

Feeling Stressed?

Ways to Improve Your Well-Being

Have you been feeling more stressed than usual? Many people are during these challenging times. The COVID-19 pandemic has many people feeling overwhelmed.

Everyone feels stress sometimes. It's a natural response to a challenge or demand. Stress can come from the day-to-day pressures of work and family.

But stress is much more than just being busy, explains Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser of The Ohio State University, who studies the effects of stress on the body.

"It's the feeling that you're overloaded, out of control, and unable to cope," she says.

Stress can also come from a sudden negative change in your life like a divorce or losing a job. Traumatic events like a major accident, assault, or natural disaster can cause severe stress.

It's important for your health and well-being to learn how to cope with stress. Researchers are working to understand how stress affects health. They're also studying ways to relieve stress. These techniques may help you to feel calmer and more relaxed.

Stress and the Body

Stress isn't always bad. It's actually a survival response. It helps you leap into action in the face of a threat. Your heart rate speeds up, and you breathe faster as you prepare to fight or run to safety.

Short-term stress can even help you perform—you're more able to ace an interview or meet a project deadline. But when stress lasts a long time, it may also harm your health. Your body is constantly acting as if it were in immediate danger.

"There's a really big body of research now that says that chronic stress promotes inflammation," says Kiecolt-Glaser.

Inflammation is associated with many diseases, including heart disease, cancer, arthritis, and some mental health conditions.

Stress may also affect your metabolism—the chemical changes in the body that release energy and produce the substances you need to grow, move, and stay healthy.

Kiecolt-Glaser's research shows that stressful events can cause the body to burn fewer calories at rest. Stress can also cause changes in mood and increase irritability with those around us.

Ways to De-Stress

The first step is to recognize the signs that you're stressed beyond a normal level. Trouble sleeping can be one. Some people get headaches or stomachaches. Stress can also cause changes in appetite that lead you to gain or lose weight.

Once you know you need to reduce stress, there are practical steps you can try. Getting regular exercise can be helpful. Doing an activity you enjoy can also help with stress. This can be anything—from dancing to making art or getting out into nature or having fun with friends.

Making sure to get enough sleep is important, too. "People are more sensitive to stress when they don't have enough sleep," says Kiecolt-Glaser.

Staying socially connected is important, too. Close personal relationships are key to reducing stress. Reaching out to friends and family by phone, video chat, and email can help you stay in touch even when you're not able to see them in person.

"Make a conscious effort to reach out and to maintain contact," says Kiecolt-Glaser. "Loneliness is really destructive."

Eating regular, well-balanced meals and avoiding alcohol and other drugs also help reduce stress.

Mindfulness Approaches

Using mindfulness helps some people cope with stress. It teaches you to focus on being present in the moment. Research shows that simply being aware of what you're doing can improve well-being.

One study showed that people spent nearly half of their waking life not paying attention to what they were doing, says Dr. Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, an expert on mindfulness. "And when they were not paying attention to what they're doing, they were significantly less happy."

Davidson's research is shedding light on how mindfulness affects the brain to improve mood. "Regular mindfulness practices can have an impact on specific circuitry in the brain that we know to be important in emotion regulation," he explains.

For those starting to practice mindfulness: One size is not likely to fit all. Davidson recommends starting modestly with three to five minutes, a few times a day. That way you don't get overwhelmed and stop. There are many mindfulness apps available that teach different techniques.

Just Breathe

The simple act of controlled breathing can bring stress relief.

"It's well known that slow breathing techniques have a positive effect on emotional state," says Dr. Jack Feldman of UCLA, an expert on the neuroscience of breathing.

His research has identified the brain circuits responsible for breathing and sighing. Now he's working to understand how breathing techniques affect the brain to improve mood.

Breathing techniques can be used to help people who are depressed or anxious. Controlled breathing may disrupt the brain circuits involved in depression, he explains.

There are many different breathing techniques you can try. Practicing a few minutes a day can help you get started.

"People who start up a breathing practice may find that it reduces their stress and anxiety considerably," he says.

If you want to try controlled breathing, "belly breathing" is a simple form. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on your belly. Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, taking air into your lower belly. The hand on your stomach should rise, while the hand on your chest remains still. Slowly exhale through your mouth.

Feeling Overwhelmed?

Ways to manage stress:

- **Be observant.** Recognize signs of excessive stress. These include difficulty sleeping, being easily angered or irritable, feeling depressed, and low energy.
- **Exercise regularly.** Just 30 minutes per day of walking can help boost your mood and reduce stress.
- **Schedule regular times for a relaxing activity.** Activities that use mindfulness or breathing exercises, such as meditation, yoga, or tai chi, may help.
- **Get enough sleep.** Adults need about 7 or more hours of sleep per night. School-age children need 9–12 hours, while teenagers need 8–10 hours.
- **Set goals and priorities.** Decide what must get done now and what can wait. Learn to say "no" to new tasks if you start to feel like you're taking on too much.
- **Build a social support network.** Stay connected with people who can provide emotional support.
- **Show compassion for yourself.** Note what you've accomplished at the end of the day, not what you've failed to do.
- **Seek help.** Talk to a health care provider if you feel unable to cope, have suicidal thoughts, or use drugs or alcohol to cope.

Source: [NIH - National Institutes of Health](#)