

# How to Handle Stress

Everyone experiences stress. Sometimes it can help you focus and get the task at hand done. But when stress is frequent and intense, it can strain your body and make it impossible to function. Finding effective ways to deal is crucial to living well.

## How Stress Affects You

Stress affects your entire body, mentally as well as physically. Some common signs include:

- Headaches
- Trouble sleeping
- Jaw pain
- Changes in appetite
- Frequent mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling overwhelmed

When experiencing long-term stress, your brain is exposed to increased levels of a hormone called cortisol. This exposure weakens your immune system, making it easier for you to get sick.

Stress can contribute to worsening symptoms of your mental illness. For example, in schizophrenia, it can encourage hallucinations and delusions, while in bipolar disorder, it can trigger episodes of both mania and depression. Knowing what situations may cause it is the first step in coping with this very common experience.

## When You Are Most Vulnerable to Stress

People are most susceptible to stress when they are:

- Not getting enough sleep
- Not having a network of support
- Experiencing a major life change such as moving, the death of a loved one, starting a new job, having a child, or getting married
- Experiencing poor physical health
- Not eating well

Everyone has his own threshold. Certain things that may upset you out might not even make one of your friends raise an eyebrow. Some people are affected when they experience large crowds and noisy environments, while others react to silence and free time.

## Ways to Reduce Stress

Developing a personalized approach to reducing stress can help you manage your mental health condition and improve your quality of life. Once you've learned what your triggers are, experiment with coping strategies. Some common ones include:

- **Accept your needs.** Recognize what your triggers are. What situations make you feel physically and mentally agitated? Once you know this, you can avoid them when it's reasonable to, and to cope when you can't.
- **Manage your time.** Prioritizing your activities can help you use your time well. Making a day-to-day schedule helps ensure you don't feel overwhelmed by everyday tasks and deadlines.
- **Practice relaxation.** Deep breathing, meditation and progressive muscle relaxation are good ways to calm yourself. Taking a break to refocus can have benefits beyond the immediate moment.
- **Interrupt your thought process.** Get away from your stressful area, drink a bottle of cold water or put a fresh mint into your mouth. This may trick your brain to focus on what you are tasting rather than remain on your problem. This is just a quick adjustment and not necessarily a long-lasting intervention.
- **Exercise daily.** Schedule time to walk outside, bike or join a dance class. Whatever you do, make sure it's fun. Daily exercise naturally produces stress-relieving hormones in your body and improves your overall physical health.
- **Set aside time for yourself.** Schedule something that makes you feel good. It might be reading a book, go to the movies, get a massage or take your dog for a walk.
- **Eat well.** Eating unprocessed foods, like whole grains, vegetables, and fresh fruit is the foundation for a healthy body and mind. Eating well can also help stabilize your mood.
- **Get enough sleep.** Symptoms of some mental health conditions, like mania in bipolar disorder, can be triggered by getting too little sleep.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs.** They don't reduce stress: in fact, they often worsen it. If you're struggling with substance abuse, educate yourself and get help.
- **Talk to someone.** Whether to friends, family, a counselor, or a support group, airing out and talking can help.

## Getting Help

If the steps you've taken aren't working, it may be time to share with your mental health professional. He or she can help you pinpoint specific events that trigger you and help you create an action plan to change them.

# Interventions to Manage Stress

These days it's hard not to get overwhelmed occasionally. Between juggling work, family, and other commitments, you can become too stressed out and busy. But you need to set time aside to unwind or your mental and physical health can suffer.

Learning how to manage your stress takes practice, but you can -- and need to -- do it. Here are 10 ways to make it easier.

## 1. Re-balance Work and Home

All work and no play? If you're spending too much time at the office, intentionally put more dates in your calendar to enjoy time for fun, either alone or with others. Break down bigger problems into smaller parts. Take one step at a time.

## 2. Positive Self-Talk

Let's be honest, we all talk to ourselves! Sometimes we talk out loud, but usually we do it in our heads. Self-talk can be positive ("I can do this" or "everything will be OK") or negative ("I'll never get better" or "I'm so stupid"). Negative self-talk increases stress. Positive self-talk can help you calm down and manage stress. With practice, you can learn to shift negative thoughts to positive ones.

## 3. Exercise

Working out regularly is one of the best ways to relax your body and mind. Plus, exercise will improve your mood. But you must do it often for it to pay off.

So how much should you exercise every week?

Work up to 2 hours and 30 minutes of moderately intense exercise like brisk walks or 75 minutes of a more vigorous exercise like swimming laps, jogging or other sports.

Focus on setting fitness goals you can meet so you don't give up. Most of all remember that doing any exercise is better than none.

## 4. Relax Your Muscles

When you're stressed, your muscles get tense. You can help loosen them up on your own and refresh your body by:

- Stretching
- Enjoying a massage
- Taking a hot bath or shower
- Getting a good night's sleep

## **5.Deep Breathing**

Stopping and taking a few deep breaths can take the pressure off you right away. You'll be surprised how much better you feel once you get good at it. Just follow these 5 steps:

1. Sit in a comfortable position with your hands in your lap and your feet on the floor. Or you can lie down.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Imagine yourself in a relaxing place. It can be on the beach, in a beautiful field of grass, or anywhere that gives you a peaceful feeling.
4. Slowly take deep breaths in and out.
5. Do this for 5 to 10 minutes at a time.

## **6.Eat Well**

Eating a regular, well-balanced diet will help you feel better in general. It may also help control your moods. Your meals should be full of vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lean protein for energy. And don't skip any. It's not good for you and can put you in a bad mood, which can actually increase your stress.

## **7.Slow Down**

Modern life is so busy, and sometimes we just need to slow down and chill out. Look at your life and find small ways you can do that. For example:

- Set your watch 5 to 10 minutes ahead. That way you'll get places a little early and avoid the stress of being late.
- When you're driving on the highway, switch to the slow lane so you can avoid road rage.
- Break down big jobs into smaller ones. For example, don't try to answer all 100 emails if you don't have to -- just answer a few of them.

## **8.Take a Break**

You need to plan on some real downtime to give your mind time off from stress. If you're a person who likes to set goals, this may be hard for you at first. But stick with it and you'll look forward to these moments. Restful things you can do include:

- Meditation
- Prayer

- Listening to your favorite music
- Spending time in nature or walk
- Spend time with your pet
- Go somewhere you have never been before
- Take a much-needed vacation

## **9. Make Time for Hobbies**

You need to set aside time for things you enjoy. Try to do something every day that makes you feel good, and it will help relieve your stress. It doesn't have to be a ton of time -- even 15 to 20 minutes will do. Relaxing hobbies include things like:

- Reading
- Knitting
- Doing an art project
- Playing golf
- Watching a movie
- Doing puzzles
- Playing cards and board games

## **10. Talk About Your Problems**

If things are bothering you, talking about them can help lower your stress. You can talk to family members, friends, a trusted clergyman, your doctor, or a therapist.

And you can also talk to yourself. It's called self-talk and we all do it. But in order for self-talk to help reduce stress you need to make sure it's positive and not negative.

So, listen closely to what you're thinking or saying when you're stressed out. If you're giving yourself a negative message, change it to a positive one. For example, don't tell yourself "I can't do this." Tell yourself instead: "I can do this," or "I'm doing the best I can."

## **11. Go Easy on Yourself**

Accept that you can't do things perfectly no matter how hard you try. You also can't control everything in your life. So do yourself a favor and stop thinking you can do so much. And don't forget to keep up your sense of humor. Laughter goes a long way towards making you feel relaxed.

## **12. Eliminate Your Triggers**

Figure out what are the biggest causes of stress in your life. Is it your job, your commute, your schoolwork? If you're able to identify what they are, see if you're able to eliminate them from your life, or at least reduce them.

If you can't identify the main causes of your stress, try keeping a stress journal. Make note of when you become most anxious and see if you can determine a pattern, then find ways to remove or lessen those triggers.