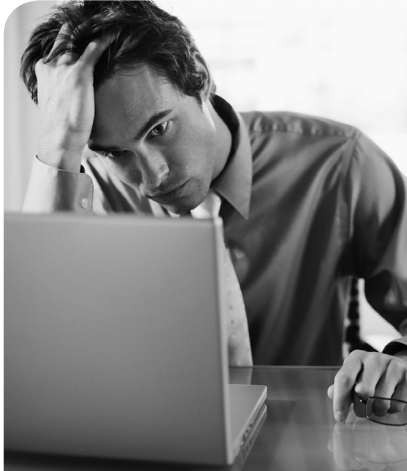




Stress

Coping with a common problem



Stress is a natural part of life. And in small doses, it's a good thing. Stress energizes and motivates you to deal with challenges. But prolonged and excessive stress can have a negative impact on both your psychological and physical health. Stress can be physical like when you've had too little sleep, haven't eaten properly, been ill or have too much to do. Stress can also be emotional.

There are generally 3 types of stress:

- Routine Stress—caused by the daily pressures of work, school, family and other responsibilities.
- Stress brought on by a sudden change such as losing a job, divorce or a loved one's illness.
- Traumatic Stress—like that experienced in a major accident, war or natural disaster.

How your body responds

The body reacts to various types of stress in similar ways. But the body's response can differ from person to person. Some people experience headaches, insomnia, fatigue or mood swings. Others experience digestive upsets, teeth grinding or a pounding heart.

Exposure to chronic stress causes long-term activation of the stress response system. This can result in your body producing too much cortisol (a primary stress

hormone). Cortisol is necessary for the body to react in stressful situations because it enhances the brain's functions. But in order to give the brain extra energy, cortisol also suppresses the digestive system and alters the immune system. Chronic stress puts you at increased risk of:

- More frequent and severe viral infections
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Sleep problems
- Depression
- Obesity
- Memory impairment
- Worsening of skin conditions such as eczema

Know your triggers

Causes of stress also vary. They can be as simple and short-term as watching a scary movie or getting stuck in traffic. There is routine stress that can be triggered by day-to-day activities such as

getting the kids off to school, commuting to and from work and the pressures of a day at work.

Stress can be brought on by a sudden negative change such as a divorce, change in economic status or a serious illness. Some changes, although not negative, can still be extremely stressful such as children leaving home or going off to college, switching jobs or preparing for a wedding.

An example of a traumatic stress incident could be the death of a loved one or being involved in a major accident or physical assault.

One of the most important ways of dealing with stress is to know your triggers. It may not be as obvious as having to give a speech in public or drive in a snow storm. It could be having to help a son or daughter who is struggling in school. It could be financial worries that won't go away. The pressure of trying to succeed at work and family life and just



“getting it all done” could be your stress. Try to be more specific. Is it a particular assignment or project at work? Is it the morning routine of having to get everyone out the door on time?

If you know exactly what it is that you are stressed about, you can attempt to fix that stress and call on others for help. If the morning rush is the issue, try prepping lunches, backpacks or briefcases the night before. Although it feels like an added chore at night, it makes a world of difference in the morning. One of the best ways to deal with work stress is to learn to better manage your time and prioritize your tasks. Be realistic about what you can accomplish. Confide with a colleague you can trust about the issue you are facing. Sometimes getting another point of view or just talking to someone can be helpful.

■ Coping with stress

There are many unhealthy ways to deal with stress. Drinking, smoking and eating a diet high in sugar and fat are some of them. They will only add to your stress in the long run. Learn to avoid these quick fixes to handling stress and instead focus on more positive changes.

Some suggestions for healthy ways to deal with stress triggers you cannot eliminate.

- Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly. A nutritious and well-balanced diet and exercise can keep your body fit and able to resist disease. Exercise in any form, whether you are an athlete or down right out of shape, is a great, simple way to boost your mood. It triggers endorphins—your brain’s feel good neurotransmitters. Regular exercise can increase self-confidence and lower symptoms associated with anxiety and stress.
- Remember, no one can do it all alone, ask family, friends co-workers for help.
- Talk to someone you trust about your stressful situation.
- Use relaxation techniques to calm your mind and body. A simple technique you can do in your chair is to focus on breathing regularly and say a word such as “relax” or “peace” aloud or silently until your muscles and mind are relaxed. There are also muscle relaxation techniques you can try. Focus on a muscle group such as your face, clench your muscles, furrow your brow and hold for 5 seconds then relax. Continue with muscle groups all the way down your body to your toes.
- Get professional help if you need it.

Stress is part of life; it’s how you handle it that will keep you healthy.