



Stress Less

Tips to tame tension and stay healthy

INTRODUCTION

Our world moves quickly and stays constantly connected. The same technologies that provide us opportunities for innovation, increased efficiency and social connection can make us feel constantly on-edge and assault our senses. We have an unending list of obligations, money is tight and the hurried pace of life never slows. In short – we are stressed.

Stress is an ever-present part of life, and not all stress is bad. In fact, our bodies have a natural stress response that allows us to react to potential threats to our health or well-being. Stress can motivate positive action, or it can be the result of excitement surrounding a major life event, like a new job or an upcoming wedding.

But when routine stress becomes chronic, it can be damaging to our health. Prolonged elevated stress levels can lead to heart disease, digestive problems and depression. People under stress may be tempted into unhealthy behaviors – like overeating, smoking tobacco or abusing drugs and alcohol – in an attempt to relieve their tension.

“When routine stress becomes chronic, it can be damaging to our health”

Fortunately, there are lots of things we can do to regulate stress and reduce its negative health effects. Positive change begins with healthy activity and diet. When in-the-moment stressors get the better of you, it helps to have a stable of stress-busting techniques to turn to for relief. This ebook will help you safeguard your health by managing stress in your daily life.

Note: If you are experiencing chronic stress as a result of traumatic experience please seek help from a mental health professional. If you or someone you know is considering suicide, please seek treatment immediately or call the National Suicide Prevention Line at (800) 273-8255. This ebook is meant to be informative and is not intended to be used as a substitute for professional medical advice.

Chronic stress can affect your mood, behavior, relationships and physical health. Stress elevates your heart rate, tenses your muscles and increases your brain activity. (Fact Sheet on Stress) When chronic stress causes these temporary physical reactions to be maintained over an extended period of time, it can be detrimental to your health.

Weight gain

It's difficult to maintain a healthy diet during periods of stress. Sometimes, food itself becomes our method of psychological relief. Lack of motivation resulting from elevated stress levels can make it difficult to seek out or prepare foods that offer nutritional value and substance. If you're feeling stressed and are tempted to reach for a donut dinner, remember to ask yourself: Am I really hungry, or am I just feeling anxious? Lack of sleep has been shown to decrease our willpower to resist high-calorie foods. (O'Connor) Getting a good night's rest and practicing relaxation techniques when you are tempted to overeat will make you more likely to avoid the weight gain that often accompanies periods of intense stress.



Heart stress and elevated blood pressure

High levels of emotional stress lead to an increase in our bodies' levels of cortisol, also known as the "stress hormone." Elevated levels of cortisol are believed to cause cardiovascular issues. (Stress hormone predicts heart death) Stress can also lead to high blood pressure; a major contributor to the development of heart disease. (When it comes to blood pressure...)

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

Headaches

Stress increases muscle tension, often without the awareness of the person experiencing it. Tightly-clenched muscles can lead to headaches and other physical pain. Relaxation techniques like meditation and mindfulness can increase your awareness of your physical state and help you learn to release muscle tension experienced during stress episodes. Massage therapy can also be useful for releasing stress-induced muscle tension.

Stomach upset

Digestion will sometimes be slowed or stopped as part of the body's physiological response to an external stressor. The purpose of this digestive disruption is to allow the body to divert all energy into dealing with the stressor. When stress becomes chronic and sustained, this normal physiological response can lead to negative effects like stomach pain or more serious digestive disorders. (Stress and the sensitive gut)

Difficulty concentrating

When stress becomes chronic, sustained elevated levels of cortisol may lead to a decrease in the brain's ability to create and recall memories. Long-term stress has been found to shrink the brain's memory center. (Stress and Anxiety)

Fatigue and irritability

The psychological worry that accompanies stress, and the physiological reaction to stressors, can make it difficult to relax into a full night's sleep. Lack of sleep in turn diminishes our ability to effectively handle stress.





For a restful evening, try practicing these sleep hygiene tips from the CDC:

Go to bed at the same time each night, and rise at the same time each morning.

Sleep in a quiet, dark, and relaxing environment, which is neither too hot nor too cold.

Remove all TVs, computers, and other "gadgets" from the bedroom.

Make your bed comfortable and use it only for sleeping and not for activities such as reading or watching TV.

Avoid large meals before bedtime.

SIMPLE STRESS RELIEVERS

Be quiet

Finding a place of quiet can be an effective way to control stress. When tensions start to overwhelm, try closing your eyes and practicing deep breathing. Reducing the assault on your senses may help you achieve calm in the chaos.

Practicing meditation has also been shown to reduce stress. There are several forms of meditation to choose from, including yoga, mindfulness, guided meditation, and tai chi – just to name a few. (Mayo Clinic staff)
Investigate your options to find a meditative practice that works for you.

Write it out

Keeping a daily journal can be an effective way to help you identify your stressors. Giving written form to your thoughts and feelings may also help alleviate your stress.

Making written to-do lists can help you feel more in-control of your life and activities, and allow you to feel the satisfaction of literally crossing things off your list.

Get moving

Exercise is an excellent way to keep stress at bay. Get moving in any way you can. Even a small amount of exercise is better than nothing, and it doesn't take much to have a positive impact on your stress level. (7 ways)

Feeling tense during your workday? Stand and stretch. Waking up your muscles can increase blood flow and help relax tension.

Cleaning your personal space at home and at work is a great way to get your body moving. Plus, tidying up your physical space can help to clear your mental clutter.



Be social

Make plans with friends. Spending time with people you care about and enjoy can help pull you out of your own head and refocus your mental energy.

Quality time with a furry friend can also help alleviate the negative effects of stress. Time spent with animals has been found to lower blood pressure, cholesterol and triglyceride levels; and to decrease feelings of loneliness. (Health benefits of pets)

Get some fresh air

Spending time in nature can help calm your mind and reduce stress along with lowering your cholesterol and blood pressure. (Ecosystem Services Team) Yet modern life has led us to spend less and less time outside. In fact, Americans now spend more than 90 percent of their time indoors. (Environmental Protection Agency) So step outside, even if just for a short walk, and let nature do its magic.



SIMPLE STRESS RELIEVERS

Sleep

Insufficient sleep can increase irritability, make it more difficult to handle stress, lower your immune system's defenses and negatively affect your concentration. People's sleep requirements vary, but, in general, it's a good rule of thumb to shoot for 8 hours a night. A good night's rest can give your ability to handle stress a major boost.

Shake things up

Stress can make you feel like you're in a mental rut. Shake things up by taking up a new hobby, or try changing something in your daily routine to give your brain a jolt. Take a new route to work, try something new for breakfast, or take a novel approach to a problem. Even small changes can serve to stimulate your brain by creating a disruption in your patterns of behavior.





How much sleep do I need?

Age	Recommended sleep
newborns	16-18 hours a day
preschool-aged children	11-12 hours a day
school-aged children	at least 10 hours a day
teens	9-10 hours a day
adults (including the elderly)	7-8 hours a day

*From "How much sleep is enough?"
Reprinted courtesy of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.
Sleep Mask designed by Nick Green from The Noun Project.*

FOODS THAT FIGHT STRESS

We don't have to tell you that maintaining a well-balanced diet has an almost unlimited number of positive effects on your overall health and well-being – you've heard it all before. But did you know that certain vitamins and minerals are thought to aid in stress-reduction and mood elevation? Here's a guide to a few nutrients that may help you stress less.

B vitamins

Evidence is inconclusive, but researchers believe deficient levels of B vitamins – including folate, B6 and B12 – may be linked to mood disorders and depression. (Hall-Flavin)

- **Folate:** You can find folate in a wide variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Asparagus, spinach, lentils and strawberries are all good sources of folate. (Best of: Folate)
- **B6:** Sources of vitamin B6 include: Bananas, avocados, potatoes, chicken breast, and chickpeas. (Dietary Supplement Fact Sheet)
- **B12:** Eggs, milk, fish, meat and fortified breakfast cereals all contain B12. (Three of the B Vitamins)



Omega-3 fatty acids

Omega-3 fatty acids may have a positive effect on cognitive function; research is ongoing. Omega-3 fatty acids have been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. (Omega-3 Fatty Acids) Sources of omega-3 fatty acids include several kinds of fatty fish, like salmon and tuna, as well as flaxseed, walnuts and Brussels sprouts. (Sacks)

Vitamin C

Vitamin C may help lower your body's stress hormone levels. (7 Ways) There are some studies that suggest that Vitamin C may also increase the resiliency of your immune system, though more research is needed. (How to boost) Eat your fruits and veggies to maintain the appropriate level of Vitamin C.

Good sources of C include oranges, bell peppers, broccoli, kiwi, apricots and sweet potatoes. (Best of: Vitamin C)

Herbal supplements

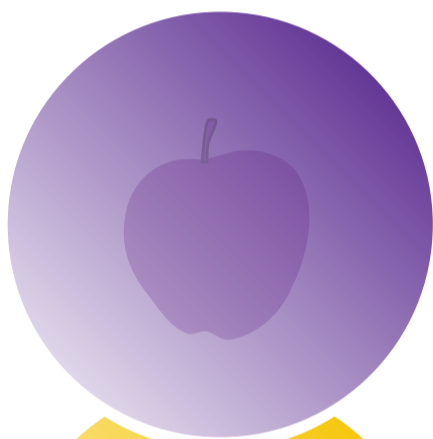
Some herbal supplements, like St. John's wort and valerian root, are thought to act as natural mood elevators for the treatment of stress and depression, though there is currently not enough scientific evidence to prove this connection. (Herbs at a glance: Valerian) (Herbs at a glance: St. John's wort)

Always check with your physician before taking herbal supplements. Some supplements may interact with or reduce the effectiveness of certain medications, or have adverse effects on people with certain medical conditions.





Easy ways to eat well



Pack fruits and nuts for easy on-the-go snacking packed with vitamins and healthy fats. Just be sure to watch your portions!



Replace sugary and caffeinated drinks with water. Try to be aware of the effects that caffeine and sugar might have on your mood and stress levels. Caffeine has been shown to temporarily elevate blood pressure, which can heighten the effects of stress. High blood sugar, coupled with psychological stress, creates an increase in the body's levels of cortisol, the "stress hormone." (Aubele)



Pack a healthy snack to perk you up during your mid-afternoon workday lull. People have a tendency to reach for high-sugar and high-fat foods when they are tired or stressed. Instead, try some veggies and hummus, a small square of dark chocolate with nuts, or a piece of citrus fruit.



Stay hydrated. For your body to reach its peak performance – mentally and physically – being well hydrated is a must. Research has not determined exactly how much water each individual should drink, but The National Institutes of Health recommends six to eight 8-ounce glasses per day as a general guideline. (Water in Diet)

STRESS OR SOMETHING MORE SERIOUS?

If stress symptoms like, sadness, difficulty concentrating, irritability or insomnia persist for several weeks, if you feel out of control, or if your symptoms interfere with your ability to complete your daily activities, please seek help from your general physician or a mental health professional.

Chronic stress can lead to depression. And, as we discussed in earlier sections of this ebook, prolonged stress can have serious repercussions on your physical health.

Stress builds up, and can often be difficult to manage on your own. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates approximately half of all adults in the U.S. will experience mental health issues at some point during their lives. (CDC report identifies need) Depression and mental health issues can affect anyone. Don't be afraid to seek professional help.

For more information or assistance, visit the National Institute for Mental Health's website, nimh.nih.gov.



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