

Stress Reduction

Stress occurs when a demand is placed upon your body and mind that exceeds your coping abilities. A demand can range from actual physical danger to the excitement of buying a home. Even day-to-day living can lead to stressful situations, such as family disagreements or traffic. In other words, stress is a response which includes both physical and mental components.

How you respond to a stressful situation determines the effect stress will have on your life. If you adapt to a stress in your life, your physical and mental health can improve. A positive response can also improve your learning and help you reach goals. Unfortunately, many times we cannot adapt to stress. It exceeds our coping ability. Our bodies respond with anxiety, depression, and other expressions of stress that are bad for your health.

The key is to learn how to cope with the situations in your life that cause stress, and reduce it when necessary, so it does not lead to health problems.

How does stress affect my health?

Stress can cause health problems or make some health problems worse. Possible effects of stress include:

- Anxiety, depression, or irritability
- Back pain or stiff neck
- Constipation, diarrhea or upset stomach
- Fatigue
- Headache
- High blood pressure and increased heart rate
- Insomnia
- Lack of concentration and inability to concentrate
- Relationship problems
- Shortness of breath
- Weakened immune system
- Weight gain or loss



In times of high stress, some people may look for ways to “forget” about their problems. This can lead to habits like smoking, drinking, overeating or drug abuse.

What are the benefits of stress reduction?

Lowering the level of stress in your life will help you feel better. It may improve some of your health problems and can even decrease your need for certain medications. Reducing stress can also improve your relationships with others. You will be less irritable, more rested and better able to concentrate.

How can I reduce stress in my life?

It is not always possible to keep a stressful change or event from happening in your life. Many are out of your control (like a job lay off) and others are a part of life (such as planning a wedding). But you can control how you react to this change emotionally and psychologically.

The first step is to recognize when you are feeling stressed. Tight muscles in your shoulders and neck, or clenching your hands into fists, may be early signs that you are stressed. Other signs and symptoms of stress are listed in the section above.

Once you recognize that you are stressed, the next step is to find a way to reduce your stress.

Tips for reducing stress

Accept things you cannot change. Don't let situations you cannot change or control cause you stress. Look for the good instead of the bad in situations.

Be realistic. You cannot do everything. If you are feeling overwhelmed with activities (either yours or your family's), learn to say "No." You may be taking on more than you can or should handle.

Add humor to your life. Humor and laughter can give you a sense of perspective on problems in life and can help take your mind off discomforts and stress. For more information, see the patient education document "Humor."

Meditate. Set aside 15 to 20 minutes a day for quiet reflection. Use the time to think of pleasant things or think of nothing at all. Listening to music may help.

Exercise. Exercising on a regular basis can relieve stress and improve your health. Do what you enjoy – walk, swim, ride a bike, jog, or practice yoga, tai chi or chi kung to get your heart beating.



Find a hobby. Take your mind off your worries by doing something you enjoy. Try reading, gardening, painting or scrap booking.

Get a massage. Many people enjoy massage as a way to relieve stress. To find a massage therapist in your area, visit the American Massage Therapy Association (www.amtamassage.org) or call the Integrative Medicine Center at 713-794-4700.

Think ahead. If you know something will upset you, try to avoid it, if possible. For example, rearrange your schedule so you do not have to drive during rush hour traffic.

Share your feelings. Open up to your friends and family about problems you are having. Let them provide support and guidance.

For more information, contact the Integrative Medicine Center at 713-794-4700.