



Healthy Lifestyle

Stress management

Your response to the demands of the world determines your stress level. Take time to consider common stressors and how they affect you.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

The kids are screaming, the bills are due and the pile of papers on your desk is growing at an alarming pace. It's undeniable — life is full of stress. Understanding the types and sources of stress — short term and long term, internal and external — is an important part of stress management. So what stresses you out?

Stress is your body's reaction to the demands of the world. Stressors are events or conditions in your surroundings that may trigger stress. Your body responds to stressors differently depending on whether the stressor is new or short term — acute stress — or whether the stressor has been around for a longer time — chronic stress.

Also known as the fight-or-flight response, acute stress is your body's immediate reaction to a perceived threat, challenge or scare. The acute-stress response is immediate and intense, and in certain circumstances it can be thrilling. Examples of acute stressors include having a job interview or getting a speeding ticket.

A single episode of acute stress generally doesn't cause problems for healthy people. However, severe acute stress can cause mental health problems — such as post-traumatic stress disorder. It can also cause physical difficulties such as tension headaches, stomach problems or serious health issues — such as a heart attack.

Mild acute stress can actually be beneficial — it can spur you into action, motivate and energize you. The problem occurs when stressors pile up and stick around. This persistent stress can lead to health problems, such as headaches and insomnia. The chronic-stress response is more subtle than is the acute-stress response, but the effects may be longer lasting and more problematic.

Effective stress management involves identifying and managing both acute and chronic stress.

Effective stress management starts with identifying your sources of stress and developing strategies to manage them. One way to do this is to make a list of the situations, concerns or challenges that trigger your stress response. Take a moment to write down some of the top issues

you're facing right now. You'll notice that some of your stressors are events that happen to you while others seem to originate from within.

External stressors are events and situations that happen to you. Some examples of external stressors include:

- **Major life changes.** These changes can be positive, such as a new marriage, a planned pregnancy, a promotion or a new house. Or they can be negative, such as the death of a loved one or a divorce.
- **Environment.** The input from the world around us can be a source of stress. Consider how you react to sudden noises, such as a barking dog, or how you react to a bright sunlit room or a dark room.
- **Unpredictable events.** Out of the blue, uninvited houseguests arrive. Or you discover your rent has gone up or that your pay has been cut.
- **Workplace.** Common stressors at work include an impossible workload, endless emails, urgent deadlines and a demanding boss.
- **Social.** Meeting new people can be stressful. Just think about going on a blind date, and you probably start to sweat. Relationships with family often spawn stress as well. Just think back to your last fight with your partner or child.

Strategies to manage external stressors include lifestyle factors such as eating a healthy diet, being physically active and getting enough sleep — which help boost your resiliency. Other helpful steps include asking for help from others, using humor, learning to be assertive, and practicing problem-solving and time management. Consider how you use your time and energy by focusing on activities that are important to you, paring down the number of activities you're involved in, and saying no to new commitments.

Not all stress stems from things that happen to you. Much of our stress response is self-induced. Those feelings and thoughts that pop into your head and cause you unrest are known as internal stressors. Examples of internal stressors include:

- **Fears.** Common ones include fear of failure, fear of public speaking and fear of flying.
- **Uncertainty and lack of control.** Few people enjoy not knowing or not being able to control what might happen. Think about how you might react when waiting for the results of a medical test.
- **Beliefs.** These might be attitudes, opinions or expectations. You may not even think about how your beliefs shape your experience, but these preset thoughts often set us up for stress. Consider the expectations you put on yourself to create a perfect holiday celebration or advance up the career ladder.

The good news is that we have the ability to control our thoughts. The bad news is that our fears, attitudes and expectations have been our companions for a long time and it often takes some effort to change them. Strategies to manage internal stressors include reframing your thoughts and choosing a positive mindset, challenging negative thoughts, using relaxation techniques, and talking with a trusted friend or counselor.

Recognizing a problem is the first step toward solving it. By beginning to identify and understand the sources of your stress, you've taken the first step in learning to better manage it. Manage it, not eliminate it. Stress is a fact of life. And that's OK. You can learn ways to handle it.

Show References

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