

Wellness

Stress and your health

Reduce and manage stress for better emotional wellbeing

We all know that feeling of pressure called stress. Some stress can be energising – it can give you an extra push to meet a deadline or a challenge.

But too much ongoing stress can leave you feeling burnt out, affecting both your physical and emotional health.

How can stress affect your body?

Each of us reacts differently to stress. Some react more to stressful events than others – and what's stressful to one person may leave someone else unruffled. Your body can react to stressful situations with what's called the fight or flight response. Your body goes on red alert to cope with what the brain believes is a threat.

The trouble is your brain can't always tell the difference between a stressful day at uni and someone who's trying to snatch your wallet. Either event can trigger the release of stress hormones causing changes in your body that make it easier to fight or run, which is helpful if you need to fend off an attacker.

However, when chronic stress keeps your fight or flight system switched on for a lot of the time, your body becomes overexposed to stress hormones. This can affect your mental and physical health in a number of ways, often by making existing problems worse.

Tips on reducing and managing stress

Just as there are things you can do to help maintain a healthy body, there are positive steps you can try to help improve your emotional wellbeing.

- **Work on your balance**
Try not to over-commit to activities, especially at times when you're more likely to feel stressed. It's okay to say 'no' sometimes. And give yourself time to relax each day doing something you enjoy.
- **Get active**
Some exercise programs have been shown to help reduce symptoms of anxiety and combat stress. Regular exercise can also help you relax physically by easing muscle tension, boosting energy levels and improving stamina, while keeping you in good shape.
- **Clean up your act**
Healthy habits that keep us in good shape physically can be good for your emotional wellbeing too. So stay-smoke-free and limit the amount of caffeine you drink – nicotine in cigarettes and caffeine in coffee, cola and energy drinks are stimulants that may increase your stress levels.

- **Talk it over**

Problems are an unavoidable part of life but taking steps to look for solutions can make you feel better by giving you a sense of control. Talking problems over with other people can often give you a fresh perspective and help you to solve them.

- **Be flexible**

While we need to look for solutions to problems that cause us stress, we also need to recognise that there are some things in our lives that we can't control. Try to focus on the things you can control, and for situations that are beyond your control, choose to let it go.

- **Try deep relaxation**

Everyone has different ways of relaxing - reading a book, listening to music or watching TV. But it's also useful to have something extra — a technique that can put you into a deeper state of relaxation and reduce feelings of anxiety. Deep relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle relaxation and meditation, can help slow down breathing and heart rate and relax muscle tension — the opposite of the fight or flight response. So it's worth finding a technique that works for you.

Help is available

If you've been experiencing symptoms of stress and feel it's been affecting your ability to carry out everyday activities for two weeks or more, you may need further help. Talk to your GP or a qualified mental health professional, and remember there are also 24-hour telephone support services such as Lifeline (**13 11 14**) and organisations such as beyondblue (www.beyondblue.org.au) who may be able to help you.

Further information



Bupa Health Information
www.bupa.com.au/health



Beyondblue
www.beyondblue.org.au



Sources:

Benson Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine. Stress Management. (www.massgeneral.org/bhi)
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