

Stress Management

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HEALTH

What is Stress?

Any situation can lead to stress – too much to do, a conflict between people, disappointment, criticism, even compliments. These situations are not stress; they are stressors.

- Stress is the reaction to these situations. When the body reacts, the muscles tighten, the blood pressure rises, and the body fights back.
- Stressors are the apparent cause, while stress is the response.

The stress reaction happens when our glands pump chemicals into the blood stream to prepare for a “fight.” When our blood fills with “fight” chemicals, the blood clots more quickly, the blood sugar level rises, the cholesterol level remains high, and acid is pumped into the stomach. Those who live high-pressured, fast-paced lives prepare themselves for a “fight” most of the time. The effect of long-term stress is “wear and tear” on our body. Stress can cause problems for us in many different ways. These can be physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually, and spiritually.

What Causes Stress?

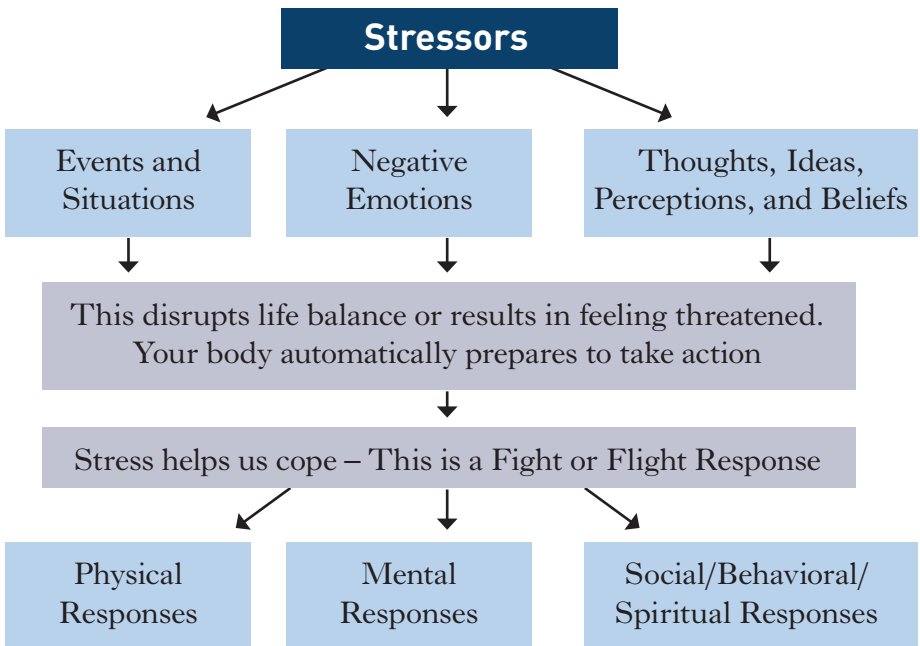
Stressors can lead to stress. Often people create their own stress by the meanings they attach to situations. You can experience stress from three sources:

- Your environment – this can include weather, noise, crowds, personal demands, time pressures, and performance standards.
- Your body – this can include aging, illness, accidents, poor diet, and sleep disturbances. Stress has been found to be related to many physical problems. These may include headaches, peptic ulcers, arthritis, colitis, diarrhea, asthma, cardiac arrhythmias, sexual problems, circulatory problems (cold hands and feet), muscle tension, and even cancer.

- Your thoughts – focusing on your worries can produce tension in your body. This can create the feeling of uneasiness and lead to more anxious thoughts. You cannot escape all of the stresses of life, but you can learn to deal with stress by learning to relax. You cannot always control what happens to you, but you can control how you react to many situations.

Stress is universal and a normal response to change (stressor) around us.

Stress keeps us safe and prepares us for action. Moderate amounts are beneficial keeping us alert and energetic. Chronic stress can have devastating long-term effects on our health. The goal is to reduce stress to make it manageable. To do this, you need to manage your own situational triggers, stress-provoking thinking patterns, and stress inducing emotional states.



Dealing with Stress

Stress management is a decision making process. When we feel the effects of a stressful situation, we have three basic ways we can deal with that stress. All of these approaches can be effective coping techniques. It is important to choose the best approach for each situation.

Alter (Change) Stress

Remove the source of stress. You can do this by:

- Problem-solving
- Talking with someone you trust
- Organizing and planning
- Managing your work and free time carefully

Avoid Stress

Remove yourself from the stress. You can do this by:

- Walk away when you can.
- Let go of the things you cannot control.
- Say “no” to demands and expectations that are hard to meet.
- Ask others to help.
- Know your limits.

Accept Stress

Building resistance to stress can be helpful. You can do this by:

- Physically – healthy, balanced diet, regular aerobic exercise, and relaxation techniques
- Mentally – positive affirmations, taking time for mental health, clarifying goals, values, and priorities
- Socially – build and maintain support systems, invest in relationships, clear communication and intimacy
- Spiritually – meditation, prayer, worship, faith, commitment

Become aware of your thoughts

- Change how you perceive the situation.
- Change unrealistic expectations.
- Change irrational beliefs.
- Build self-esteem and a positive attitude.
- Reframe your view; look to the positive.

How to Cope with Stress

Changing old habits of coping is your first step to reducing stress. You cannot learn new skills until you are willing to break old habits.

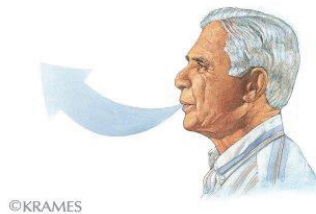
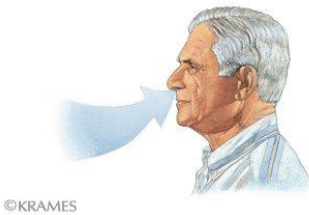
- Do not overwhelm yourself by resolving to break all your old habits overnight. Focus on developing one new habit.
- Be patient. New skills feel awkward at first. New coping skills take courage and persistence. At first, you may feel foolish and strange. The new coping skill may not make you feel like you are coping at all. This is normal. Whatever technique you try will take a bit of practice before you feel comfortable.

Stress Reduction

Relaxation Skills

Make a conscious effort to relax your mind and body.

- Practice – Pick a quiet place, sit or lie comfortably and close your eyes. Picture yourself in a peaceful environment.
- Music – Listen to soothing music; allow your mind and body to float along with the melody.
- Muscle Relaxation – Become conscious of a muscle group. Tense the muscle momentarily for awareness and identification, then allow it to relax. Concentrate on that feeling of relaxation in a muscle.
- Set aside time for relaxation. Find a private spot, sit and relax. Recall the relaxed feelings you attained during practice sessions. Then try the techniques in stressful situations. Do something you enjoy each day to improve your mood.
- Meditation: Become conscious of your breathing. When exhaling think “I breathe out tension;” when inhaling, think “I am calm.”
- Do something you enjoy each day to improve your mood.



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Acquire New Responses to Stress Situations

- Become aware of situations which make you feel pressured.
- Imagine the situation and yourself reacting very calmly to it.
- Rehearse new and acceptable ways to handle the situation calmly.

Manage Your Environment

- Be realistic about your limitations and capabilities.
- Set up priorities and schedule properly.
- Manage your work and free time carefully.

Slow Down

- Be conscious of slowing yourself down.
- Practice things like eating slower and walking slower.
- Relax after meals.
- When someone talks to you using slow speech, repeat to yourself briefly what you hear.
- When doing anything, become more aware of body parts and muscle movements.

