

Stress Management



Marshfield Clinic



MINISTRY HEALTH CARE



Two Leaders, One Leading Heart Care Team



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More and more studies are showing evidence suggesting a link between cardiovascular disease and stress. Though stress is not yet scientifically proven as a risk factor for heart disease, managing it makes sense for your overall health. Uncontrolled, stress may affect other risk factors and behaviors such as high blood pressure

and cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating.

What is Stress?

Stress is the “wear and tear” our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment. It has physical and emotional effects which can be good or bad for us. Hans Selye, one of the founding fathers of stress research, said, “stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative, successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental.” Positive influences can excite and move us into action. Negative influences can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger or depression. These, in turn, can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. We are constantly adjusting our lives to new circumstances such as the birth of a child, a job promotion or a new relationship. The way in which we adjust will determine if stress will help or hinder us.

How Can I Eliminate Stress from My Life?

Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life; we all thrive under a certain amount of it. Our goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage and use it to our benefit. Not enough stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected; excessive stress may leave us feeling “tied up in knots.” What we need is to find a balance which will motivate, not overwhelm us.

What Is Right For Me?

There is no single level of stress that is just right for all people. We are individual creatures with unique requirements. As such, what is distressing to one may be a joy to another. And even when we agree that a particular event is distressing, we are likely to differ in our physical and emotional responses to it.

The person who loves to arbitrate disputes and moves from job site to job site would be stressed in a job which was stable and routine. On the other hand, the person who needs stable, routine conditions would likely be stressed on a job where duties were highly varied. The amount we can tolerate before we become distressed changes with age.



It has been found that many illnesses are related to unrelieved stress. If you are experiencing stress symptoms, you have gone beyond your optimal stress level; you need to reduce the stress in your life and/or improve your ability to manage it.



How Can I Manage Stress Better?

Becoming aware of our unrelieved stress and its effect on our lives is not enough to prevent harmful effects. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many different ways to manage it. However, all of them require work toward changing the source and/or your reaction to it.

Here are some things you can do:

Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions

- Notice your distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over your problems.
- Determine what events bother you. What are you telling yourself about the meaning of these events?
- Determine how your body responds to the stress.
- Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?

Recognize what you can change

- Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?
- Can you reduce their intensity? Try managing them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis.
- Can you shorten your exposure to stress – by taking a break, leaving the physical premises?
- Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change? Goal setting, time management techniques and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here.





Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress

- The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger – physical and/or emotional. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
- Are you expecting to please everyone?
- Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent? Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?
- Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.
- Try to temper your excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and “what ifs.”

Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress

- Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal.
- Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback can help you gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart rate and blood pressure. Medications, when prescribed by a physician, can help in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer. Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution.



Build your physical reserves

- Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling or jogging).
- Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
- Maintain your ideal weight.
- Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine and other stimulants.
- Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can.
- Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.

Maintain your emotional reserves

- Develop mutually supportive friendships/relationships.
- Pursue realistic goals which are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you.
- Expect some frustrations, failures and sorrows.
- Always be kind and gentle with yourself – be your own friend.





Keep a stress diary

- Keep a log of stressful events. Record when, where, what and how it happened. Indicate your response to the situation (e.g. anger, frustration, tearful, etc.). Record how you handled it and how you felt when it was done.
- Stress diaries help you to get a good understanding of the routine, short-term stressors that occur day to day. They help identify the most important and frequent ones you experience and where to concentrate your efforts. They also help identify areas in which you need to improve stress management skills and understand the level of stress at which you are happiest and most efficient.

Overall, managing your stress is good for your health. Find what works best for you and commit to a healthier lifestyle. You'll be happy you did.

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