

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress can be a reaction to a short-lived situation, such as being stuck in traffic. Or it can last a long time if you're dealing with relationship problems, a spouse's death or other serious situations. Stress becomes dangerous when it interferes with your ability to live a normal life over an extended period. You may feel tired, unable to concentrate or irritable. Stress can also damage your physical health.

Six myths about stress

Six myths surround stress. Dispelling them enables us to understand our problems and then take action against them. Let's look at these myths.

Myth 1: Stress is the same for everybody.

Completely wrong. Stress is different for each of us. What is stressful for one person may or may not be stressful for another; each of us responds to stress in an entirely different way.

Myth 2: Stress is always bad for you.

According to this view, zero stress makes us happy and healthy. Wrong. Stress is to the human condition what tension is to the violin string: too little and the music is dull and raspy; too much and the music is shrill or the string snaps. Stress can be the kiss of death or the spice of life. The issue, really, is how to manage it. Managed stress makes us productive and happy; mismanaged stress hurts and even kills us.

Myth 3: Stress is everywhere, so you can't do anything about it.

Not so. You can plan your life so that stress does not overwhelm you. Effective planning involves setting priorities and working on simple problems first, solving them, and then going on to more complex difficulties. When stress is mismanaged, it's difficult to prioritize. All your problems seem to be equal and stress seems to be everywhere.

Myth 4: The most popular techniques for reducing stress are the best ones.

Again, not so. No universally effective stress reduction techniques exist. We are all different, our lives are different, our situations are different, and our reactions are different. Only a comprehensive program tailored to the individual works.

Myth 5: No symptoms, no stress.

Absence of symptoms does not mean the absence of stress. In fact, camouflaging symptoms with medication may deprive you of the signals you need for reducing the strain on your physiological and psychological systems.

Myth 6: Only major symptoms of stress require attention.

This myth assumes that the "minor" symptoms, such as headaches or stomach acid, may be safely ignored. Minor symptoms of stress are the early warnings that your life is getting out of hand and that you need to do a better job of managing stress.

Stress Tip Sheet

In today's fast-paced and ever-connected world, stress has become a fact of life. Stress can cause people to feel overwhelmed or pushed to the limit. The American Psychological Association's 2007 "Stress in America" poll found that one-third of people in the U.S. report experiencing extreme levels of stress. In addition, nearly one-in-five report that they are experiencing high levels of stress 15 or more days per month. While low to moderate levels of stress can be good for you when managed in healthy ways, extreme stress takes both an emotional and physical toll on the individual.

With the consequences of poorly managed stress ranging from fatigue to heart disease and obesity, it is important to know how to recognize high stress levels and take action to handle it in healthy ways. Being able to control stress is a learned behavior, and stress can be effectively managed by taking small steps toward changing unhealthy behaviors.

TIPS ON HOW TO MANAGE STRESS:

Understand how you stress. Everyone experiences stress differently. How do you know when you are stressed? How are your thoughts or behaviors different from times when you do not feel stressed?

Identify your sources of stress. What events or situations trigger stressful feelings? Are they related to your children, family, health, financial decisions, work, relationships or something else?

Learn your own stress signals. People experience stress in different ways. You may have a hard time concentrating or making decisions, feel angry, irritable or out of control, or experience headaches, muscle tension or a lack of energy. Gauge your stress signals.

Recognize how you deal with stress. Determine if you are using unhealthy behaviors (such as smoking, drinking alcohol and over/under eating) to cope. Is this a routine behavior, or is it specific to certain events or situations? Do you make unhealthy choices as a result of feeling rushed and overwhelmed?

Find healthy ways to manage stress. Consider healthy, stress-reducing activities such as meditation, exercising or talking things out with friends or family. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Don't take on too much at once. Focus on changing only one behavior at a time.

Take care of yourself. Eat right, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water and engage in regular physical activity. Ensure you have a healthy mind and body through activities like yoga, taking a short walk, going to the gym or playing sports that will enhance both your physical and mental health. Take regular vacations or other breaks from work. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself — even if it's just simple things like reading a good book or listening

to your favorite music.

Reach out for support. Accepting help from supportive friends and family can improve your ability to manage stress. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.