

When You're Stressed Out

Exercise, relaxation, and even diet can combat stress

We all experience stress. But women often juggle multiple roles that create special stressors. It's hard to keep all the balls in the air at once, and we end up feeling overwhelmed. While a certain amount of stress is good for you—it helps you focus and get things accomplished—too much stress can cause depression, anxiety, and fatigue. The trick is to defuse harmful stress by learning relaxation techniques, eating the right foods, and defining which stressors are under your control—and which ones aren't.

Women's stressors

"Women over the age of 40 have special concerns and life experiences that may exacerbate stress," remarks Carol Goldberg, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Syosset, New York. Changes in our bodies, our work situations, our family lives, and our finances affect our stress levels. A study in the November 2001 *Journal of Marriage and Family* found that high levels of job stress can have a significant negative impact on a marriage, even a happy one.

Among the other issues typically causing stress for women in midlife and beyond: menopause symptoms; having an "empty nest;" making a career change or entering the workforce for the first time; facing age discrimination; being suddenly single (due to divorce or widowhood); a change in income; or taking care of sick or elderly relatives.

Listen to your body

"Stress is an unavoidable consequence of life," says Paul Rosch, MD, president of The American Institute of Stress in Yonkers, New York. But the symptoms of stress aren't always obvious.

While each of us handles stress differently, Dr. Rosch offers some signs that stress may be adversely affecting you: palpitations, gritting or grinding your teeth, frequent headaches, jaw clenching or pain, neck ache, back pain, muscle spasms, frequent blushing or sweating cold or sweaty hands and feet, rashes, itching, hives, and goose

bumps. But don't assume these symptoms are due to stress—check them out first with your physician.

Can diet make a difference?

Foods may help us fight stress. But we're not talking about "comfort foods," like cookies or mashed potatoes. While it's true that carbohydrates boost the brain chemical *serotonin*, which helps elevate mood, complex carbohydrates like whole grains take longer to be absorbed by the body and may have more lasting effects on mood, alertness, and energy. Instead of a doughnut, eat whole grain cereal as a snack. Have dried apricots instead of candy. Still want a cookie? Make it a real oatmeal cookie.

Limit caffeine and alcohol intake. Caffeine can raise your heart rate and blood pressure; both can disrupt sleep and exacerbate stress. Don't smoke.

Learn how to relax

There are many ways you can physically

decompress. But you must make time to insure adequate relaxation. Try one of the following exercises:

- **Deep breathing:** Place your hand on your abdomen, just below your rib cage. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the bottom of your lungs. Your hand should rise as you inhale, and your chest should move slightly. Take a breath, inhale to the count of 4, pause, and slowly exhale to the count of 4. As you exhale, let your body go. Keep your breathing slow and regular, and deep-breathe for 3 to 5 minutes. Try this once a day.


- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Tense a muscle for 10 seconds and then release it for 15 to 20 seconds. Do this with each major muscle group. Each time you release a muscle group, notice how it feels in contrast to when you tensed it. Start with your fists and end with your feet. Try this technique for 20 minutes, once a day. A good time to try it is before going to sleep.

Stretching exercises also help relax tense muscles (see page 11). Other simple fixes: crossword puzzles, walking, getting a massage, or going to a movie.

Other ways to cope

"Stress means different things for different people, but in general, the feeling of not having control is always distressing," explains Dr. Rosch. It's important to find out what causes you stress so you can work to reduce it. "Write a list of the things that are bothering you and separate them into ones you can't avoid or control and ones where you might make a difference," Dr. Rosch suggests. Then forget about the first list and concentrate on the items you can control. Focus on solutions, not problems.

To avoid the feelings of isolation that create stress, create support systems for yourself. Join a group activity or do volunteer work. Don't forget spirituality and religion. Don't ruminate or dwell on your problems, and avoid negative self-talk. If stress escalates into daily feelings of anxiety and panic, consider talking to a mental health professional.

Debbie Feldman 

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Learn to recognize your personal stress symptoms.
- Say "no" to any request that could pile on stress.
- Make two lists of things stressing you—the ones you can do something about, and the ones you can't. Work on those you can change.
- Try deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation.
- Get regular exercise, go for a long walk, or window shop with a friend.
- Join a new social activity or volunteer your time.
- Eat complex carbohydrates like whole grains.