



# What You Need To Know About Coping With Stress

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No one is immune to stress, but how it affects health depends to a great extent on how a person chooses to handle it. For some people, stress is the motivator that catapults them to success; for others, it's a time bomb waiting to explode. More than half the visits Americans make to their doctors are a product of stress. Back pain, ulcers, depression, and asthma are just a few of the problems stress either causes or worsens.

## What Is Stress?

Stress is an individualized reaction to situations or conditions that cause pressure. It can be caused by virtually anything. Regardless of how significant or insignificant a stressful event is, if it's perceived as a threat to one's physical or psychological well-being, the body responds to handle it.

The body has a built-in response system for stress. The neuroendocrine system releases *adrenaline* and *cortisol*, preparing the body to respond to a threat. The heart pumps faster, blood pressure rises, and muscle tension increases. Fat and sugar are released into the blood to provide quick energy, and certain chemicals are sent out to help blood clot faster in case of injury. These reactions help the body survive a crisis while keeping it in a constant state of alertness.

## What Are The Dangers Of Stress?

Though stress responses prepare the body for physical action, today's stressors are mostly emotional. They don't call for a physical response, yet they evoke the same physiological reactions. People who are frequently stressed are overexposed to the potent hormones and chemicals that put the body on alert. Eventually these substances may damage the body. The effects of stress can be felt in nearly every part of a person's body, from headaches to upset stomachs to back pain. For many people, however the cardiovascular effects are the most serious. Stress causes the liver to produce extra cholesterol. Extra fat and cholesterol are released from the body's stores. Together, these reactions increase blood cholesterol levels.

The hormones released in response to stress cause constant changes in blood pressure. Over time, this can lead to chronic hypertension, further straining the heart and damaging the lining of the arteries. Stress also damages the muscle fibers of the heart and increases the likelihood that blood will clot. Together, these changes increase the risk for a heart attack or stroke.

Studies show that stress reduces a person's ability to fend off

disease. At first, stress-induced hormones stimulate the immune system. Shortly after a stressful situation, however, the immune system becomes suppressed, and susceptibility to infectious diseases increases. The greater the number of stressful events during any one period, the greater the risk of stress-related illnesses.

As profound an effect as stress has on one's day-to-day health, it's important to master the basics of stress management.

## Managing Your Stress -

Stress is a normal part of life and will always exist. Learning how to identify and handle stress, however, can greatly reduce its impact on one's well-being. To manage the stress you can't prevent, take heed of the following advice:

### Identify the causes of stress -

Be aware of what increases anxiety and frustration. Look for reasons behind a headache, stomach ache, or other ailment. Knowing what's causing a sense of pressure can go a long way towards preventing it in the future.

### Keep things in perspective -

Ask questions such as "What's the worst thing that can happen?" "In the scope of things, how important is this issue?" "Is there anything I can do to improve the situation?" Many of the situations that cause stress are beyond our control or of little real consequence. Traffic jams, long lines at the post office, and busy signals are rarely worth the time and energy we waste agonizing over them.

### Be your own best friend -

Much of the stress a person experiences is due to negativity, which increases doubt, helplessness, and a sense of lost control. Stress levels can be reduced with a little self-confidence and a good deal of positive thinking.

### Try relaxation techniques -

Relaxation rids the body of tension and prevents the headaches, insomnia, and high blood pressure that can be symptoms of stress. There are many forms of relaxation therapy including hypnosis, yoga, meditation, and bio-feedback.

- Simple techniques include *focusing*, in which you remove yourself from a stressful situation by

closing your eyes and concentrating on a pleasing mental image. This helps block out distracting, negative thoughts.

- During *relaxed breathing*, the abdomen rises with each inhalation and lowers on exhalation, which differs from the way people usually breathe, expanding and contracting their chests. Breathing from the diaphragm takes less effort and allows a more efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. The result is an overall relaxed sensation in your body.

#### **Exercise Stress Away -**

A regular exercise program increases the body's stamina, making it better equipped to handle stress. Exercise increases a person's sense of control and resistance to both depression and anxiety. Exercise also increases the release of endorphins, which have a calming effect that lasts 30 to 45 minutes after exercising. Regular exercise also counteracts the harmful effects of stress by lowering cholesterol levels, reducing the potential for blood clotting, lowering blood pressure, improving sleep, and increasing energy.

#### **Eat Healthfully -**

Some people respond to stress by either overeating or skipping meals. Both can be harmful to health. Some of the hormones released during stress can also cause sodium and water retention and excess cholesterol production. A well-balanced diet that's low in fat, moderate in sodium, and provides enough calories to maintain a healthy weight can help negate the effects of stress hormones and strengthen the body's ability to fight off the damages caused by stress.

#### **A Word Of Caution -**

Some symptoms of stress may also be indicators of more serious health problems. Depression, for example, may have many of the same signs of stress while posing a more serious threat to one's well-being. If, after conscientious efforts to manage your stress, you don't feel better, call your doctor.

### **The Warning Signs of Stress**

#### **Emotional Signs**

- anxiety
- apathy
- confusion
- forgetfulness
- irritability
- tearfulness

#### **Behavioral Signs**

- procrastination

- irresponsibility
- alcoholism
- compulsive shopping, gambling, or eating
- poor hygiene
- clumsiness
- chronic lateness

#### **Physical Signs**

- frequent illness
- exhaustion
- insomnia
- headaches
- loss of appetite
- digestive problems

#### **Who Is At Risk For Stress?**

Actually, everyone is at risk for experiencing stress, but some people are predisposed to respond more violently to it. About 20 percent of Americans with high stress levels are considered "hot reactors." Outwardly, they appear calm and collected, but inside their blood pressure and hormones are surging. For them, the stress response is activated more intensely and more frequently than it is for others.

Years ago, people categorized as *Type A* personalities were thought at greatest risk of stress-induced illness because of their competitive drive, aggressiveness, and compulsive behavior. But experts now feel such labeling is too broad and that personality alone is a poor predictor of how a person handles stress.

Today, experts believe it's how much control people feel they have over the variables in their lives that determines the impact stress will have on their health. The less control they feel they have, the more susceptible they are to stress-related ills.

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