

STRESS MANAGEMENT

We all know what it is like to feel stressed. We may feel irritable, jumpy, and tense. We may have difficulty sleeping, which leaves us feeling tired and reduces our ability to work effectively and make good decisions. Our muscles may become tense, leading to headaches, backaches, clenched teeth and sore jaws, or overall muscle pain. We may have stomach aches, acid reflux, nausea, or diarrhea. Our blood pressure may increase, and we may have heart palpitations. We may have hot flashes or our hands and feet may become cold. We may feel dizzy and have difficulty breathing. These are common symptoms we experience when we feel overwhelmed by situations we consider stressful.

What makes a situation stressful for one person, while another person feels stimulated or challenged by the same set of circumstances? The answer lies in our perception, or view, of the position in which we find ourselves. Stress occurs when we believe that the demands of the situation exceed our ability to adequately meet those demands. We may feel inadequate to cope with the situation, because our personal or social resources are limited.

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Although we often think of stress as being negative, stress can create positive or negative feelings. Stressful situations can have a positive influence on us by motivating us to take action, acquire new skills, increase our awareness and insight, and develop a new perspective. Stress has a



negative influence on us when it causes us to feel overwhelmed, rejected, angry, or depressed.

There are many factors that influence our level of stress:

Attitude. Our attitude determines whether a situation or emotion is stressful or not. A person with a negative attitude typically reports more stress than someone with a positive attitude.

Nutrition. Poor nutrition places the body in a state of physical stress and at risk of infection. Poor nutrition can be caused by unhealthy food choices, inadequate food intake, an irregular eating schedule, or substance abuse. This form of physical stress decreases our ability to deal with situations that are perceived as difficult or unmanageable because malnutrition affects the way our brain processes information.

Exercise. Inadequate physical activity can create a stressful state for the body. A program of regular physical activity will improve your mood and increase your feeling of well-being.

Support systems. Everyone needs someone in their life to share their experiences, especially when they are having a hard time. The lack of adequate support makes stressful situations more difficult to manage.

Relaxation. People who do not know how to relax are less able to handle stressful situations because they do not know how to manage their stress.

You may be wondering if it is possible to eliminate stress from your life. Our goal is not to eliminate stress, but to learn how to manage it. What can you do to manage the stress in your life? Identifying unrelieved stress and being aware of its effect

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on our lives is a first step, but it is not sufficient for reducing the harmful effects of stress. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many

ways of managing it. Learning to manage stress requires a willingness to work toward change. We must identify the sources of stress and change our reaction to it.

We know from research that the most fundamental strategy for creating and maintaining balance and health is learning what is known as the relaxation response, the term we use to describe the deep state of relaxation attained when one focuses atten-

tion on breathing and mindfully letting go of muscle tension. Learning to trigger the relaxation response is known to reduce tension, to reduce pain, to ease gastrointestinal disturbance, to relieve insomnia, and to reduce anxiety and depression. It has also been found to increase immune system functioning so that your overall health improves. It is effective in reducing blood pressure, which is especially beneficial for those suffering from hypertension and other cardiovascular disorders. Learning the relaxation response teaches you to cope with the hassles of everyday life and helps you to reduce your overall stress. After learning to elicit the relaxation response, you will find that your physical health improves. Learning the relaxation response through a structured stress management program is an important step in learning how to manage the stress in your life.

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