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How To Manage Stress

Banish the hold stress has over your life with these smart, stress-coping strategies.

Stress poses a significant threat to Americans' health. A recent National Consumers League survey of 1,074 adults found that 80 percent of Americans report feeling stressed out. The survey also revealed that women are more likely than men to suffer from stress, including adverse physical symptoms, such as headache. Americans rated work, family, and health as the three biggest sources of stress.

Despite the fact that it's normal to experience the everyday hassles and pressures that come with juggling a job and family, stress, especially intense or long-term stress, can be dangerous to your health. Stress robs your body of essential minerals, vitamins, and nutrients and suppresses your immune system, leaving you vulnerable to infections, colds, and flu. Studies show that people who report suffering from moderate stress are more likely to die from heart attack, stroke, and cancer.

Although it may be impossible to completely eliminate stress from your life, the good news is there are several stress-management strategies you can adopt today to reduce your stress levels and insulate your body from the harmful effects of stress.

Types of Stress

The first step to reduce stress in your life is to identify which form of stress plagues you. The three main types of stress are:

- Acute
- Episodic Acute
- Chronic

Acute stress has an immediate onset, instantly throwing the body into crisis-control mode. In an acutely stressful situation, such as a minor traffic accident, a looming deadline at work, or an argument with your spouse or loved one, you are assessing the stressor and developing the best strategy for solving the problem.

The second type of stress is episodic acute. An example of this form of stress includes ongoing worry about finances, work, etc. It also encompasses "Type A" behavior, which is characterized by competitive drive, anger or impatience with others, and the need to attain personal perfection in all tasks. Studies show that Type-A individuals are more prone to heart attack compared to those who are more calm.

The third type of stress is chronic, which simply means it's an ongoing, unrelenting form of stress. Examples of situations that contribute to chronic stress are job and family pressures, sleep deprivation, and strained roles

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at work or at home. Chronic stress, because it is an unrelenting form of stress, poses the most serious risk to your health and should be addressed immediately.

The Negative Effects of Stress

Stress can wreak havoc on your health. When you are under pressure, your body reacts by releasing adrenaline. Adrenaline increases your heart rate and blood pressure, causes your muscles to tense, and slows your digestion. This physical response prepares the body to respond to the stressor in one of two ways: to either confront the problem or find a way to escape it. Hans Selye, a well-known stress researcher, referred to this as the “Fight or Flight” response.

But there is another serious effect that stress has on the body. When your body’s adrenal glands release hormones such as cortisol and norepinephrine, these hormones instantly mobilize and use electrolytes and nutrients such as magnesium, potassium, B-vitamins, vitamins C, and amino acids. One of the minerals the body uses the most during stress is magnesium. When your body releases adrenaline, it simultaneously releases magnesium. Magnesium helps the muscles, including the heart, contract and relax, it creates energy for the body, and it helps buffer some of the jarring effects of adrenaline.

If you experience stress, especially chronic stress, it’s important to replenish your body’s store of magnesium and other essential nutrients. If you don’t, you may be putting your health at risk.

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Anti-Stress Nutrients

Here are some important anti-stress nutrients:

- **Magnesium** — According to Carolyn Dean, M.D., N.D., author of *The Miracle of Magnesium*, magnesium limits the stress response by reducing the excitability of the nervous system. A study of workers in a high-noise environment and students preparing for their final exams found that those who took 6-7 milligrams of magnesium per kilogram of body weight did not experience increases in blood pressure that typically occurred during these times.
- **Zinc** — Zinc plays an important role in boosting your body’s immune defenses. Studies show that zinc levels decline rapidly during acute and chronic stress.
- **Vitamin C** — This essential vitamin acts as a powerful antioxidant and positively affects the immune system. Studies also show that vitamin C (in large doses) may reduce increases in blood pressure that are common during periods of high stress.
- **B-Complex** — B-vitamins are necessary for a number of functions including energy production, metabolism, and nerve function. During stress, B-vitamins, in addition

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to magnesium, are quickly mobilized and used.

- **Herbs** — For years, herbalists have used chamomile, hops, skullcap, valerian, and wood betony to help calm and soothe nervous tension.

Lifestyle Modifications

In addition to certain nutritional supplements, eating a balanced diet and adopting an exercise regimen can also be extremely beneficial in reducing stress. Here are four important tips:

1. Make the Most of the Foods You Eat

If you're under a lot of strain, it's important—now more than ever—to eat balanced, healthy meals and snacks. That means eating breakfast every morning and eating a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Not only do whole foods and grains provide you with essential vitamins and minerals, but they'll give you a long-lasting energy boost so you can combat stress.

2. Say No to Junk Food

Fat and sugar-laden treats are convenient and tempting when you're under a lot of pressure, but they don't provide any nutrients and, worst of all, these foods can actually make you feel worse in the long run. During times of stress, pamper your body by eating nutrient-dense foods. That means saying goodbye to candies, chips, and cookies and opting instead for more nutritious snacks like fresh or dried fruit, a handful of raw nuts, or a few crackers topped with peanut butter.

3. Exercise, Exercise, Exercise

Although exercise may be the last thing you feel like doing when you're stressed, studies show it improves mood in addition to controlling your weight. But exercise doesn't have to be strenuous or boring. Take a friend or spouse along for a 20-minute walk. Talk to him or her about your problems and feelings and develop strategies to alleviate stressful situations while you both burn calories.

4. Let Go of Unproductive Worry and Unrealistic Expectations

Incessant worry and unrealistic expectations of ourselves are a major source of internal conflict. During a less-stressful quiet moment, make the decision that from now on you will dismiss internal fears and worries and let go of unrealistic expectations. Develop a mantra or statement you can repeat to yourself so that when worries about problems or what others may think arise, you can break the hold negative thoughts and beliefs have of you. One example of a positive statement: "This thought/belief is harmful to me. It's not productive or healthy for me to think/feel this way, so I am letting it go."

Stress Management: A Holistic Approach

Stress may be an unavoidable fact of life in modern society. But adopting a holistic approach to stress that includes exercise, a balanced diet, supplementation of essential nutrients, and letting go of incessant worry and unrealistic expectations will help you release the intense internal pressure you are feeling. It will also help you fight off the physical effects of stress that can be harmful to your health.

Can't Sleep Because of Stress? Quick Tips for Ending Insomnia

One of the most common and frustrating side effects of stress is insomnia or sleep deprivation. Fatigue can significantly compound your ability to cope with stress. If you're having a difficult time falling asleep or maintaining sleep, here are three simple tips.

1. Reduce or eliminate caffeine and stimulants in your diet. You can find caffeine in coffee, tea, colas, and chocolate. If you consume caffeine, be sure to limit it to the early part of the day. In other words, don't consume caffeine before bedtime. In addition, some supplements contain stimulants such as energizing B-vitamins and herbs such as guarana, gotu kola, and ginseng that can disrupt sleep. If you currently take one of these supplements in the evening, you may want to wait and take them in the morning so you can get an uninterrupted night's sleep.

2. Try to rest—even if you're not tired. If you're having difficulty falling or staying asleep, stay in bed, close your eyes, and lie still. Even though you may not feel sleepy, rest is important for your body. But don't impede rest by worrying about problems. Rather than focusing on everything you have to do, focus on the tasks you did accomplish.

3. Consider supplements. Here are some dietary supplements that may help you unwind and get the sleep you need:

- **Calcium and Magnesium-** These essential minerals promote relaxation, especially when taken before bedtime. They may also reduce painful leg cramps, which can disrupt sleep.
- **Valerian Root -** This herb has been studied in the treatment of sleep disorders. Valerian contains substances called sesquiterpenes, which have sedative effects. Clinical trial patients taking valerian root-supplements report being able to fall asleep faster while experiencing a more restful slumber.
- **Chamomile -** This herb gently soothes and calms overexcited nerves without major side effects like drowsiness and impaired motor function.
- **Skullcap -** Skullcap is a traditional herbal remedy used to calm and alleviate stress and improve sleep.

If you're still having problems falling or staying asleep, talk to your therapist or physician to rule out the possibility of an underlying medical condition.



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