



Live More, Stress Less

Everyone experiences stress in life. Some stress can be healthy and give you a sense of purpose. But, extended periods of high stress can have negative effects on your body and your health. Balancing work, family and finances puts a lot of stress on a person. Let's learn more about stress, the causes and symptoms, and how to cope with it.

Stress is the body's reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. It's something that causes a state of strain or tension. It can be a good thing, like the birth of a baby or a promotion at work or a new job. However, we tend to think of stress in the negative and the things that challenge us mentally or emotionally, as well as physically.

Recognizing early warning signs: Do you ever experience any of these symptoms, and if so, how often? Do they affect how you function in daily life? Do they affect your state of health or wellbeing?

- Physical: fatigue, aching muscles, shortness of breath, cramps
- Behavioral: Insomnia, forgetfulness, nail-biting, nervousness
- Emotional: Anxiety, irritable, depression, no emotional control

Effects of Stress on the Body: Everyone experiences some level of stress. However, extreme or chronic stress can affect your body by increasing risks for the following: high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, irritability, anxiety, depression, headaches, and insomnia.

Effects on Your Digestive System: A spike of adrenaline causes your liver to produce extra blood sugar to increase your energy for fight or flight of the threat. Chronic stress may inhibit your body from keeping up with these extra glucose surges and increase your risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Excessive hormones, rapid breathing, and increased heart rate can also upset your digestive system. Heartburn or acid reflux may arise due to an increase in stomach acid. Chronic stress can also lead to a higher risk for ulcers. Stress can also affect the way food moves through your body, leading to diarrhea or constipation.

Effects on Your Muscular System: Under stress, your muscles tense up to protect themselves from injury. Usually, they will release again once you relax, however if you're constantly under stress, your muscles may not get the chance to relax. Tight muscles cause headaches, back and shoulder pain, and body aches. Over time, this can set off an unhealthy cycle as you may stop exercising and turn to pain medication for relief.

Effects on Your Immune System: Stress stimulates the immune system, which can be a plus for immediate situations to help you avoid infections and heal wounds. But over time, stress hormones will weaken your immune system and reduce your body's response to foreign invaders. People under chronic stress are more susceptible to viral illnesses like the flu and the common cold, as well as other infections. Stress can also increase the time it takes you to recover from an illness or injury.



Techniques to control stress: Some coping strategies center on planning and organizational skills while others may focus more on controlling thoughts, attitudes, emotions and behaviors.

Control events: plan ahead and set priorities. Having a schedule always eases the mind.

Control Attitudes: list accomplishments, set realistic daily goals.

Control Responses: take care of your body, think positive, and relax before bed.

Healthy living can reduce stress: There are several effective ways to manage your stress and help alleviate the negative effects on your health.

- Maintaining a healthy diet - your body works better.
- Balance work and recreation- don't take every day and everything too serious. Make time for yourself and your family/friends/pets.
- Exercise 20 minutes or more a day
- Maintain a sense of humor
- Make time for hobbies or things you enjoy doing
- Avoid too much caffeine and alcohol.
- Limiting internet use and television
- Get enough sleep at night



Stress relieving exercises

Utilize relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, yoga, tai chi or massage. If you can't get away from a stressful situation, here are a few actions you can take in as little as 5 minutes to bring some relief.

- **Deep Breathing:** Inhale deeply, hold for a few seconds, and then release slowly. Repeat.
- **Neck Rolls:** Keeping your shoulders level, drop your chin to your chest and slowly roll your head in circles. Make sure to switch directions.
- **Stand up and Stretch:** Stand up and reach your hands high above your head, then reach down to your knees or your toes.
- **Unknot Your Back:** Sit on the edge of your chair with your feet flat on the floor. Lean forward and put your chest onto your knees, hands and head hanging loosely. Breathe deeply. Slowly roll your back, vertebrae by vertebrae until you feel relief in your back.
- **Relax Completely:** Lie on the floor or sit back in a comfortable chair. Keep your hands at your side or on the arms of the chair. Beginning with your toes and going all the way up to your scalp, visualize/sense each part of your body and tell it to relax. Take your time. Go back over any area that becomes tense again until finally your whole body is relaxed.

Practicing Self-Care and Mindfulness

Practicing self-care and mindfulness are great ways to help reduce stress. Self-care is basically paying attention to supporting your own health physically, mentally, and spiritually. There are 8 dimensions of self-care that you can focus on to help reduce stress.



- **Emotional:** Talk to someone, journal, read, listen to music, laugh, take a nap, take a walk, spend time with your pet, get a massage, take a bath, do something artistic, etc.
- **Environmental:** breathe in fresh air, enjoy the sun, go star gazing, pick up litter, etc.
- **Financial:** create a spending plan, open a savings account, cut back on unnecessary spending, etc.
- **Intellectual:** build a puzzle, try something new, read, listen to audiobooks or podcasts, etc.
- **Occupational:** update your resume, learn a trade, train for a promotion, take a class, etc.
- **Physical:** be active daily, eat healthy, get an annual checkup, see the dentist, sleep, etc.
- **Social:** spend time with friends and family, volunteer, laugh, go out, join a book club, etc.
- **Spiritual:** meditate, pray, be mindful, help those in need, reflect, do right by others, etc.

Mindfulness is helpful practice to support self-care. It essentially means being fully aware of what we are doing and where we are in a relaxed and undistracted state. Mindful eating can be very helpful through this challenge, so here are some ways to practice mindfulness

- Use a hunger scale: While you are eating, continue to place yourself on this scale to avoid over eating.

Starving & light headed	Stomach empty & growling	Stomach feels empty	Starting to feel hungry	Not hungry or full	Slightly satisfied	Almost satisfied	Satisfied & content	Feel too full (stuffed)	Ate way too much
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

- Turn off or silence your devices so you can eat without interruptions.
- Don't eat straight out of the container or bag. Consider what you plan to eat and portion it out before you start eating.
- Serve your food on a smaller plate, bowl or glass to help prevent your perceptions of servings from assuming they are too small.
- Take a moment to appreciate the food in front of you.
- Use all of your senses to note appearances, aromas, textures, flavors, and sounds of your food.
- Set your fork down between bites to help slow your pace. It takes 15-20 minutes for our brains to catch up with our stomachs and signal that we are full.

Remember that not all stress is negative. It is necessary to trigger the flight or fight response in our brain. Continuous stress however can be harmful. Remember to keep checking in on your physical health and stress level. Use some of these techniques to help you focus on reducing your stress level.

Resources:

Mindful: <https://www.mindful.org/6-ways-practice-mindful-eating/>

Harvard Health Publishing: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/8-steps-to-mindful-eating>

“Diabetes Spectrum”, American Diabetes Association:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5556586/>

“Self Care and Wellness: Taking Care of Yourself So You Can Be Your Best,” Ferris State University:

<https://www.ferris.edu/RSS/eccc/tools/wellness.htm>



AHW Lesson Activities

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“Applying the Lesson”

Choose one of the following activities to apply what you learned about your health and your healthy goal setting. Write a short response (3 to 5 sentences) to describe what you did and learned from the activity selected. Report your Applying the Lesson results by Online form, email, fax or hard copy to your county Extension Office.

Option 1: As you experience a stressful situation, select one or more of the stress relieves activities listed throughout the lesson. How does the activity affect your stress level and symptoms of stress?

Option 2: What are some of your major stressors in life? What are some ways to help ease your tension around those topics?

Option 3: Your key to distressing. Pick one activity this week you enjoy and helps you unwind. How does engaging in this activity help you to alleviate some of your stress?