



Stress — what is it and how does it affect you? Stress is a natural reaction of the body to any demand (“pleasant” or “unpleasant”) placed upon it. We are aware of the physical demands such as sickness or danger, but we are much less aware of psychological demands (worrying, deadlines, depression, etc.) which are the major negative stressors for most of us.

Stress: The Silent Killer

Stress

Although physical stressors are usually caused by external factors and psychological stressors are caused by how we perceive things, your body reacts in much the same way to both of them. Whether you are in a car accident or you have an argument, your heart beat speeds up, your blood pressure increases, your muscles tighten and many other physical changes occur (most involuntary and unknown to you). Depending upon your situation these physical reactions to stress may take place several times a week or even every day. As you become stressed more frequently, these physical reactions can create problems such as headaches, nausea, fatigue, sleeplessness, and more. Over a period of time the constant stress that causes these reoccurring reactions can weaken your immune system, opening up a chance for disease to strike. Some studies have shown that stress could play a silent role in diseases which affect and kill many Americans.

So what can I do to manage my stress? First, realize that stress is a necessary part of your life and without some stress you would not be healthy either. However, too much of anything, even good things, can have negative effects. That's why you need to manage your stress level so that you stay healthy and functional.

Here are six external things you can do to help better manage your stress.

Play

Once a week do something you enjoy so much that you can lose track of time. This activity can have absolutely no purpose other than to make you relive your childhood play-time.



Sleep

If you are faced with a high stressed life your body needs enough rest to handle it. Without enough rest you will further weaken your immune system. Get what you need!

Eat

Being stressed takes a lot of energy. If you give your body the kind of food it needs to work at its best (carbohydrates - such as pasta, bread, fruits), you will have better energy to meet your stressful situations.

Exercise

This is the simplest and most direct way to relieve stress. Since a stress reaction (muscle tension, heart rate increase, etc.) is preparing

your body to do something physical, exercise such as walking, biking or swimming is the perfect remedy!

Relax

It often seems we forget how to relax. Relaxation comes in many forms and is different for everyone. Deep breathing, body massages, mental imagery, hobbies, music and other relaxing activities are good ways to stop the stress for a short time and revitalize you.

Avoid Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs

Many times, our first reaction to a stressful situation may be to reach for a drink to help "relieve" the stress. What we are actually doing is making our bodies deal with the stress AND the alcohol, which the body treats as a poison and tries to get rid of. So instead of relieving our stress with these not-so-healthy choices we end up OVER-LOADING our bodies and making the situation worse.

It's a little trickier to manage the psychological stress because it is created by your thoughts and perceptions. However, if you become aware of your own thoughts and realize you create them, and therefore can control them, you are on your way to better managing the origin of most of your stress – your mind.

Signs of Distress

Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tension Headaches ▪ Muscle Tension ▪ Cool, Clammy Skin ▪ Trembling, Twitches ▪ Nausea/ Vomiting ▪ Chronic Fatigue ▪ Weight Gain/Loss ▪ Loss of Appetite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Elevated Blood Pressure ▪ Heart Rate Increases ▪ Indigestion ▪ Hyperventilation ▪ Frequent Urination ▪ Impaired Sexual Function ▪ Stopped Posture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sweaty Palms ▪ Constipation ▪ Diarrhea ▪ Insomnia ▪ Backaches ▪ Anorexia ▪ Grinding Teeth
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Apathy ▪ Irritability ▪ Denial ▪ Grandiosity ▪ Feeling You Can't Slow Down ▪ Feeling Worthless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over Compensation ▪ Unable to Concentrate ▪ Nervousness ▪ No Interest in Things That Used to Bring You Joy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anxiety ▪ Mental Fatigue ▪ Restlessness ▪ Depressed ▪ Don't Know What To Do
Behavioral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poor Work Quality ▪ Poor Appearance ▪ Being Accident Prone ▪ Alcoholism ▪ Gambling ▪ Mood Swings ▪ Blaming Others ▪ Hyperactivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Poor Personal Hygiene ▪ Keeping to Yourself ▪ Defensive Behavior ▪ Excessive Smoking ▪ Spending Sprees ▪ Diminished Initiative ▪ Tardiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sullenness ▪ Crying ▪ Panic ▪ Quarreling ▪ Nail Biting ▪ Mistrust ▪ Indecisiveness ▪ Drug Dependence
Intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Job Dissatisfaction ▪ Poor Span of Attention to Details ▪ Past-oriented Rather Than Future-oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of Awareness to External Stimuli ▪ Reduced Creativity ▪ Diminished Cognitive Abilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of Concentration ▪ Preoccupation ▪ Forgetfulness

Stress Reducers

Ideas for boosting your ability to manage stress effectively



- Write something (maybe in a journal) about some of the stressful situations you've experienced lately and end it in a positive way – sometimes this can help you realize things aren't as bad as they seemed.
 - Don't prioritize your schedule – schedule your priorities!
 - Unclutter your life.
- Do something that you enjoy that makes you sweat, and do it regularly.
 - Try exercising, or specifically, relaxation exercises (like deep breathing) or Yoga, Tai Chi, or Pilates.
 - Do something for others...give in occasionally.
 - Go see a funny movie, read a funny book, or just find someone to laugh with.



- Do something you enjoy – get a massage, go to a movie, laugh with friends, lay on the beach, play a round of golf.
 - Make a list of all the symptoms you experience when stressed – use them as cues to identify when you're stressed.
 - Write out at least five things/goals you hope to experience, achieve, and accomplish through the rest of your life.
- Unwind before bedtime.
 - Go to bed on time or early – even if it means missing a favorite TV show.
 - Don't rely on your memory – use reminders...write notes to yourself...stay organized.
 - Decide which parts of your routine can be changed so that you don't live in the rut of "wake up, go to work, eat dinner, and go to bed."



- Call someone...find someone to confide in.
 - Talk to your friends and family about how you can support each other in living a healthy lifestyle.
 - Avoid destructive coping mechanisms (i.e., alcohol, smoking, caffeine, self-medicating, impulsivity, taking on more than you can handle).
 - Take care of yourself!
- Visit the CMEL Library or call the CMEL Health Awareness Coordinator (386) 446-7202 for additional stress management techniques and materials.

Take a Deep Breath . . .

...And Relax

When you're under stress, your muscles tense, and your breathing becomes shallow and rapid. One of the simplest (and best) ways to stop this stress response is to breathe deeply and slowly. It sounds simple, and it is. Most of us, however, do not breathe deeply under normal circumstances, so it may help to review the mechanics of deep breathing and how it helps us to relax.

Breathing Under Stress

When prehistoric humans were in danger of attack, their muscles tensed and their breathing became rapid and shallow, as they prepared to run or fight. Their high level of tension was a means of preparing their bodies for optimum performance. Today, the causes of our "stress" are different, but our stress response is the same. However, since we're not running or fighting, our tension has no release and our stress response builds. One way to counteract the stress response is to learn how to breathe deeply and slowly - the opposite of how we breathe when under stress.

How Deep Breathing Works

Deep breathing is not always natural to adults. Watch the way a baby breathes: the area beneath the chest goes in and out. Most adults breathe from the chest. This is shallower breathing, so less oxygen is taken in with each breath. As a result, blood is forced to move

through the system quickly so that enough oxygen gets to the brain and organs. Higher blood pressure results.

Deep breathing can reverse these effects. Take some time to practice this kind of breathing each day, especially when you're under stress. You can be sitting, standing, or lying down, but it helps to wear loose, comfortable clothing. Begin by breathing in through your nostrils. Count to five and let your lower abdomen fill with air. Then count to five as you let air escape through pursed lips. Do this deep breathing for two minutes or more each time. With practice, you will be able to count slowly to ten or higher. You can increase your relaxation if you imagine breathing in ocean air, the scent of flowers or forest air.

Effects of Deep Breathing

By helping you let go of tension, deep breathing can relieve headaches, backaches, stomach aches, and sleeplessness. It releases the body's own painkillers, called endorphins, into the system. It allows blood pressure to return to normal, which is good for your heart. Deep breathing can also allow held-in emotions to come to the surface, so your emotional health benefits from deep breathing, too. Use deep breathing any time, anywhere. Even just 3-5 breaths can be effective. It's one of the best techniques for relieving stress.



Slowly breathe in through your nostrils, imagining a peaceful scene.



Slowly exhale through pursed lips, then begin the sequence again.

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