

Text

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Handle Stress Before It Handles You

No one is immune to stress. It's a part of life, whether the physical stress of a harried schedule, or the mental stress of money problems.

People respond to and rate stress differently, but stress is usually defined as a negative feeling, according to the National Mental Health Association (NMHA).

Much of the stress we complain of or react to is tied to everyday responsibilities, the NMHA says. And not all stress is easily recognizable by us. But our bodies respond automatically: increasing blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, metabolism and blood flow to your muscles, the NMHA says. This response is valuable when fleeing a dangerous situation, but when you face stress daily, the result can affect your health, weakening your immune system and leaving you more susceptible to illness.

By understanding what is causing you stress, you may be able to make changes to help you feel more in control.

Impact of stress

People are affected differently by stress. Some feel overwhelmed about lack of time, others are more irritable and less patient, and some are unable to focus well.

Stress can cause physical, emotional and behavioral problems that can affect your health, as well as your personal and professional relationships, the NMHA says. Too much stress can cause relatively minor illnesses such as insomnia, backaches or headaches, and can contribute to potentially life-threatening diseases like high blood pressure and heart disease. Stress also is strongly linked to depression.

How to cope

Dealing effectively with stress takes determination, persistence and time, the NMHA says. Here are suggestions for coping with stress; some may help immediately, but others may help in the long term. Learn to accept or change stressful situations when you can.

Learn to say no

If you feel overwhelmed by your (or your family's) hectic schedule, figure out what you can eliminate -- and learn to say no to new responsibilities, the NMHA says. Tell family and friends why you are making changes, and be willing to listen to other people's suggestions.

Pass up perfection

You're not Superman or Superwoman, so don't expect perfection from yourself -- or others, the NMHA says. Be realistic about what you can accomplish, and don't hesitate to ask for help if you need it.

One at a time

Focus on one task you need to do at a time. Decide which is the most urgent and tackle that one first. From there, go down your list one at a time. This will help keep you from feeling overwhelmed.

Have a support system

It's OK to lean on others. Taking time to talk with friends and family about what's bothering you can make a real difference, the NMHA says. Instead of simply complaining about issues, talk about ways to solve the problems causing your stress. And, if your stressors become overwhelming, your next step should be turning to a mental health professional.

Exercise and enjoy your leisure time

Step away from your stress by setting aside time for exercise, leisure and relaxation. Don't use leisure time as a reward for completing work or chores. Build it into your schedule all through the year.

Some people like quietness and can use relaxation exercises such as meditation to ease their stress because they find it refreshing and restorative. Other people like to be active and are more apt to find physical activities, such as walking, running or other exercise, to be beneficial.

Whichever style is appropriate for you, it's important to make time to de-stress regularly. In the long run, using small moments to escape your stressors can protect you from many of the damaging effects of stress.

Here are other ways to increase your coping ability:

- Concentrate on the present. Don't dwell on problems in your past or worries about your future.
- Maintain a daily routine. A familiar pattern can increase security when stress seems to be taking over.
- Take deep-breath breaks several times a day. Even brief stress breaks of 10 to 15 minutes can be helpful.
- Get regular, adequate amounts of sleep. Most people need from six to 10 hours per night.

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