



Stress Management

Using Self-Help Techniques for Dealing with Stress



It may seem like there's nothing you can do about stress. The bills won't stop coming, there will never be more hours in the day, and your work and family responsibilities will always be demanding. But you have a lot more control than you might think. In fact, the simple realization that you're in control of your life is the foundation of stress management. Stress management is all about taking charge: of your lifestyle, thoughts, emotions, and the way you deal with problems. No matter how stressful your life seems, there are steps you can take to relieve the pressure and regain control.

Why is it important to learn how to manage stress?

If you're living with high levels of stress, you're putting your entire well-being at risk. Stress wreaks havoc on your emotional equilibrium, as well as your physical health. It narrows your ability to think clearly, function effectively, and enjoy life.

Effective stress management, on the other hand, helps you break the hold stress has on your life, so you can be happier, healthier, and more productive. The ultimate goal is a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun—and the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on. But stress management is not one-size-fits-all. That's why it's important to experiment and find out what works best for you. The following stress management tips can help you do that.

Tip 1: Identify the sources of stress in your life

Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This isn't as straightforward as it sounds. While it's easy to identify major stressors such as changing jobs, moving, or a going through a divorce, pinpointing the sources of chronic stress can be more complicated. It's all too easy to overlook how your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors contribute to your everyday stress levels. Sure, you may know that you're constantly worried about work deadlines, but maybe it's your procrastination, rather than the actual job demands, that is causing the stress.

To identify your true sources of stress, look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses:

- ▶ Do you explain away stress as temporary (“I just have a million things going on right now”) even though you can't remember the last time you took a breather?
- ▶ Do you define stress as an integral part of your work or home life (“Things are always crazy around here”) or as a part of your personality (“I have a lot of nervous energy, that's all”)?
- ▶ Do you blame your stress on other people or outside events, or view it as entirely normal and unexceptional?

Until you accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining it, your stress level will remain outside your control.

Start a stress journal

A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the way you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, keep track of it in your journal. As you keep a daily log, you will begin to see patterns and common themes. Write down:

- What caused your stress (make a guess if you're unsure)
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally
- How you acted in response
- What you did to make yourself feel better

Tip 2: Replace unhealthy coping strategies with healthy ones

Think about the ways you currently manage and cope with stress in your life. Your stress journal can help you identify them. Are your coping strategies healthy or unhealthy, helpful or unproductive? Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that compound the problem.

Unhealthy ways of coping with stress

- Smoking
- Using pills or drugs to relax
- Drinking too much
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Bingeing on junk or comfort food

- Procrastinating
- Zoning out for hours looking at your phone
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- Sleeping too much
- Taking out your stress on others

If your methods of coping with stress aren't contributing to your greater emotional and physical health, it's time to find healthier ones. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

Tip 3: Practice the 4 A's

While stress is an automatic response from your nervous system, some stressors arise at predictable times—your commute to work, a meeting with your boss, or family gatherings, for example. When handling such predictable stressors, you can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose in any given scenario, it's helpful to think of the four A's: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

The four A's - Avoid, Alter, Adapt & Accept

Avoid unnecessary stress

The four A's - Avoid, Alter, Adapt & Accept

It's not healthy to avoid a stressful situation that needs to be addressed, but you may be surprised by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

Learn how to say "no." Know your limits and stick to them. Whether in your personal or professional life, taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress. Distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts" and, when possible, say "no" to taking on too much.

Avoid people who stress you out. If someone consistently causes stress in your life, limit the amount of time you spend with that person, or end the relationship.

Take control of your environment. If the evening news makes you anxious, turn off the TV. If traffic makes you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore do your grocery shopping online.

Pare down your to-do list. Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the "shoulds" and the "musts." Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.

Alter the situation

If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

Express your feelings instead of bottling them up. If something or someone is bothering you, be more assertive and communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you've got an exam to study for and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you only have five minutes to talk. If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the stress will increase.

Be willing to compromise. When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground.

The four A's - Avoid, Alter, Adapt & Accept

Create a balanced schedule. All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Try to find a balance between work and family life, social activities and solitary pursuits, daily responsibilities and downtime.

Adapt to the stressor

If you can't change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.

Reframe problems. Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.

Look at the big picture. Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere.

Adjust your standards. Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with "good enough."

Practice gratitude. When stress is getting you down, take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

Accept the things you can't change

Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can't prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change.

Don't try to control the uncontrollable. Many things in life are beyond our control—particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.

The four A's - Avoid, Alter, Adapt & Accept

Look for the upside. When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.

Learn to forgive. Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.

Share your feelings. Expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic, even if there's nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist.

Tip 4: Get moving

When you're stressed, the last thing you probably feel like doing is getting out and exercising. But physical activity is a huge stress reliever—and you don't have to be an athlete or spend hours in a gym to experience the benefits. Exercise releases endorphins that make you feel good, and it can also serve as a valuable distraction from your daily worries.

While you'll get the most benefit from regularly exercising for 30 minutes or more, it's okay to build up your fitness level gradually. Even very small activities can add up over the course of a day. The first step is to get yourself up and moving. Here are some [easy ways to incorporate exercise into your daily schedule](/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm):

- ▶ Put on some music and dance around
- ▶ Take your dog for a walk
- ▶ Walk or cycle to the grocery store
- ▶ Use the stairs at home or work rather than an elevator
- ▶ Park your car in the farthest spot in the lot and walk the rest of the way
- ▶ Pair up with an exercise partner and encourage each other as you work out
- ▶ Play ping-pong or an activity-based video game with your kids

The stress-busting magic of mindful rhythmic exercise

While just about any form of physical activity can help burn away tension and stress, rhythmic activities are especially effective. Good choices include walking, running, swimming, dancing, cycling, tai chi, and aerobics. But whatever you choose, make sure it's something you enjoy so you're more likely to stick with it.

While you're exercising, make a conscious effort to pay attention to your body and the physical (and sometimes emotional) sensations you experience as you're moving. Focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements, for example, or notice how the air or sunlight feels on your skin. Adding this mindfulness element will help you break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that often accompanies overwhelming stress.

Tip 5: Connect to others

There is nothing more calming than spending quality time with another human being who makes you feel safe and understood. In fact, face-to-face interaction triggers a cascade of hormones that counteracts the body's defensive "fight-or-flight" response. It's nature's natural stress reliever (as an added bonus, it also helps stave off depression and anxiety). So make it a point to connect regularly—and in person—with family and friends.

Keep in mind that the people you talk to don't have to be able to fix your stress. They simply need to be good listeners. And try not to let worries about looking weak or being a burden keep you from opening up. The people who care about you will be flattered by your trust. It will only strengthen your bond.

Of course, it's not always realistic to have a pal close by to lean on when you feel overwhelmed by stress, but by building and maintaining a network of close friends you can improve your resiliency to life's stressors.

Tips for building relationships

1. Reach out to a colleague at work
2. Help someone else by volunteering
3. Have lunch or coffee with a friend
4. Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly
5. Accompany someone to the movies or a concert
6. Call or email an old friend
7. Go for a walk with a workout buddy

8. Schedule a weekly dinner date
9. Meet new people by taking a class or joining a club
10. Confide in a clergy member, teacher, or sports coach

Tip 6: Make time for fun and relaxation



Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by carving out “me” time. Don’t get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you’ll be in a better place to handle life’s stressors.

Set aside leisure time. Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don’t allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries.

Do something you enjoy every day. Make time for leisure activities that bring you joy, whether it be stargazing, playing the piano, or working on your bike.

Keep your sense of humor. This includes the ability to laugh at yourself. The act of laughing helps your body fight stress in a number of ways.

Consider taking up a relaxation practice

Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body’s relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the fight or flight or mobilization stress response. As you [learn and practice these techniques](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm), your stress levels will decrease and your mind and body will become calm and centered.

Develop a "stress relief toolbox"

Come up with a list of healthy ways to relax and recharge. Try to implement one or more of these ideas each day, even if you're feeling good.

- Go for a walk
- Spend time in nature
- Call a good friend
- Sweat out tension with a workout
- Write in your journal
- Take a long bath
- Light scented candles
- Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea
- Play with a pet
- Work in your garden
- Get a massage
- Curl up with a good book
- Listen to music
- Watch a comedy

Tip 7: Manage your time better

Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. Plus, you'll be tempted to avoid or cut back on all the healthy things you should be doing to keep stress in check, like socializing and getting enough sleep. The good news: there are things you can do to achieve a more healthy work-life balance.

Don't over-commit yourself. Avoid scheduling things back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day. All too often, we underestimate how long things will take.

Prioritize tasks. Make a list of tasks you have to do, and tackle them in order of importance. Do the high-priority items first. If you have something particularly unpleasant to do, get it over with early. The rest of your day will be more pleasant as a result.

Break projects into small steps. If a large project seems overwhelming, make a step-by-step plan. Focus on one manageable step at a time, rather than taking on everything at once.

Delegate responsibility. You don't have to do it all yourself, whether at home, school, or on the job. If other people can take care of the task, why not let them? Let go of the desire to control or oversee every little step. You'll be letting go of unnecessary stress in the process.

Tip 8: Maintain balance with a healthy lifestyle

In addition to regular exercise, there are other healthy lifestyle choices that can increase your resistance to stress.

Eat a healthy diet. Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress, so be mindful of what you eat. Start your day right with breakfast, and keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day.

Reduce caffeine and sugar. The temporary "highs" caffeine and sugar provide often end in with a crash in mood and energy. By reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugar snacks in your diet, you'll feel more relaxed and you'll sleep better.

Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief is only temporary. Don't avoid or mask the issue at hand; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind.

Get enough sleep. Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally.

Related HelpGuide articles

- [Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes: \(/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm\)](/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm) The Harmful Effects of Stress and What You Can Do About It
- [How to Stop Worrying: \(/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm\)](/articles/anxiety/how-to-stop-worrying.htm) Self-Help Tips for Relieving Anxiety, Worry, and Fear
- [How to Start Exercising and Stick to It: \(/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm\)](/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm) Making Exercise an Enjoyable Part of Your Everyday Life
- [Healthy Eating: \(/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm\)](/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm) Tips for Planning, Enjoying, and Sticking to a Healthy Diet
- [Getting Better Sleep: \(/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm\)](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) Tips for Getting a Good Night's Sleep

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