

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is an unavoidable part of life and it can cause significant impairment in our wellbeing. Symptoms of stress can be emotional, mental, and physical. These symptoms include: anxiety, depression, irritability, anger, difficulties focusing, confusion, memory problems, fatigue, sleep disturbance, change in appetite, muscle tension, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, weight change, decreased sex drive, increased reliance on substances (ex. alcohol, caffeine), conflict in your relationships, and social withdrawal.

Recognizing the impact and symptoms of stress can help you better manage and improve your mental health. If ignored, these symptoms can lead to serious health problems, such as: cardiovascular disease, ulcers, tension or migraine headaches, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, irritable bowel syndrome, asthma, and multiple sclerosis. Stress can also exacerbate existing medical conditions. In short, it is essential that you attend to the stress in your life and take steps to manage it effectively.

Techniques for Managing Stress

1. **Breath-** Use deep diaphragmatic breaths to induce the relaxation response in your body. When stressed, our breathing tends to be quick and shallow, which limits oxygenation of the body and can lead to clouded thinking. Take a deep breath in and out for five seconds and make sure that your abdomen is rising and falling with each breath (as opposed to your chest).
2. **Relax-** Utilize relaxation training to help your body and mind find rest. These can include: progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, deep muscle relaxation, and imagery training.
3. **Think Calm-** Allow yourself to redirect your attention to something that is pleasing or calming. This could be a picture on the wall or pleasant smell. Allow yourself to enjoy the moment.
4. **Be Positive-** Train yourself to focus on the positive things in your life. Think about what went right in a day, rather than dwelling on what went wrong.
5. **Say 'No' to Caffeine-** Stimulants activate the physiological stress response. Caffeine and nicotine may temporarily soothe your mind, but they ultimately increase your body's stress response.
6. **Control?** - There are some things in life that we can't control, and trying to control these things can be extremely frustrating and stressful. Being realistic about what we can control and accepting what we can't control is a powerful way of reducing stress.
7. **Be Nice to Yourself-** Use positive self-talk and affirmations to build confidence and reduce stress. The way we talk to ourselves impacts our perception of our stress and our ability to cope with it. Change your self-talk to reflect truth and fact, rather than fear and anxiety.
8. **Be Present-** Living in the past or worrying about the future, is a huge source of stress. Taking each day one-at-a-time and striving to live each moment as it comes can help reduce your stress. After all, you can only control the present, so that's where your mind should be.
9. **Express Yourself-** Keep a journal, talk to a friend, or see a psychologist. Either way, don't keep your feelings and

thoughts inside. Let them out and feel relief! It may be the first step to processing, problem solving, and dealing with the underlying issue. You have a support system- use it!

10. Laugh- Laughing is truly the best medicine! Instead of dwelling on the things that go wrong, find humour in them. Life is funny don't be afraid to laugh.
11. Eat Well- Make sure you eat a health and well balanced diet. This helps boost your immune system and gives your body what it needs to manage stress.
12. No One Is Perfect- You are not perfect, so don't try to be. Being realistic with your expectations helps remove undue pressure to be "perfect". Accept that you will make mistakes; it takes the pressure off.
13. Get Organized- It is easy to get stressed when you have a busy schedule and have a lot of things to do. Being organized and developing a reasonable schedule that includes productive and relaxation activities, can reduce stress. As well, prioritizing an organized To Do list helps you keep on top of your daily tasks.
14. Get Active- Exercise reduces stress by causing the release of endorphins, which leave us feeling blissful and calm.
15. Be Alone- It is common for people to come into contact with hundreds of people each day, which can be quite overwhelming. Being alone can provide an opportunity for you to decompress, reflect on your day, and relax.
16. Deal With Your Problems- The more we try to ignore problems, the bigger they become. Tackling problems head on allows you to move on in life and provides a sense of achievement, which is much better than looming worry.
17. Slow Down- Research has demonstrated that our productivity and enjoyment decrease as the pace of our life increases. Slowing down can actually increase our performance and reduce our life-stress.
18. Be Realistic- Make sure you set realistic and meaningful goals. Doing so can reduce your stress and help you be more focused and productive.
19. Express Your Emotions- If you are upset, it is natural and healthy to cry, and it can be powerfully cathartic. Crying is our body's natural mechanism to reduce tension, so let it out and you will reduce your stress dramatically.
20. Pamper Yourself- Get a massage, go to a spa, give yourself a facial, have a bath, stretch your muscles... all great ways to de-stress. If paying for a massage isn't an option, then you can do it yourself by rubbing your fingers in circular motions over your neck, shoulders, and face. This is a powerful mechanism for releasing muscle tension in the body.
21. Spirituality- Prayer and meditation can be very helpful in reducing stress. As well, having a spiritual understanding helps us deal with many of the challenges of life, whether formal relation or otherwise.
22. Don't Drink- Alcohol may help you temporarily relax or escape your problems, but it is a very poor long term solution. Not only does it impair our ability to solve problems, but reliance on alcohol for coping can also lead to addiction and other life issues. As well, alcohol is a depressant of the central nervous system and will enhance any depressive symptoms we feel.