



## KEYS TO EMBRACING AGING

# Stress Management

Everybody experiences both good and bad stress. It can come from mental activity (for example, working on a research paper), emotional activity (for example, having a milestone birthday), or physical activity (for example, walking to school).

The way you interpret stress is unique and personal. For example, what may be relaxing to one person may be stressful to another. Good stress can be healthy and useful. It helps you get to an appointment on time or meet a deadline. But when stress becomes overwhelming, it becomes distress, or bad stress. Bad stress can lead to chronic stress, which can leave you feeling nervous, on-edge, and tense. It also puts you at greater risk for numerous health problems, including heart disease, sleep problems, digestive problems, depression, obesity, memory impairment, and various skin conditions, such as eczema. Learning what causes stress and different ways to cope with it helps you be more balanced and healthy throughout life.

### What is Stress?

Stress is the way your body responds to experiences and events. It helps you rise to a challenge in addition to preparing to meet tough situations with focus, strength, stamina, and heightened alertness. The events that provoke stress are called stressors. Some stressors are caused by negative events, such as a family argument, physical

danger, test anxiety, or concern over finances. But events that you look forward to, such as celebrations, or going to a movie with a friend, are also stressors. Stressors can be single events or a result of multiple events that pile up.

The human body responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The hypothalamus signals the adrenal glands to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol and release them into the bloodstream. These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to large muscle groups, putting muscles on alert. Pupils dilate to improve vision. The liver releases some of its stored glucose to increase the body's energy. And sweat is produced to cool the body. All of these physical changes prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment.

This natural reaction is known as the stress response. Working properly, the body's stress response enhances a person's ability to perform well under pressure. But



the stress response can also cause problems when it overreacts or fails to turn off and reset itself properly.

The stress response (better known as the fight or flight response) is critical during emergency situations, such as when a driver has to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. It can also be activated in a milder form at a time when the pressure's on but there's no actual danger — such as stepping up to take the putt on the final green, getting ready to go to a big dance, or sitting down for a mini-mental status exam. A little of this stress can help keep you on your toes, ready to rise to a challenge. And the nervous system quickly returns to its normal state, standing by to respond again when needed.

But stress doesn't always happen in response to things that are immediate or that are over quickly. Ongoing or long-term events — such as coping with a divorce or moving to a new school, new neighborhood, or assisted living facility — can cause stress, too. Long-term stressful situations can produce a lasting, low-level stress that is hard on people. The nervous system senses continued pressure and may remain slightly activated and continue to pump out extra stress hormones over an extended period. This wears out the body's reserves, leaving a person feeling depleted or overwhelmed, weakening the body's immune system, and causing other problems.

### ***People who are experiencing stress overload may notice:***

- anxiety or panic attacks;
- a feeling of being constantly pressured, hassled, and hurried;
- irritability and moodiness;
- physical symptoms, such as stomach problems, headaches, or even chest pain;
- allergic reactions, such as eczema or asthma;
- problems sleeping;
- drinking too much, smoking, overeating, or doing drugs; and
- sadness or depression.

Everyone experiences stress a little differently. Some people become angry and act out their stress or take it out on others. Some people internalize it and develop eating disorders or substance abuse problems.

## ***Stages of Stress***

The body reacts to stress in three ways:

**Stage 1: Alarm.** Certain hormones are pumped into the bloodstream, which speeds up the heart rate, increases respiration and slows down digestive activity. The body is ready for either fight or flight. Such a situation can lead to stress-related illnesses such as ulcers, headaches, backaches, palpitations of the heart, rashes, and other ailments.

**Stage 2: Resistance and Adaptation.** The body tries to repair the damage caused in stage one and bring the body back to a "normal condition." It is only when stress is not positively dealt with that the third stage occurs.

**Stage 3: Exhaustion.** A person's body cannot be stressed all the time. Release must occur or illness may result.

And some people who have a chronic illness may find that the symptoms of their illness flare up under an overload of stress.

## ***Managing Stress***

While you cannot rid yourselves of stress, you can learn to manage it. The ultimate goal in stress management is to achieve a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun — plus the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet life's stressors head-on.

### ***Identify the sources of stress in your life***

The first step in stress management is to identify the stressors in your life. Are there any stressors you can change by avoiding, reducing exposure to, or eliminating completely? Can you go to work earlier if parking is a problem or organize your time differently so you are not studying for an exam last minute?

### ***Learn healthier ways to manage stress***

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no "one size fits all" solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation; therefore, it is important to experiment with different stress-reduction strategies to lessen your feelings of stress. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

Two common strategies for managing stress include changing the situation and changing your

## How to deal with stressful situations

Change the Situation	Change your Reaction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoid the stressor</li><li>• Alter the stressor</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accept the stressor</li><li>• Adapt to the stressor</li></ul>






response to the situation. If there is a situation that you can identify that causes stress, avoid it. For example, if the crowds and chaos of the state fair make you feel anxious to the point that you do not like to go, stay home instead. In unavoidable situations, such as a holiday dinner with in-laws, you may have to change your reaction. Accept it for what it is, focus on what is really important, adapt to the environment, and move on.

### Stress Management Strategy 1: Change the Situation

- **Evaluate your physical environment.** If the color on the walls affect your mood, or if you are worried about a toddler falling down the stairs or a loved one with dementia wandering out of the house in the middle of the night — modify your environment with paint, gates, or alarms on the door.
- **Take a look at the people in your life.** Is there a person or group of people that really causes you stress? If so, you may need to distance yourself or resign from that organization or group.
- **Review your calendar.** Sometimes stress results from your inability to say “no.” Look at your commitments. Are you doing what you want to do, should do, have to do? If part of your stress is over-committing yourself, pare back. Many commitments and tasks are beneficial, but if it is hurting your health it may not be worth it.

### Stress Management Strategy 2: Change Your Reaction

- **Laugh, don't cry.** Some things you just can't change. These are the things that you need to learn to accept instead of letting them bother you. So your neighbor painted his garage hot pink. Instead of getting worked up when you drive past, accept the pink and laugh at his lack of style.

- **Compromise.** The need to be “right” often interferes with good communication and can cause stress when you are so focused on what the other person is doing. If you ask someone to change, you need to be willing to change yourself.
- **Let it go.** Ask yourself, “Does it really matter? Will it matter in five years?” Sometimes you have to pick your battles. For instance, a mother and child fought most mornings about what the child was going to wear to school. The child chose gym shorts and t-shirts over the mother's choice of “school clothes.” It was causing stress in their relationship as well as starting the day off with ugly confrontation. When the mother finally decided to let it go and allow her child to choose his own clothes, the morning conflict ended. The mother recognized that it really didn't matter if the child wore a t-shirt or a polo shirt, as long as he went to school clean and decent and learned while he was there.

Having realistic expectations of yourself, shifting your focus to looking at what is really important, and taking care of yourself emotionally and physically will also increase your confidence to deal with stressors. Sometimes, taking a deep breath, meditating, relaxing, or taking time to smell the roses allows you to appreciate the little things so you don't overreact to the big things.

## Conclusion

Throughout the lifespan, you face multiple demands, such as peer pressure, school and workloads, relationships issues, making ends meet, taking care of family, or just making it out the door on time. But stress should not rule your life. Learning what causes stress and different ways you can cope with it is a healthy lifestyle behavior that will reduce pressure and anxiety and influence optimal aging.



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