Tips for coping with stress

Coping with stress is easier when you identify your stress triggers, manage your time well, and take steps to curb job burnout.

In small doses, stress is a good thing. It can energize and motivate you and perhaps even prevent or delay certain types of damage to your cells. But prolonged or excessive stress — the kind that overwhelms your ability to cope — can take a severe psychological and physical toll. High stress levels have been linked to depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal problems, an impaired immune system and cancer.

The following tips may help reduce your stress.

Identify your stress triggers

Your genes, personality and life experiences all influence the way you respond to stress. Situations and events that are distressing for most people might not bother you in the least. Or, you may be particularly sensitive to even minor stressors. The first step in dealing with stress is identifying your particular stress triggers.

Some causes of stress are obvious — job loss, a divorce, the death of a loved one. But small, daily hassles and demands such as a long commute or trouble finding childcare also contribute to your stress level. Over time, small, persistent stressors can wreak more havoc than sudden, devastating events do.

Try one or more of these techniques to help identify the factors causing you stress:

- **Keep a stress journal.** For one week, note which events and situations cause a negative physical, mental or emotional response. Record the day and time. Give a brief description of the situation. Where were you? Who was involved? What seemed to cause the stress? Also, describe your reaction. What were your physical symptoms? How did you feel? What did you say or do? Finally, on a scale of 1 (not very intense) to 5 (very intense), rate the intensity of your stress.

- **Make a list of all the demands on your time and energy for one week.** Some examples may include your job, volunteer work, driving kids to after-school activities or caring for an elderly parent. Then, on a scale of 1 (not very intense) to 5 (very intense), rate the intensity of stress that each demand causes.

Sit down and look at your stress recordings. Pay particular attention to events that you ranked as very stressful. Select one of them to work on using problem-solving techniques. That means identifying and exploring the problem, looking for ways to resolve it, and selecting and implementing a solution.

Suppose, for instance, that you’re behind at work because you leave early to pick up your son from school. You might check with other parents to see if your son can ride with them. Or, you might come
in early, work through your lunch hour or take work home to catch up. The best way to cope with stress is to try to find a way to change the circumstances that are causing it.

**Tips for coping with stress**

**Improve your time management skills**

Effective time management skills can help you identify goals, set priorities and minimize stress in your life. Use these tips to improve your time management skills and lower your stress level.

- Create realistic expectations and deadlines for yourself, and set regular progress reviews.
- Throw away unimportant papers on your desk.
- Prepare a master list of tasks. Throughout the day, scan your master list and work on tasks in priority order.
- Use a planner. Store addresses and telephone numbers there. Copy tasks from your master list onto the page for the day on which you expect to do them. Evaluate and prioritize daily.
- For especially important or difficult projects, reserve an interruption-free block of time behind closed doors.

**Extinguish job burnout**

Nowhere is stress more likely than in the workplace. Twenty-five percent of people say that their job is the primary stressor in their lives. And the vast majority of workers believe that on-the-job stress is worse today than it was just 10 years ago.

Job stress can affect your professional and personal relationships, your livelihood, and your health.

Here are strategies you can use:

- **Identify the source of the problem.** Whether it's an unrealistic workload, job insecurity, inadequate compensation, office politics or a hostile work environment, you need to figure out what's making you miserable at work and then take steps to deal with it.

- **Develop friendships at work and outside the office.** Sharing unsettling feelings with people you trust is the first step toward resolving them. Minimize activities with "negative" people who only reinforce bad feelings.

- **Take time off.** Take a vacation or a long weekend. During the workday, take short breaks.

- **Set limits.** When necessary, learn to say no in a friendly but firm manner.

- **Choose battles wisely.** Don't rush to argue every time someone disagrees with you. Keep a cool head, and save your argument for things that really matter.
- **Have an outlet.** Read, enjoy a hobby, exercise or get involved in some other activity that is relaxing and gets your mind off work.

- **Seek help.** If none of these things relieves your feelings of stress or burnout, ask a health care professional for advice.

### Relaxation techniques: Learn ways to reduce your stress

Relaxation techniques can reduce stress symptoms and help you enjoy a better quality of life. Explore relaxation techniques you can do on your own.

Relaxation techniques are an essential part of your quest for stress management. Relaxation isn't just about peace of mind or enjoying a hobby. Relaxation is a process that decreases the wear and tear on your mind and body from the challenges and hassles of daily life.

Whether your stress is spiraling out of control or you've already got it tamed, you can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Learning basic relaxation techniques is easy, often free or low cost, and poses little risk. Explore these simple relaxation techniques to get you started on de-stressing your life and improving your health.

#### The benefits of relaxation techniques

With so many things to do, relaxation techniques may take a back seat in your life. But that means you might miss out on the health benefits of relaxation.

Practicing relaxation techniques can reduce stress symptoms by:

- Slowing your heart rate
- Lowering blood pressure
- Slowing your breathing rate
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Reducing muscle tension and chronic pain
- Improving concentration
- Reducing anger and frustration
- Boosting confidence to handle problems

#### Types of relaxation techniques
Health professionals such as complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, doctors and psychotherapists can teach various relaxation techniques. But if you prefer, you also can learn some relaxation techniques on your own.

In general, relaxation techniques involve refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly to reap the benefits.

There are several main types of relaxation techniques, including:

- **Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this relaxation technique, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax and reduce muscle tension. You may imagine a peaceful place and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or feeling different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** In this relaxation technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. You become more aware of physical sensations. One method is to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.

- **Visualization.** In this relaxation technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. During visualization, try to use as many senses as you can, including smell, sight, sound and touch. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about such things as the smell of salt water, the sound of crashing waves and the warmth of the sun on your body. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.

Other common relaxation techniques include:

- Yoga
- Tai chi
- Listening to music
- Exercise
- Meditation
- Hypnosis
- Massage

Relaxation techniques take practice
As you learn relaxation techniques, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment you start to feel stress symptoms. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control.

Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. And as with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself — don't let your effort to practice relaxation techniques become yet another stressor.

Also, bear in mind that some people, especially those with serious psychological issues and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during some relaxation techniques. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation techniques, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your health care professional or mental health provider.

- Source: Mayo Clinic