



Managing stress for long-term health

We all face stress on a day-to-day basis. But how you deal with it can have big effects on your health. The body typically responds to stress as though you are in danger, making a hormone that speeds up your heart. This allows you to breathe faster in preparation for a mad dash. It's known as the "fight-or-flight" stress response.

Some stress is normal and even useful. It can help if you need to work hard or react quickly. But chronic or frequent stress can result in headaches, an upset stomach, back pain, or insomnia. It can also weaken your immune system, making you more prone to disease.

One study, conducted by the University of California, San Francisco's psychiatry department, shows that chronic stress may speed up the aging process, while stress management might slow it down.

What to do about stress: Five things you can try

The good news is that you can learn ways to manage stress. The Mayo Clinic reports that causes of stress are as varied as the individual. What relieves stress for one person might cause stress for another.

To get stress under control, consider the following techniques:

- 1 Recognize the stress triggers in your life.** Try keeping a journal or simply list the demands on your time for one week. What seemed to cause stress? How did you react? Take some time to look at the things that are causing you stress and select one of them to work on using problem-solving techniques.
- 2 Look for ways to reduce the amount of stress.** Take control of your surroundings. Is traffic bothering you? Leave early or take the longer, less-travelled route. Learn to say "no" to extra responsibilities or demands on your time that are not as important to you. Other techniques include talking it out, practicing positive self-talk, and looking at a bad day as comical. In other words, laugh a little more.
- 3 Improve your time management skills.** Effective time management can help you set priorities and minimize stress in your life. Use a planner. Create realistic expectations and deadlines for yourself.
- 4 Unplug.** Aside from physically unplugging from your cell phone or laptop, unplug from the demands of day-to-day life. Watch the news a little less. Take a walk. Make time for the relaxing things in life you enjoy.
- 5 Adapt.** One of the greatest stressors, according to the Mayo Clinic, is when you think you can't cope with a given situation. Adapting involves changing your standards or expectations. This may include redefining cleanliness, success, and satisfaction. Doing so can help reduce feelings of frustration or guilt.

Obviously, one technique doesn't work for every situation. You can't avoid all stressors, nor can you control all situations. Choose your battles wisely. A good diet, plenty of exercise, and 7-8 hours of sleep a night also keeps your body and mind in a healthier state to cope with stress.