

# Manage Your Stress

Stress is the most common cause of health issues in our society – probably the underlying cause of as many as 70 percent of all visits to family providers. It's important to learn about stress and how it can be managed to improve your health.

The causes of stress are multiple and varied, but can be classified in two general groups: external and internal.

External stressors are forces we can't control, such as:

- Physical environment – noise, heat and lights
- Social – rudeness, bossiness
- Organizational – rules, regulations and deadlines
- Major life events – death of a relative, lost job, new baby
- Daily hassle – commuting and mechanical breakdowns

Internal stressors are more common and considered self-generated. Internal stressors may include:

- Lifestyle choices – not enough sleep, overloaded schedule
- Negative self-talk – pessimistic thinking and self-criticism
- Mind-traps – unrealistic expectations
- Stressful personality traits – trying to be a perfectionist

By getting to the root causes of your stress, you cannot only relieve current problems and symptoms, but also prevent recurrences. Sometimes people choose unhealthy methods for dealing with stress, such as drinking, smoking, drug use and over-working. These activities are damaging and cause more harm than good. There are many healthier ways to relieve stress. Below is a list of some practical strategies. Some are simple and can be implemented quickly; others are more involved.

- Decrease or discontinue caffeine – Caffeine is a strong stimulant that actually generates a stress reaction in the body. Make sure you wean yourself gradually or you might get migraine-type withdrawal headaches.
- Regular exercise – Nothing beats aerobic exercise as a way to reduce stress energy. Researchers at the University of Massachusetts Center for Health and Fitness found that, on average, subjects experienced a 14 percent decrease in anxiety level after taking a brisk 40-minute walk.
- Relaxation/meditation – Relaxation responses need to be brought on intentionally (unlike the stress reaction which is automatic). There are many ways of doing this, including sitting quietly by a lake or lying on a hammock.

Meditation or self-hypnosis gives you a state of deep relaxation, which can be more physiologically restful than sleep.

- Sleep – People who are tired do not cope well with stressful situations. Most people know their sleep requirements, which range from five to 10 hours per night. However, keep in mind that sleeping -in is fine, but if you sleep too long, it throws off your body rhythms the following day. "Power naps" ranging from five to 20 minutes can be rejuvenating, but a nap lasting more than 30 minutes can make you feel groggy.
- Time-outs and leisure – Pace yourself and know when to extend yourself and when to ease up. The leisure time and levels of distress are inversely proportional — less leisure, more stress.
- Realistic expectations – When expectations are realistic, life feels more predictable and therefore more manageable.
- Reframing – If you change the way you look at things, you will feel better about them. Reframing does not change the external reality, but simply helps people view things differently.
- Support system – There is an old saying that "a problem shared is a problem halved." People who keep things to themselves carry a considerable burden. It's very helpful to develop a support system to talk to when you are upset or worried.
- Humor – Humor is a wonderful stress reducer and antidote to upsets. Laughter relieves tension.