

Stress management

Stress is consistently reported as the #1 trigger for both migraine and tension-type headaches, acting as a trigger for about 75% of headache sufferers. Remember that everyone experiences stress symptoms, with our bodies reacting in different ways to stress. Some people become loud and boisterous, others quiet and reserved. Other people experience chest pain, rapid breathing, stomach aches, or diarrhea. Typically, people notice that stress causes their usual health symptoms to be aggravated. Stress can cause people with heart disease to experience chest pain, people with Parkinson's disease more tremors, people with epilepsy a higher risk of seizures, and headache sufferers headaches.

Stress management does not mean ignoring or eliminating stressful situations from our lives. Indeed, every life is full of stresses related to school, work, family, health issues, etc. In fact, driving to your doctor's office may be stressful because of traffic and concerns about making it to the appointment on time. Your doctor would not suggest that you "eliminate" the stress of your appointment. And no one could imagine that having a new baby in the house won't be stressful!

While it is not usually possible to change whatever is producing the stress response, we can change our response to the stress. Stress management teaches your body to react to stresses in different ways that do not result in the release of pain-provoking chemicals and tightening muscles. So, when you're stuck in aggravating city traffic on your way to your appointment, instead of experiencing a flare in temper, clenching your teeth, and tightening the muscles in your neck, you can repeat soothing thoughts ("I will make my appointment. I am a responsible person.") or listen to music, while practicing relaxation techniques (such as slow, deep breathing). These same strategies can be used before attending a meeting with one's boss or a child's teacher, before beginning a discussion about family issues with your spouse or child, or when waiting in a long line at the grocery store.

Try these stress management techniques:

- Learn good time management: schedule a reasonable amount of activities, chores, or goals for each day. Overloading your schedule will inevitably result in a stress response.
 - Write down which activities must be completed each day, and delegate chores among members of your household.
 - Accept that life won't be perfect. It's more important to have a relaxed home than a spotless house.
 - Don't be afraid to say no. You can't volunteer for every worthwhile cause and your kids don't need to participate in every possible after-school activity. Prioritize what's important for you and your family.
 - Schedule down time every day for reading, reflection, or a fun family activity.

- Identify your stress buttons. Learn what events typically make you feel stressed. You might be stressed after meeting with your boss, helping with a school project, or talking with your mother-in-law.
 - Anticipate when your stress buttons will be pushed, and practice relaxation techniques beforehand.
 - Stretch muscles when they first become tense.
 - Provide positive encouraging messages to yourself before the beginning of a stressful activity to reduce your stress response.
- Practice daily stress-busting:
 - Recognize and accept stressful events you can't control (e.g., the weather or other people's attitudes and behavior).
 - Plan for stress by recognizing when stressful events are likely to occur.
 - Practice relaxation techniques and cognitive restructuring.
 - Ask for help from others—you don't have to do everything yourself!
 - Do aerobic exercise every day.
 - Consider learning and practicing yoga, Tai Chi, and/or mindfulness meditation.
 - Eat regularly.
 - Get plenty of sleep.
 - Sing and find humor in your day.

Most people notice stress symptoms when they come upon new environments and situations. Take time to spot situations that are usually stress-provoking for you. When you feel your jaw or hands clench or notice you are beginning to sweat before certain situations, make a mental note that these events are stressful for you. For some people, events like taking a test in school or giving a speech or a business presentation may be where they feel stress. For others, minor events, like making a phone call, driving in traffic, or meeting a school teacher may be stress-provoking. Understanding your body's response to stress lets you understand how and when to best use relaxation techniques and stress management.