

Stop the Stress

Stress and Your Body

When was the last time you reacted to the pressure of studying for an important exam by stuffing yourself with cookies, downing countless cups of coffee, or drinking a little too much beer? When was the last time you “beat yourself up” verbally for waiting until the last minute to cram for that test?

Overeating, undereating, and excess alcohol and caffeine consumption are a few of the many ways we cope with the pressures of daily life. Ironically, these behaviors and others familiar to us all, such as procrastination and verbal self-abuse, rarely reduce the stress. More often they cause us to feel worse.

What Is Stress?

Stress is a mental, physical, and behavioral response to a variety of stimuli. Contrary to popular belief, stress is not necessarily caused by an acutely upsetting event. Stress actually results from everyday experiences, as well as unexpected changes.

How Does Stress Affect My Body?

Stress activates the nervous system and the endocrine (or hormonal) system. If stimulation is prolonged, changes in the following body systems can occur: muscular, digestive, cardiovascular, skin, endocrine, and brain. Stress can cause physical and mental exhaustion and may increase your likelihood of developing disease. Some health professionals believe individuals who view stress in a positive manner may not suffer the negative effects associated with it.

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How Can I Reduce My Stress?

- **Time Management**

This improves your ability to use time efficiently and effectively. It also helps deal with one of the greatest time robbers – procrastination. Tips include:

1. Make a daily To Do List to get a clear picture of what you need to accomplish for that day. Select the same time every day to write your list.
2. Keep the list realistic. That means short – no more than 5-8 items.
3. Prioritize the items using A to denote the most important tasks, B for medium priority, and C for low priority. Focus your effort on getting A tasks done, even if the Cs seem easier. You will get more value from your time by completing two A tasks rather than eight C tasks.
4. Schedule time on your calendar to do the tasks on your To Do List.

- **Exercise**

Exercise is an excellent way to release the energy generated by stress. Exercise also produces endorphins – natural pain relievers – that help you feel relaxed and energized after a workout.

- **Relaxation Techniques**

Controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, yoga, and meditation are all effective methods for reducing stress.

- **Accept What You Cannot Change**

If a problem is beyond your control, let it go. Some things cannot be predicted or planned. It is best to work within the limitations of the situation.

- **Get Support**

When your stress level is high, share your concern with friends and family. Also, help them when they need support.

For additional tips about managing stress, please visit www.snac.ucla.edu.

DEALING WITH DAILY STRESS

Stress is a physiological, psychological, and behavioral response to change. This change may be positive or negative, and your responses may be helpful or maladaptive. A moderate level of stress motivates you to meet the challenges of life. A temporary burst of adrenaline helps you study for an important exam or face an intimidating situation. Ideally, this physiological and mental arousal will subside when the stressful event is over. However, prolonged stress can interfere with your health and performance, leading to physical and mental exhaustion and illness.

Know When You're Overly Stressed

The symptoms below may indicate excess levels of stress. If you or a friend is experiencing prolonged stress symptoms, you may want to try management techniques or seek counseling.

- Problems eating or sleeping
- Increased boredom or fatigue
- Inability to concentrate
- Excessive gum chewing or tooth decay
- Impatience, frustration, or anger over uncontrollable annoyances
- Disrupted relationships and feelings of isolation
- Any unwanted change in behavior
- Increased use of alcohol or other drugs
- Frequent headaches, backaches, muscle aches, or stomach upsets
- Frequent illnesses, accidents, or injuries

TIPS TO MANAGE STRESS

Try the following techniques to manage short-term and long-term stress reactions. These techniques may be helpful alone or in combination, depending on the situation. The full benefits of stress management may not be immediately visible, but with patience and practice you can design a successful stress-management program.

Overcome Procrastination

One of the biggest time management obstacles is the natural tendency to procrastinate. Procrastination is usually related to fear that the task is overwhelming, unpleasant, or that the results will be negative. Usually these fears are imaginary. Most people discover that once they get started, the activity is not as difficult or unpleasant as anticipated. Here are some tips for taking that most difficult step – getting started.

1. **Chunking** – Break the big tasks into several smaller pieces. Set a time limit or “check point” for each piece to help pace yourself.
2. **Leading Tasks** – Pre-plan two to three very easy activities related to the task, which you can quickly do to get you started.
3. **Environmental Control** – Set up your environment to decrease distractions and interruptions. This may include taking the phone off the hook and placing a “do not disturb” sign on your door.



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4. **Follow the five-minute rule** – Make a commitment to spend five minutes on the task before deciding whether to continue. Usually, once you have spent five minutes, you will find that you are “on a roll” and will be able to continue.
5. **Breaks** – Plan to take a ten-minute break after every 45-50 minutes spent on a thinking activity. This will help to prevent burn-out and overload.

Exercise

Physical activity is an excellent way to release the negative energy associated with stress. Jogging, aerobic dance, or swimming are effective methods for relieving stress, and they also aid in weight management. A brisk walk is a great idea for a study break.

Relax

Controlled breathing—When you are under stress, your breathing tends to become shallow, and your muscles tighten. By breathing deeply from your diaphragm, you lessen muscle tension. Sit or lie down, close your eyes, and make yourself comfortable. Place one hand on your abdomen, and breathe deeply. Feel your hand rise and fall as you breathe in and out.

Progressive muscle relaxation—This technique involves first tightening muscles that are stiff and then relaxing them. Lie or sit comfortably and close your eyes. Clench your fingers together and form a tight fist. Hold this for 5-10 seconds and then relax. You can apply this procedure to all muscle groups. Start with your facial muscles, and work your way down to your toes.

Guided imagery, yoga, and meditation—These methods reduce stress through relaxation.

Laugh

Various brain centers are involved with the laughter response, and studies have shown that neurons containing natural painkillers (endorphins) are in many of the brain centers related to laughter. Therefore, a good laugh can create a natural high and relieve the stress experienced in everyday life.

Think Positively

When you predict negative outcomes, your body responds by preparing for failure or distress. Imagine yourself performing well in difficult situations. Not only will you increase your likelihood of success, but you will probably enjoy facing challenges more if you believe you can manage them well.

Take a Break

Escape temporarily from a stressful situation in order to regain your patience and energy. Allow yourself to enjoy these necessary breaks, then re-approach the problem.

Get Support

Build relationships with friends whose company you enjoy. Maintain balance by taking time to have fun with these friends, and allow yourself to lean on them when you need support. Also, be prepared to help them when they are overloaded.