



Healthy Lifestyle

Stress management

Chronic stress can wreak havoc on your mind and body. Take steps to control your stress.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Your body is hard-wired to react to stress in ways meant to protect you against threats from predators and other aggressors. Such threats are rare today, but that doesn't mean that life is free of stress.

On the contrary, you likely face many demands each day, such as taking on a huge workload, paying the bills and taking care of your family. Your body treats these so-called minor hassles as threats. As a result, you may feel as if you're constantly under attack. But you can fight back. You don't have to let stress control your life.

When you encounter a perceived threat — such as a large dog barking at you during your morning walk — your hypothalamus, a tiny region at your brain's base, sets off an alarm system in your body. Through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts your adrenal glands, located atop your kidneys, to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues.

Cortisol also curbs functions that would be nonessential or harmful in a fight-or-flight situation. It alters immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and growth processes. This complex natural alarm system also communicates with the brain regions that control mood, motivation and fear.

The body's stress response system is usually self-limiting. Once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels return to normal. As adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.

But when stressors are always present and you constantly feel under attack, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on.

The long-term activation of the stress response system and the overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones that follows can disrupt almost all your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk of many health problems, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Headaches
- Muscle tension and pain
- Heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure and stroke
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Memory and concentration impairment

That's why it's so important to learn healthy ways to cope with your life stressors.

Your reaction to a potentially stressful event is different from anyone else's. How you react to your life stressors is affected by such factors as:

- **Genetics.** The genes that control the stress response keep most people on a fairly steady emotional level, only occasionally priming the body for fight or flight. Overactive or underactive stress responses may stem from slight differences in these genes.
- **Life experiences.** Strong stress reactions sometimes can be traced to traumatic events. People who were neglected or abused as children tend to be particularly vulnerable to stress. The same is true of airplane crash survivors, military personnel, police officers and firefighters, and people who have experienced violent crime.

You may have some friends who seem relaxed about almost everything and others who react strongly to the slightest stress. Most people react to life stressors somewhere between those extremes.

Stressful events are facts of life. And you may not be able to change your current situation. But you can take steps to manage the impact these events have on you.

You can learn to identify what causes you stress and how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally in the face of stressful situations.

Stress management strategies include:

- Eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise and getting plenty of sleep
- Practicing relaxation techniques such as yoga, deep breathing, massage or meditation
- Keeping a journal and writing about your thoughts or what you're grateful for in your life
- Taking time for hobbies, such as reading, listening to music, or watching your favorite show or movie
- Fostering healthy friendships and talking with friends and family

- Having a sense of humor and finding ways to include humor and laughter in your life, such as watching funny movies or looking at joke websites
- Volunteering in your community
- Organizing and prioritizing what you need to accomplish at home and work and removing tasks that aren't necessary
- Seeking professional counseling, which can help you develop specific coping strategies to manage stress

Avoid unhealthy ways of managing your stress, such as using alcohol, tobacco, drugs or excess food. If you're concerned that your use of these products has increased or changed due to stress, talk to your doctor.

The rewards for learning to manage stress can include peace of mind, less stress and anxiety, a better quality of life, improvement in conditions such as high blood pressure, better self-control and focus, and better relationships. And it might even lead to a longer, healthier life.

Show References

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