

GUIDELINES THAT WILL HELP YOU

# MANAGE YOUR STRESS

INFORMATION THAT WILL HELP YOU STAY HEALTHY

## SIGNS OF STRESS

To know when you are stressed, tune into your mind and your body. Do you have any of these common signs of stress?

### Physical symptoms:

- back pain and/or muscle aches
- cold, sweaty hands
- fatigue and/or low energy level
- frequent colds / flu
- lack of appetite or overeating
- pounding heart
- skin problems
- stomach upsets

### Emotional symptoms:

- anger
- anxiety or nervousness
- depression
- helpless feeling
- lack of interest in people/activities
- restlessness
- unhappiness for no apparent reason

### Behavioral symptoms:

- desire to be alone
- emotional outbursts
- excess smoking or drinking
- grinding teeth or clenching jaw
- runaway thoughts
- inability to make a decision
- poor concentration or forgetfulness

Any number of symptoms, such as tense muscles, may be early indicators of too much stress. When you feel stress coming on, step back, take a breath and put your stress management techniques to work.

## EVERYONE HAS PERIODS OF STRESS

Everyone has periods of stress. Your stress may be related to relationships at home, with friends or at work; job performance, pressure, layoffs; changes in your finances or personal life. No matter what the cause, all of these sources of stress can contribute to the feeling that you've lost control. Managing stress is a challenge, but it is possible. And that belief can help you get back on top of life again.

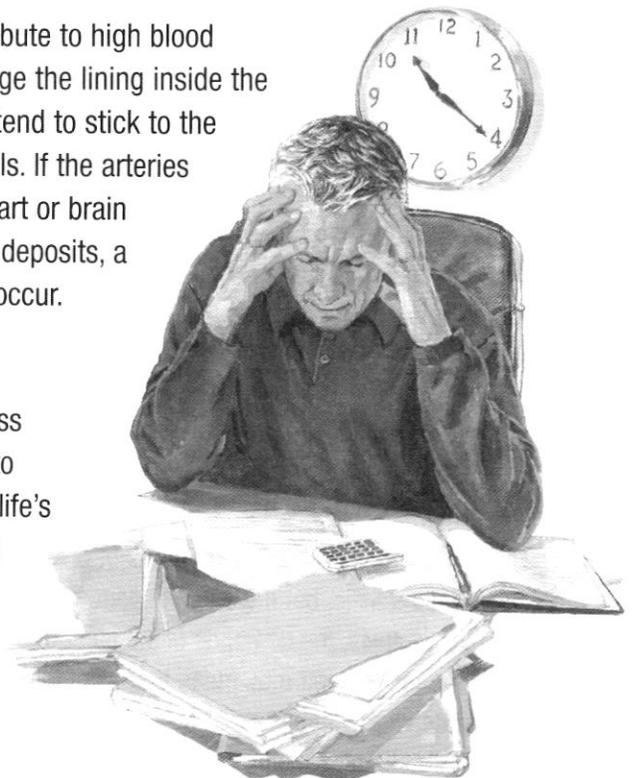
Changes take place in your body when you are stressed. The central nervous system triggers the release of stress chemicals. Blood pressure increases, muscles tense, stored sugars and fats are released into the bloodstream to provide quick energy.

Short-term stress may actually be helpful if it allows you to meet a challenge, then goes away so that you can relax. Sometimes, however, stress gets stuck in high gear — it doesn't go away and you can't relax. **If stress continues for a long time and you don't do anything to manage it, you may "burn out" or become ill.** Unrelieved stress weakens the immune system, making you more susceptible to illnesses ranging from colds to cancer.

Stress also can contribute to high blood pressure, which can damage the lining inside the arteries. Fats in the blood tend to stick to the rough, damaged artery walls. If the arteries that supply blood to the heart or brain become blocked with fatty deposits, a heart attack or stroke can occur.

## LEARNING TO COPE

You can't eliminate stress entirely, but you can learn to cope more effectively with life's demands. Learning to cope will reduce your stress to a manageable level. Start by learning to recognize the signs of stress.



### Healthy choices:

- focus on the positive
- exercise
- make time for fun
- eat healthy foods
- avoid drugs or alcohol
- limit caffeine
- get plenty of sleep

### Quick fixes that don't work:

- self-medicating with drugs or alcohol
- smoking
- eating unhealthy foods
- having too much caffeine
- being inactive
- isolating yourself

## CHANGE YOUR OUTLOOK

Identify negative thoughts that may be contributing to your stress. Be aware of how you talk to yourself. Self talk may be spoken words or unspoken thoughts. If this self talk is negative, you can end up feeling stressed. For example, using words like “I can’t” or “I should have” are self-defeating and will make you feel depressed. When you feel stressed, identify the negative thought you had before the upsetting episode. Changing negative thoughts can help you reduce your stress.

**Focus on the positive.** Take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

## ELIMINATE SOME OF YOUR STRESSORS

**Know your limits.** If you’ve reached the limit of what you can do, say “no” to added responsibilities. Taking on more than you can handle is a recipe for stress. If you’ve already got too much to do, drop the tasks that aren’t really necessary to the bottom of your list or eliminate them. If someone is always causing stress in your life and you can’t turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with the person or end the relationship.

## EXERCISE

Exercise burns stress chemicals and relaxes your body and your mind. Some of the best exercises for counteracting stress are aerobic exercises, like walking, biking, jogging and swimming. If aerobic workouts just aren’t for you, take a basic dance, yoga or tai chi class to get your muscles moving while your mind unwinds.

## MAKE TIME FOR FUN

Most of us are so busy that the thought of taking time for fun seems unrealistic, but if we don’t spend time doing something we enjoy, the demands of life can get us down. Making time for yourself may mean that something else has to go. Decide what you can do to re-arrange activities or eliminate something. We all need to recharge our batteries.

## LEARN HOW TO RELAX

Relaxation involves doing things that help relax your mind and your body. Some people find meditation or yoga helpful. Others like to practice mental imagery, a form of day-dreaming in which you picture yourself in a restful place. Doing deep, slow breathing exercises is also a good way to clear your mind of thoughts and worries. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tightening and relaxing muscle groups throughout your body to help you feel calm. Doing relaxation exercises really does work, but you have to practice. If you have trouble learning to relax, take a stress management class, which will teach you these and other relaxation techniques.

## EAT RIGHT TO INCREASE YOUR STAMINA

Coping with stress can take the form of crunchy potato chips, creamy chocolate or an abundance of anything to eat. Many people opt for fast food or packaged meals to save time. Eating like this can make you feel even worse because these foods are often loaded with fat, calories and sodium. Choose low-fat, low-calorie foods that can be prepared in a short amount of time. If you don’t have much time or much of an appetite, eat several small meals and snacks throughout the day. To increase your stamina, eat more high-protein foods, foods rich in vitamin A, like broccoli and other dark green vegetables and foods rich in vitamin C, like citrus fruits.

## SLEEP

When you’re stressed you may have trouble sleeping. To help you get the rest you need, cut out caffeine. Substitute decaffeinated coffee, tea or soda for caffeinated beverages. Exercise during the day so that you will be tired at bedtime. Don’t read work-related material before bed. If you like to read, choose something light. Go to bed at the same time each night. If you have trouble sleeping, get up and do something until you feel tired. Getting enough sleep will help you be better able to cope with stress.

## DEVELOP A SUPPORT SYSTEM

Sharing problems with friends helps us release built-up pressure and anxiety. The support we get from people who are close to us is invaluable when it comes to managing stress. Accept and return invitations. Return phone calls. Reach out to others to get the support that you need. When stress is overwhelming, more help may be needed. Talking to a professional who specializes in stress counseling or taking a stress management class can give you the extra support you need.