

Stress Management: Examine Your Stress Reaction

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It's hard to avoid stress these days with so many competing demands for your time and attention. But with good stress management skills, you can cope with stress in a healthy way.

One of the first steps toward good stress management is understanding how you react to stress — and making changes if necessary. Take an honest look at how you react to stress and then adopt or modify stress management techniques to make sure the stress in your life doesn't lead to health problems.

Evaluate how you react to stress

Stress management skills often don't come naturally. You can learn new stress management skills or modify your existing stress management skills to help you cope better, though.

First, take a look at how you react to stress. Some people seem to take everything in stride. Their naturally laid-back attitudes shine through, even in stressful situations. Another deadline? Bring it on. The dishwasher is leaking? No problem, it'll be a simple repair. Others get anxious at the first sign of a stressful situation. Running late for a meeting? Time to panic! Stuck in a traffic jam? Let the cursing begin!

Here are some common but unhealthy reactions to stress. Do any of these describe your reactions? If you're not sure, consider keeping a daily journal for a week or so to monitor your reactions to stressful situations.

- **Pain.** You may unconsciously clench your jaws or fists or develop muscle tension, especially in your neck and shoulders, all of which can lead to unexplained physical pain. Stress also may cause a variety of other health ailments, including upset stomach, shortness of breath, back pain, headaches and insomnia.
- **Overeating.** Stress may trigger you to eat even when you're not hungry, or you may skip exercise. In contrast, you may eat less, actually losing weight when under more stress.
- **Anger.** Stress may leave you with a short fuse. When you're under pressure, you may find yourself arguing with co-workers, friends or loved ones — sometimes with little provocation or about things that have nothing to do with your situation.
- **Crying.** Stress may trigger crying jags, sometimes seemingly without warning. Little things unrelated to your stress may leave you in tears. You also may feel lonely or isolated.
- **Depression.** Sometimes stress may be too much to take. You might avoid the problem, call in sick to work, feel hopeless or simply give up. Chronic stress can be a factor in the development of depression or anxiety disorders.
- **Negativity.** When you don't cope well with stress, you may automatically expect the worst or magnify the negative aspects of any undesirable situation.
- **Smoking.** Even if you quit smoking long ago, a cigarette may seem like an easy way to relax when you're under pressure. In fact, stress is a leading cause of having a smoking relapse. You may also find yourself turning to alcohol or drugs to numb the effects of stress.

Take the next step toward stress management

Once you've identified the unhealthy reactions you may be having to uncontrolled stress, you can begin to improve your stress management skills. Stress management techniques abound, including:

- **Scale back.** Cut back on your obligations when possible. While it may seem easier said than done, take a close look at your daily, weekly and monthly schedule and find meetings, activities, dinners or chores that you can cut back on or delegate to someone else.
- **Prepare.** Stay ahead of stress by preparing for meetings or trips, scheduling your time better, and setting realistic goals for tasks both big and small. Stress mounts when you run out of time because something comes up that you didn't account for — build in time for traffic jams, for example.
- **Reach out.** Make or renew connections with others. Surrounding yourself with supportive family, friends, co-workers, or clergy and spiritual leaders can have a positive effect on your mental well-being and your ability to cope with stress. Volunteer in your community.
- **Take up a hobby.** It may seem cliché, but when you engage in something enjoyable, it can soothe and calm your restless mind. Try reading, gardening, crafts, tinkering with electronics, fishing, carpentry, music — things that you don't get competitive or more stressed out about.
- **Relax.** Physical activity, meditation, yoga, massage and other relaxation techniques can help you manage stress. It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body.
- **Get enough sleep.** Lack of sufficient sleep affects your immune system and your judgment and makes you more likely to snap over minor irritations. Most people need seven to eight hours of sleep a day.
- **Get professional help.** If your stress management efforts aren't helpful enough, see your doctor. Chronic, uncontrolled stress can lead to a variety of potentially serious health problems, including depression and pain.

Stress usually doesn't just magically get better on its own. You may have to actively work on getting control of the stress in your life so that it doesn't control you. When you first identify how you react to stressful situations, you then can put yourself in a better position to manage the stress, even if you can't eliminate it. And if your current efforts at stress management aren't working, try something new.