

Get a Handle on Stress

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Do you suffer from headaches? Are you nervous or irritable? Do you feel isolated from others? Are you constantly fatigued or feeling down? If so, you may be suffering from too much stress. If a physician determines these symptoms aren't caused by a physical illness, you may want to take a look at the role of stress in your life.



What is stress?

Stress affects everyone. "Stress is an unavoidable consequence of the human condition," says Paul Rosch, M.D., president of the American Institute of Stress in Yonkers, N.Y. "Stress signifies different things for different people, but in general, the feeling of not having control is always distressful."

A certain amount of stress helps us focus and get things done. If there is too little stress, we feel bored, restless and unhappy. But too much stress leads to distress, and this affects our health.

"Stress results from any situation that requires behavior adjustment. Any change is stressful," says Herbert Benson, M.D., president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel-Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School in Boston.

How stress affects the body

"Stress evokes the fight-or-flight response, which releases adrenaline and noradrenaline," Benson explains. "This leads to anxiety, increased anger and hostility, and mild to moderate depression. The hormones released in the body when it's under stress contribute to a host of diseases, including hypertension (high blood pressure), cardiac disorders, insomnia, PMS and infertility."

What's causing your stress?

It's important to find out what causes stress in your life so you can work on reducing 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," Rosch suggests. Then forget about the first list and concentrate on the items you can control.

Another way to find out what's causing you stress is to listen to your body. "Look at how your life is on a day-to-day basis," says Dori Winchell, a San Diego-area psychologist. Look at how you're sleeping and eating, and whether you're feeling muscle tension or fatigue.

Dealing with stress effectively means focusing on solutions, not problems. Rosch offers the following stress-busting advice. "Before you let something really get to you, ask yourself, 'Will this really make much difference 5 years from now?'"

Make time for yourself and what's important to you. What do you enjoy? You may decide to slow the pace of your life. "Look at your goals and how you want your life to be. Ask yourself, 'Is this really what I want to be doing? What's important to me?'" says Winchell.



Take a 10-minute walk to lessen stress and to keep your heart healthy.

Get physical

Physical activity can lessen stress. Enjoy a relaxing bath to recharge yourself, take a 10-minute walk, or get a massage. These activities will help you get in touch with your body. "Try Tai Chi, singing, yoga, drawing or dancing," Winchell suggests. "These devices help us remove the focus from the frenetic part of the brain and learn to relax."

The relaxation response

How can we help our bodies relax? While the body's fight-or-flight response to stress comes automatically, we need to bring on the relaxation response ourselves. In 1975, Benson coined the term "relaxation response" to describe the body's "response which is opposite of stress."

To summon the relaxation response, first repeat a word, sound, prayer, phrase or muscle activity. Second, when other thoughts come to your mind, simply let them pass through, and return to repeating your word or phrase.

Do this for 10 to 20 minutes twice a day, preferably before breakfast and before dinner. "When you do this regularly, long-term changes occur which decrease your response to the stress hormones—it's like blocking their effect," says Benson. There are many ways to summon the body's relaxation response, such as abdominal breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization.

Your body and mind are less susceptible to stress when you get enough rest and exercise, eat a healthy diet, develop a support system of people you enjoy being around, practice positive thinking, and avoid negative self-talk.

If you find that stress is causing you to feel overwhelmed, or your stress symptoms escalate into panic, talk to a professional. A licensed social worker or psychologist can help you learn to talk things out and deal with stress.

Although we can't rid our lives of stress entirely, we can learn to manage it. +

For More Information

American Institute of Stress
Department 5
124 Park Avenue
Yonkers, NY 10703
Ask for "Ten Proven Stress Busters" and "50 Common Signs and Symptoms of Stress"

Mayo Clinic Health
www.mayohealth.org

National Mental Health
Association
(800) 969-NMHA
www.nmha.org

Mind/Body Medical Institute
(617) 632-9530
www.mindbody.harvard.edu

American Psychological
Association
(202) 336-5500 • www.apa.org



What's Causing All This Stress?

Financial hardships, jobs, children, relationships or information overload can turn a normally calm and cool individual into a frazzled mess. Dealing with an illness or a divorce or taking care of sick or elderly relatives can also cause a great deal of stress in your life. A more recent stressor is the current technological revolution and the amount of information we're bombarded with daily.

"The rapid changes in our society are a great cause of modern stress," says Herbert Benson, M.D., president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel-Deaconess Medical Center, Har-

vard Medical School in Boston. "Our stressors are coming over radio, TV and the Internet. Where does it end?"

"People are maxed out," says Dori Winchell, a psychologist in the San Diego area. "Our plate is overloaded. We're experiencing things in this generation that no other generation has had to deal with. We now have voice mail, E-mail, regular mail and 24-hour days, thanks to computers and other technology."

If you feel like you're the only one who's stressed out, relax. Everyone is being bombarded with the same types of stressors day after day.

Try These Relaxation Techniques

Deep or Abdominal 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 only 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 3-5 minutes. Do 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 new muscle group, notice how it feels in contrast to when you tensed it. Start with your fists and end with your feet. Try this for 20 minutes, once a day.

Peaceful Scene Visualization

Imagine a peaceful scene—a quiet beach, a sofa in front of a roaring fire, a forest or a mountain top. Close your eyes and imagine the scene. Breathe slowly. Practice returning to your peaceful scene after you do deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation, or whenever you feel stressed.

Source: "The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook," by Edmund J. Bourne, Ph.D., 1995, New Harbinger Publications, Inc.