

Stress is an experience that most people face at some point in their lives in response to the demands of daily life. It affects people from all ages, genders and backgrounds. While mild to moderate stress can sometimes be a motivator for personal growth, prolonged and unmanaged stress can have significant negative effects on your health.

Understanding your stress is crucial for maintaining your physical and mental wellbeing. It's important to ask yourself the right questions to help manage it.

What is Causing My Stress?

Identifying the source of your stress is an essential step in managing it. Some common sources of stress include:

- Work-related stress
- Family obligations
- Personal issues
- Medical concerns
- Financial concerns
- Recent significant life changing event

Once you've identified the source of your stress, you can take action to reduce or eliminate the stressor by changing your circumstances.

How Is My Stress Affecting Me?

In order to manage stress effectively, you have to be aware of its existence. Stress can manifest in many different forms and sometimes it can be difficult to realize how stressed you are until you experience one or more of the following symptoms.

Sleep Difficulties

One of the most significant changes related to stress is its effects on sleep. These include inability to fall asleep, racing thoughts at night, waking up frequently through the night, or having vivid dreams. Poor sleep—both in terms of quality and quantity—aggravates daytime irritation and anxiety as well as your stress levels.

Cognitive Symptoms of Stress

You may have trouble focusing and concentrating on tasks, which can result in poor memory registration. You might have trouble remembering things including recalling persons and events. You might even have trouble making judgments, which results in poor work performance.

Emotional Symptoms

These may range from feeling anxious, worried, overwhelmed, or irritable to full blown panic attacks. You can become moody and irritable, feel depressed and unmotivated, or lose interest in activities that you used to find enjoyable. This may lead to avoidance and isolation to social activities, feelings of hopelessness and even suicidal thoughts. Severe traumatic experiences may cause post-traumatic stress symptoms including nightmares, flashbacks and in extreme cases, psychosis.

Relationship Difficulties

When you are stressed, you may frequently be moody and agitated. This can have a significant effect on your relationship with your friends and family members. You may find it difficult to communicate your needs with others and may be less understanding of their feelings. This causes relationship conflict that further worsens your stress response.

Maladaptive Behaviors Caused by Stress

People frequently resort to using maladaptive habitual behaviors that they may have developed over time to manage their stress. You may find yourself overeating or losing weight due to poor nutrition, or even smoking, drinking, or using drugs more frequently. You may start withdrawing from friends, family, and social activities while also neglecting your self-care and social obligations.

Stress-Caused Physical and Somatic Symptoms

Stress can manifest as unexplained bodily symptoms that may necessitate a visit to your primary care physician. These may include increased fatigue, muscle tension, back pain, body aches, dental problems, chest pain, shortness of breath, elevated heart rate, blood pressure and blood glucose levels. You may have more frequent asthma attacks or headaches/migraines. You may develop gastrointestinal symptoms like heartburn, nausea, diarrhea, or constipation and genitourinary symptoms like urinary urgency or hesitancy and sexual dysfunction. Chronic stress may also increase your risk of infections, chronic heart disease, diabetes and other metabolic diseases.

How Do I Manage My Stress?

Everyone manages stress differently, and it's important to find a variety of strategies that work for you. Self care is an essential part of managing stress. Here are 10 stress management skills that you can develop:

1. **Sleep hygiene:** Getting at least 7-8 hours of sleep per night can help you manage stress during the daytime effectively. Being in a dark room, low activation

environment, avoiding caffeine, alcohol, and screen time right before bedtime and practicing yoga are some of the ways you can improve your sleep quality.

2. **Social support:** Having a support system can help you manage stress. Getting involved in social activities, volunteering, spending time with friends and family, joining a support group, or seeking professional help can all be effective ways to manage stress.
3. **Sobriety:** Avoid using substances such as smoking, caffeine, alcohol or marijuana to manage your stress. These often affect your mental and physical health negatively. Maintaining sobriety can help reduce your stress response and may help you make rational decisions to mitigate the stressors
4. **Engaging in pleasurable activities:** Music, art, outdoor activities and playing sports for fun may all be helpful in managing stress. Learning a new skill can help reduce anxiety.
5. **Structure and daily routine:** Having a daily routine for wakeup, bedtime and exercising regularly is a great way to reduce stress. Endorphins released during physical activities can help reduce stress levels.
6. **Healthy eating:** Eating a healthy diet is an essential part of stress management. Reducing processed foods and eating a diet that is rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains can help reduce stress levels.
7. **Mindfulness and relaxation techniques:** Mindfulness and relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga can help you relax and reduce stress levels. Taking a few minutes each day to practice mindfulness and Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) technique can help with stress and insomnia.

8. **Time management:** Prioritizing your tasks, creating a schedule, and avoiding procrastination are all effective time management skills that can help you make timely decisions to avoid unnecessary stress. Recognizing what stressors you can control and what you can't and then labeling the ones you can control as urgent, non-urgent and emergent, can help you prioritize and help you address them efficiently.
9. **Self-talk:** Positive self-talk and reframing negative thoughts into positive ones can help you reduce stress levels and improve your overall outlook. Having gratitude can bring serenity and peace in your life.
10. **Social media use:** Social media can cause fear of missing out (FOMO). You may assess your own life negatively and inaccurately in comparison to the perfectly curated and edited pictures put on social media by others.

Technology That Can Help With Stress

With modern technology such as fitness wearables and smartphone health apps, you can use these in a positive way to get a very comprehensive picture of your stress response.

These things can help you track areas that may show increased stress, such as:

- Decreased sleep hours/abnormal REM patterns, which may indicate depression and increased stress response.
- Reduced daily step count, which may indicate poor motivation and energy.
- Increased resting heart rate, which may indicate severe anxiety.
- Low Heart Rate Variability (HRV) may be indicative of severe stress response.

A few examples of apps and technology that can be used include:

- Continuous glucose monitors
- Migraine apps
- Medication reminder apps
- Mindfulness apps
- Mood diary apps
- Journaling apps

When Should I Seek Professional Help for My Stress?

You don't have to struggle alone. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It takes strength and courage to ask for help when you need it. It's essential to have a support system and to seek help when you need it. If you feel overwhelmed and struggling with stress, it may be helpful to answer the following questions to determine when to reach out for professional help.

- Do you have chronic stress for an extended period that you are unable to resolve by yourself by making changes in your circumstances?
- Do you have a chronic medical illness such as diabetes, cardiac disease or cancer that is causing a feeling of helplessness and you are struggling to manage it on your own?
- Are you feeling isolated, alienated and are unable to find any support from friends and family?
- Did you have a significant life change such as the death of a loved one, divorce, or job loss that is challenging for you to cope on your own?
- Do you have physical symptoms that have worsened over time, still remain unexplained and are not responsive to medical treatments?

- Are you indulging in substance use or other maladaptive behaviors that are becoming detrimental to your health and relationships?
- Do you have severe sleep difficulties and emotional or cognitive symptoms that are causing significant impairment in your daily functioning?
- Have you suffered a severe traumatic experience that is contributing to severe symptoms such as nightmares and flashback or hallucinations?
- Are you experiencing suicidal thoughts, planning to commit suicide or engaging in serious self-harming behaviors?

If you answer yes to any of the above-mentioned questions, it's time to seek professional help.

Contact a mental health provider to start therapy and counseling and if necessary start medications to manage your symptoms.

Call 988 if you are feeling suicidal or cannot keep yourself or others safe.

Remember, stress is inevitable in life but suffering doesn't have to be. It's okay to ask for help, and there are many resources available to help you manage stress.