we know it can be linked to poor health. Learning how to manage your stress can be a small change with a big positive impact on your physical and mental health.

## EVERYONE HAS STRESS

Stress is a normal part of life. You can feel stress in your body when you have too much to do or when you haven't slept well. You can also feel stress when you worry about things like your job, money, relationships, or a friend or family member who is struggling with illness or difficult circumstances.



In response to these strains, your body releases chemicals that cause increases in blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, availability of cell energy, and blood flow to your muscles. At the same time, it also releases chemicals to slow down less urgent bodily functions that deal with digestion, growth, sex, and aspects of the immune system.

These stress responses are intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to dangerous or high-pressure situations – known as the “fight or flight” reaction - and were especially important when our ancestors were living in the wilderness, facing exposure to predators and extreme weather conditions.



## WHEN STRESS DOESN'T LET UP

When stress comes and goes relatively quickly the body can return to functioning in a normal, healthy way. When you are constantly reacting to stressful situations (chronic stress), cells in your immune system can cause inflammation that doesn't go away.<sup>1</sup>

Chronic stress and inflammation have been linked to reduced ability to fight off viruses (from HIV to the common cold), and increased risk for heart disease, headaches, intestinal problems, sexual dysfunction, diabetes, and even cancer.<sup>2</sup>



Stress can also cause a number of other physical symptoms, including:

Acne and other skin problems



Muscle aches and tension



Nausea, stomach pain, and heartburn



Diarrhea, constipation and other digestive issues



Irregular or painful periods



Changes in appetite and weight



# TEN TIPS FOR DEALING WITH STRESS

## BE REALISTIC

You may be taking on more responsibility than you can or should handle for yourself or your family. If you feel overwhelmed by how many things are on your schedule, it's ok to say "No" to new activities! You may also decide to stop doing an activity that is not 100% necessary. If friends or family criticize your decisions, give reasons why you're making the changes. If you are a parent and your kids' activities are part of your stress, be willing to listen to their concerns and stay open to compromise.

## NO ONE IS PERFECT

Shed the "superman/superwoman" urge. 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.

## MEDITATE

Just ten to twenty 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.

## 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 help them to take a more positive approach to a difficult task.

## ONE THING AT A TIME

For people under tension or stress, their day-to-day workload can sometimes seem unbearable. You may feel like you have to multi-task, but that often leads to more stress. Take one task at a time. Make a list of things you need to get done and start with one task. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one. The feeling of checking items off a list is very satisfying and can motivate you to keep going.

## EXERCISE

Regular exercise is a popular way to relieve stress. It gives an outlet to energy your body makes when it is preparing for a "flight or fight" response to stress or danger. Twenty to thirty minutes of physical activity benefits both the body and the mind.

## GET A HOBBY

Take a break from your worries by doing something you enjoy. Whether it's gardening, painting, doing jigsaw puzzles or playing video games, schedule time to indulge your interests. The "zoned out" feeling people get while doing these types of activities is a great way to relax.

## VENT

Talking with a friend or family member 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. Try to limit complaining and keep conversations constructive. Ask them how they have dealt with a similar situation that may be "stressing you out." Let them provide love, support and guidance. Don't try to cope alone.

## BE FLEXIBLE

If you find you're meeting constant opposition in either your personal or professional life, rethink your approach. Arguing only intensifies stressful feelings. Make allowances for others' opinions and be prepared to compromise. If you are willing to be accommodating, others may meet you halfway. Not only will you reduce your stress, you may find better solutions to your problems.

## GO EASY ON CRITICISM

You may expect too much of yourself and others. Try not to hold on to frustration or disappointment when another person does not measure up. The "other person" may be a coworker, spouse, or child whose behavior you are trying to change or don't agree with. Avoid criticisms about character, such as "You're so stubborn," and try providing helpful suggestions for how someone might do something differently. Also remember to be kind to yourself. Negative self-talk doesn't fix problems and will make you feel worse.

If you are taking steps to live a healthy lifestyle but still feel like you are struggling with your mental health, visit [www.mhascreening.org](http://www.mhascreening.org) to check your symptoms. It's free, confidential, and anonymous. Once you have your results, we'll give you information and help you find tools and resources to feel better.