

# Understanding and Managing Stress

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**Stress is a part of daily life and happens to all of us. The challenge is to learn to manage our stress in order to have balance between being motivated but not feeling overwhelmed.**



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## **STRESS IS A PART OF DAILY LIFE AND HAPPENS**

to all of us. It is the body's reaction to the demands of life. We need moderate amounts of stress to motivate us. For example, the deadline for a project helps us get our work done. Too much stress however is harmful physically and psychologically. According to the American Institute of Stress, 75-90 percent of all doctors' visits are for stress-related illnesses and conditions. Stress management is a critical issue as stress-related problems cost American industry more than \$300 billion each year. The challenge is to learn to manage our stress in order to have balance between being motivated but not feeling overwhelmed.

Stressors are the events that cause stress in our lives. They can be categorized into three different groups: daily stressors, major negative events and positive events. **Daily stressors** are events that are relatively small, but can add up. For example, getting ready on time to go to work in the morning, having a child come down with a cold so she can't attend day care or getting stuck in traffic. These events are ones that most of us can handle without much anxiety. Second, we have major **negative events** also occur in life. These include the death of a family member, divorce, losing a job, or experiencing a major chronic illness. Finally, there are major **positive events**. Although we do not often think of a positive event, such as getting married, as being a stressor, an event like this can cause a great deal of stress. Other positive events include starting a new job, the birth of a child or graduating from college.

In addition to the three listed classifications of stress, stressors can be categorized as a **single event** or as **chronic**, on going situations. A broken arm, although stressful, is a condition that generally heals, while having Crohn's disease is a chronic condition that can present ongoing stress. Stressors can also be viewed as **normal** or **non-normal**. High school graduation is a routine event in most individuals' lives. Becoming physically disabled due to an accident would be a non-normal stressor. Some stressors are related to **historical events** in our lives. For example, experiencing the Great Recession was a stressor for many individuals and feelings of fear and anger may continue even though the Recession is over. Finally, stressors can be **ambiguous** or **clear**. Ambiguous stressors would include knowing your company is going to have impending layoffs but not knowing when they will come. Another ambiguous stressor would be learning your child has a chronic illness but the doctor not being able to identify the illness. An example of a clear stressor might be notification that you were not chosen as a finalist for a job.

Stress can impact us physically and emotionally. Physically, there is an increase in the body of the stress hormone, cortisol. This hormone can the delay healing processes in the body. Stress can lead to gastrointestinal disorders such as ulcers and cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure. Stress impacts us emotionally with symptoms such as crying, anxiety, and anger. It can even affect our ability to interact with others.

## TEST YOUR COPING SKILLS

- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 10 points if you feel you have supportive family around you.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 10 points if you actively pursue a hobby.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 10 points if you belong to a social or activity group in which you participate more than once a month.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 15 points if you are within 10 pounds of your "ideal" body weight, considering your height and bone structure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 15 points if you practice some form of "deep relaxation" at least five times a week. Deep relaxation includes meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, imagery and yoga.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 5 points for each time you exercise for 30 minutes or longer during an average week.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 5 points for each nutritionally-balanced and wholesome meal you eat during an average day. A nutritionally-balanced meal is low in fat and high in vegetables, fruits and whole-grain products.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 5 points if you do something you really enjoy and which is "just for you" during an average week.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 10 points if you have a place in your home to which you can go to relax or be by yourself.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give yourself 10 points if you practice time management techniques daily.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Subtract 10 points for each pack of cigarettes you smoke during an average day.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Subtract 5 points for each evening during an average week that you use any form of medication or chemical substance, including alcohol, to help you sleep.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Subtract 10 points for each day during an average week that you consume any form of medication or chemical substance, including alcohol, to reduce anxiety or just to calm down.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Subtract 5 points for each evening during an average week that you bring work home – work meant to be done at your place of employment.

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### \_\_\_\_\_ Calculate your total score.

A "perfect" score is 115. If you scored in the 50-60 range, you probably have adequate coping skills for most common stress. The higher your score, the greater your ability to cope with stress in an effective, healthy manner.

This stress assessment was created by Dr. George Everly Jr. of the University of Maryland. It is reprinted from a U.S. Public Health Service pamphlet, *What Do You Know About Stress* (DHHS Publication No. PHS79-50097), and is in the public domain. Retrieved from: <http://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/dpc/stressquiz.html>

Before we can work on managing stress, we must be able to identify signs of stress. Some people do not acknowledge their stress until they become seriously physically or emotionally ill. Knowing your own signs of stress is helpful, so that you can take action before the problem becomes more serious. Some signs of stress include excessive crying or anger, increased forgetfulness, sleep problems, the inability to concentrate, lashing out at others and abusing substances. Increasing disagreement or problems with partners or spouses can be a sign of stress. Stress can affect us physically by causing headaches, stomachaches, rashes and pains. Some individuals with chronic illness find that stress exaggerates their symptoms.

Finding positive ways to manage or cope with stress is essential to your overall health. The scale on the left is an educational tool, designed to help inform you of the most effective and healthy ways to cope with stress. Take a moment to see how you are doing in coping and managing your stress. Follow the instructions for each item.

When you have identified some strengths and challenges in coping with stress, take a moment to identify specific activities that you can participate in order to moderate your stress. Having a variety of activities that can reduce stress is the key! The activities vary according to personal preferences. For example, some people do yoga to relax while others choose a walk in the woods. Having activities that are short-term, instant stress reducers that involve a few minutes; those that take more time such as a few hours or an entire day; and longer activities such as a week of vacation are all useful tools. A short-term stress reliever at work might be to walk outside for a few minutes. A medium-term reliever could be taking in a movie on Friday night. A long-term stress reliever might be going on a ski weekend.

Most importantly, it is necessary to have a toolkit of ideas for reducing stress – from those that may take a few minutes to those that may necessitate taking a few days off from work and daily family life. None need to be costly – conversely, not managing our stress costs us if the end result is a serious health problem.

Researchers involved in stress reduction programs advocate having a state of mindfulness. Similar to meditation, mindfulness helps you to listen to your body and increase awareness of what is going on

## STRESS REDUCTION TOOLKIT IDEAS

Take a walk	Meditate
Play with a pet	Engage in a sport like skiing
Listen to music	Explore a museum
Do yoga	Go for a hike
Read	Take a weekend mini vacation
Practice spirituality	Do relaxing exercises
Visit with a friend	Reduce caffeine consumption
Try a new hobby	

### My stress reduction ideas:

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in the present. Since our minds are often occupied with what has happened in the past or what might happen in the future, mindfulness helps to keep us calm, worry-free and aids in lowering blood pressure. A way to practice would be to make your morning shower a session of mindfulness. Instead of thinking about all the things you need to get done today, take this time to observe your present surrounding. Listen to the sound of the water, notice the sensation of the water as it flows on your skin and allow distressing thoughts to flow down the drain. These types of exercises can be used at different times throughout the day. The point of being mindful is to become more aware of the here and now and less worried about things that have happened or could happen. Mindfulness should help you reach a place of calmness and ultimately reduce stress and anxiety.

Too many stressors, even small ones, can add up, creating a level of stress that may not seem manageable. Learning to manage the daily stressors also helps us to handle stress better when a larger stressor occurs. We also need to acknowledge that some stressors are beyond our control, such as a natural disaster. Acknowledging our lack of control in those situations and learning to let go of stressors that we can't control will help in reducing our overall stress.

For more ideas on stress reduction, read the MSU Extension Montguide: 50 Stress Busting Ideas for Your Well-being. The guide can be found at: <http://store.msuextension.org/publications/HomeHealthandFamily/MT200016HR.pdf>

## Additional Resources

For additional reading on stress reduction and mindfulness, these resources may be helpful:

Davis, M., Eshelman, E.R., and McKay, M. (2008) *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*. Oakland, CA: New Harbor Publication

Williams, M. and Penman, D. (2011) *Mindfulness: An 8-week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books.

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