

IS STRESS MAKING YOU *SICK?*



You can learn to manage
your stress.

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Everyone knows what stress is. It's part of a challenging life.

Some challenges are good for you—they keep you on your toes and make life exciting. For some people, however, challenges can lead to non-stop stress, which can lead to health problems and make many illnesses worse. For others, stress alone can cause symptoms that can be scary or even dangerous.

It's often hard for people and their doctors to figure out if stress might be causing a physical symptom. Even if two people have the same symptom, one person might have a physical illness, while the other person's illness is caused by stress.

This booklet will help you be aware of stress and its effects on your health. See if any of the types of stress we describe apply to you. If they do, we have ways to help you control your stress. Talk to your doctor about any exams, tests, or treatments that may help you.

KNOWING YOUR STRESS SYMPTOMS

Are you under too much stress?

Here are some warning signals that can be caused by stress. Check the ones that apply to you. Being aware of the signals is half the battle.

body

- upset stomach
- fatigue
- backaches
- headaches
- constipation
- diarrhea
- chest tightness

mind

- scary thoughts
- unable to make decisions
- racing mind
- uncertainty
- loss of usual creativity
- forgetfulness
- constant worry

feelings

- irritability
- impatience
- tension
- low self-esteem
- depression
- anger
- loneliness

behavior

- bad appetite or overeating
- trouble sleeping
- too much smoking
- too much alcohol or drugs
- grinding teeth
- unsafe driving
- not able to get things done

WHAT ARE YOUR STRESSORS?

Once you're aware that you're having too much stress, you can learn how to manage it.

Begin by identifying the daily events that bother you. Check the boxes that relate to your situation:

- money problems
- too much work
- boring work
- commute to work
- noisy environment
- lack of support
- family problems
- not enough free time
- sexual problems
- having a hard time getting along with others
- poor health or long-term illness
- not enough exercise
- not eating well
- over/under weight
- no direction in life



START A STRESS DIARY

To help you see how you respond to your stress, try keeping a stress diary. For one week, write down your response to each stressful event that occurs.

Here's an example:

Date	Time of Event	Stressful Event
3/9	4:30pm	<p>(include emotional & physical reactions)</p> <p><i>I have trouble getting to work on time, so I tried a short cut and got lost. I was frustrated, and the longer I drove, the more I kept picturing my boss chewing me out for being late. My back muscles were tight and I had a stomachache.</i></p>

You can learn how you change your stress responses by learning how to manage your stress.

LEARN HOW TO MANAGE YOUR STRESS

Remember that **you can control your response to any stressful event**. Your reaction to stress can change from a passive role into an active take-charge role. By learning to change your reaction, you can cope better with stress. Also, changes to aspects of your life may help. Here are some things that you can do.

Be realistic about what is happening.

*We often worry about things
that will never happen.*

When you have a problem, think about what you would tell a friend in the same situation. How important is it in your life? In a year? In a week? Decide what is worth fighting about and let go of things that are not worth it. If this is a real problem, worry does not help anyway!

Try to have a positive attitude.

*Looking on the bright side lightens
your load. So does laughing.*

Look for something positive in a tough situation. Give yourself a pep talk and remind yourself that you are OK. Repeat sayings like “things could be worse,” or “every cloud has a silver lining.”

Accept what you cannot change.

Human beings are not perfect.

You may not like the way the world is run. You might not like some things about yourself or your life. You may not like the weather. Think about accepting them and working around them or with them instead of being upset. Instead of pushing and rushing, slow down a little and think about your choices. When possible, try to relax. For example, if you're stuck in a traffic jam, instead of feeling angry about it, use that time to stretch your neck and to breathe deeply. Think about something you enjoy. This can help you reduce stress or not become stressed at all.



Develop healthy habits.

Our bodies need regular exercise, relaxation, good nutrition, and enough sleep.

If you make healthy habits part of your day, you will have more energy to deal with the effects of stress.

Exercise can have a calming effect that helps you feel, think, and perform better. There are two main types of exercise that can reduce the effects of stress: aerobic and relaxation.

- **Aerobic** exercises help release chemicals in the brain that reduce depression and stress. Some examples are:
 - walking
 - cross-country skiing
 - swimming
 - bike riding
 - jogging
 - rowing
- **Relaxation** exercises soothe your mind and body. They include:
 - slow, deep breathing
 - yoga, tai chi
 - listening to quiet music
 - peaceful thoughts
 - strolling
 - massage
 - stretching
 - guided imagery
 - meditation

- **Eating regular balanced meals** is also important. Include lots of foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads, cereal, lean meats, fish, poultry, and low-fat dairy products. Be sure to avoid too much sugar, salt, fat, caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and “crash” or fad diets.

deep breathing exercise

Doing deep breathing exercises 1–2 minutes many times a day for 5–6 weeks can help reduce stress.

Try this exercise and see if it helps you.

1. Make sure you are in a comfortable position.
 2. Inhale slowly through your nose and count to four.
 3. Exhale slowly through your nose or mouth and count to eight (or at least longer than you inhale), letting go of any tension you feel.
 4. Relax your shoulders, chest, and stomach muscles as you exhale.
 5. Repeat steps 2-4 for a few minutes.
- Breathe smoothly and comfortably.
You will feel your body relax as you do this exercise.

Develop a support system.

We all need to give and receive love and emotional support.

Caring about others and feeling cared about can reduce stress. We need to hug, laugh, and share our feelings with family and friends. Talk to your good friends during stressful times.



Find uplifting activities for your free time.

Joys offer balance to the stress in your life.

Get involved in an activity that is both peaceful and playful, whether it's hiking or drawing, gardening or singing. Know what activities or hobbies bring you pleasure and do them often.

Manage your time.

Reward yourself for getting things done.

Make a “to do” list so that you will be in control of your time. Prioritize the items on your list in order of importance. Whenever possible, combine tasks that can be done together, like errands, phone calls, and paperwork. Use waiting time to do short tasks such as reading a saved article, planning events, or practicing relaxation breathing.

Set realistic life goals.

*With a goal in mind, you'll be amazed
how good you'll feel.*

One of the causes of stress and depression is a feeling of going nowhere: “Life is just passing by.” Think about your ideal life, your values, and hopes. What steps can you take to get a little closer to your dream?

Write down your thoughts, and set up small realistic goals that you can reach. Your goals don't have to be big: plant a small vegetable garden, read a book, go out with friends. The point is to set up a plan of action and follow through by taking small steps.

Manage chronic illness or chronic pain.

It's really important to have a daily self-care routine.

If you have a chronic illness or chronic pain condition, stress can make it worse. Set aside time each day to “check in with yourself.” Sometimes, you may need to re-prioritize a task or project to make time for exercise or to practice relaxation breathing.

Build on habits you already have.

Small habits practiced regularly result in the most lasting changes.

As you've read the ideas listed above, you've probably noticed some items you practice already. Choose one or two of these habits that you can do easily and more often.



CONCLUSION

If you and your doctor feel that stress may be causing your symptoms, there are many things you can do. There are medications that can help if your stress is a result of depression or anxiety. There are also things you can learn that will help you deal with stress. Practicing the techniques presented in this booklet is a start. There are also books you can read, CDs to listen to, and life skills classes. Reducing stress is possible, and so is living a healthy life. Even if your symptoms are not caused by stress, the things you learn can help in other areas of your life.



Web sites

Kaiser Permanente: members.kp.org/healthyliving

National Institute of Mental Health: [nimh.nih.gov](https://www.nimh.nih.gov)

866-615-6464

Recommended Books

Mind and Body Health Handbook. David Sobel, MD and Robert Ornstein, PhD. Los Altos, CA: DRx Publishers, 1996.

The Wellness Book: The Comprehensive Guide to Maintaining Health and Treating Stress-Related Illness. Herb Benson, MD and Eileen Stuart, RN, MS. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eschelman, and Matthew McKay. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1988.

Minding the Body, Mending the Mind. Joan Borysenko, PhD. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1988.

Audiotapes

Letting Go of Stress. Emmett Miller, MD. Available at local stores or order from: The Source (800) 52-TAPES.

Guided Visualization with Ocean Sounds/Breath Body Awareness. Available at local stores or order from: Mind-Body Medical Institute, Boston, MA (617) 632-9523.

Autogenics/Meditation. Matthew McKay & Patrick Fanning. Order from New Harbinger Publications Inc., Oakland CA: 510-652-0215

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

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