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Stress: How to Cope Better With Life's Challenges

What causes stress?

Feelings of stress are caused by the body's instinct to defend itself. This instinct is good in emergencies, such as getting out of the way of a speeding car. But stress can cause physical symptoms if it goes on for too long, such as in response to life's daily challenges and changes.

When this happens, it's as though your body gets ready to jump out of the way of the car, but you're sitting still. Your body is working overtime, with no place to put all the extra energy. This can make you feel anxious, afraid, worried and uptight.

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What changes may be stressful?

Any sort of change can make you feel stressed, even good change. It's not just the change or event itself, but also how you react to it that matters. What's stressful is different for each person. For example, one person may feel stressed by retiring from work, while someone else may not.

Other things that may be stressful include being laid off from your job, your child leaving or returning home, the death of your spouse, divorce or marriage, an illness, an injury, a job promotion, money problems, moving, or having a baby.

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Can stress hurt my health?

Stress can cause health problems or make problems worse if you don't learn ways to deal with it. Talk to your family doctor if you think some of your symptoms are caused by stress. It's important to make sure that your symptoms aren't caused by other health problems.

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Possible signs of stress

- Anxiety
- Back pain
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Insomnia
- Problems with relationships
- Shortness of breath
- Stiff neck
- Upset stomach
- Weight gain or loss

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What can I do to manage my stress?

The first step is to learn to recognize when you're feeling stressed. Early warning signs of stress include tension in your shoulders and neck, or clenching your hands into fists.

The next step is to choose a way to deal with your stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to your stress--but often this is not possible. A second way is to change how you react to stress. This is often the best way.

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Tips for dealing with stress

- Don't worry about things you can't control, such as the weather.
- Prepare to the best of your ability for events you know may be stressful, such as a job interview.
- Try to look at change as a positive challenge, not as a threat.
- Work to resolve conflicts with other people.
- Talk with a trusted friend, family member or counselor.
- Set realistic goals at home and at work.
- Exercise on a regular basis.
- Eat well-balanced meals and get enough sleep.

- Meditate.
- Participate in something you don't find stressful, such as sports, social events or hobbies.

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Why is exercise useful?

Exercise is a good way to deal with stress because it's a healthy way to relieve your pent-up energy and tension. It also helps you get in better shape, which makes you feel better overall.

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What is meditation?

Steps to deep breathing

- Lie down on a flat surface.
- Place a hand on your stomach, just above your navel. Place the other hand on your chest.
- Breathe in slowly and try to make your stomach rise a little.
- Hold your breath for a second.
- Breathe out slowly and let your stomach go back down.

Meditation is a form of guided thought. It can take many forms. You may do it with exercise that uses the same motions over and over, like walking or swimming. You may meditate by practicing relaxation training, by stretching or by breathing deeply.

Relaxation training is easy. Start with one muscle. Hold it tight for a few seconds then relax the muscle. Do this with each of your muscles.

Stretching can also help relieve tension. Roll your head in a gentle circle. Reach toward the ceiling and bend side to side slowly. Roll your shoulders.

Deep, relaxed breathing (see the box to the right) by itself may help relieve stress. This helps you get plenty of oxygen.

If you want more help treating stress symptoms, ask your family doctor for advice.

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