Mind Over Matters

A lot of things in life can cause pressure in our lives, sometimes leading to chronic stress, anxiety or even depression. But there are a number of ways we can fight back against the stressors we face and both manage and reduce their negative effects.

Managing stress

Every day we encounter situations or events that cause stress. It's usually easy to identify the cause of stress as a negative or unpleasant experience, such as a divorce or a layoff, or even driving in heavy traffic or bad weather. But positive life changes or enjoyable events can also lead to stress—like receiving a promotion, having a baby or watching an exciting sporting event.

A moderate amount of stress can be good because it keeps you alert and engaged in the world. But too much stress can be overwhelming and have both short- and long-term consequences.

Stress and disease

Because the stress response combines physiological and emotional responses, it may cause physical symptoms such as tension headaches or upset stomachs.

Chronic and serious conditions, such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and cancer, may develop. The list of diseases linked to stress is almost endless, and includes asthma, allergies, rheumatoid arthritis, ulcers, ulcerative colitis and migraine headaches, among many others.

It seems most likely that stress plays a nonspecific role in disease by throwing off the body's natural ability to heal itself.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Stress is often accompanied by some or many of the following symptoms:

Headaches	Unhappiness for no reason
Sleep difficulties	Compulsive habits or excessive use of substances
Indigestion or stomachaches	Bossiness
Racing heart or dizziness	Critical attitude
Back pain or tightness in neck and/or shoulders	Grinding of teeth at night
Sweaty palms	Inability to get things done
Crying	Forgetfulness
Edginess	Trouble thinking clearly
Boredom	Lack of creativity
Nervousness, anxiety	Memory loss
Feeling powerless to change	Inability to make decisions
Loneliness	Confusion
Overwhelming sense of pressure	Constant worry
Anger	Loss of sense of humor
Easily upset	

Relaxation techniques

Diaphragmatic breathing: Training to breathe in a different way, at will, which increases relaxation and becomes habitual.

1. Sit up straight, stand or lie flat on your back
2. Let your hands lie comfortably by your sides
3. Take a long, deep breath through your nose and hold it for a moment
4. Purse your lips (as if you're going to whistle), then breathe out slowly through your mouth

Progressive muscle relaxation: Training to increase awareness of body tension; reduces tension in 16 muscle groups; results in a state of relaxation few have experienced before.

1. Start out by intentionally maximizing tension, and then increasing relaxation from this point
2. Focus on these muscle groups:

Lower leg	Upper back	Nose/eyes
Upper Leg	Chest	Forehead/skull
Abdomen	Upper Arm	Shoulders
Lower back	Mouth	

Relaxation activities

You can do a number of things to help you relax: spend a half hour listening to music, write about stressful events and your thoughts, talk things over with a friend or family member, or enjoy your hobby.

Another tactic for helping you relax and refocus is **visualization**. This tactic helps relax muscles and helps you feel like you can handle whatever is causing stress.

1. Create a quiet, peaceful scene in your mind—it might be a favorite vacation spot like the ocean or the mountains, or remembering an occasion when you were feeling calm, happy and free of stress
2. Close your eyes and focus on the scene
3. With your eyes closed, use your imagination—notice what you see, hear, smell and feel as you are in the scene, notice where the positive feelings are in your body and what sensations you are experiencing
4. Breathe deeply as you relax and experience the peace and calm

Treating depression

Occasional sad moods happen to all of us. You feel "blue" or "down in the dumps," not like yourself. But clinical depression is a depressed mood or loss of interest in formerly pleasurable activities that lasts for at least two weeks.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

People with depression often have some, or all, of the following symptoms

Frequent body aches and pains	Trouble getting through the day
Persistent anger or irritability	Thoughts of suicide
Increased or decreased appetite	Frequent crying
Too much or too little sleep or difficulty sleeping through the night	Loss of interest in physical appearance
Restlessness	Lack of emotional response
Fatigue without physical exertion	Anxiety
Feelings of worthlessness or guilt	

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Stress self-care

When stress occurs, it is important to recognize and deal with it. Here are some suggestions for ways to handle stress. As you begin to understand more about how stress affects you as an individual, you will come up with your own ideas on how to ease the tension.

Try physical activity: Running, walking, playing tennis or working in your garden are just some of the activities you might try. Physical exercise will relieve that "uptight" feeling, relax you and benefit your body and mood.

Talk with someone: Share your concerns and worries. Perhaps a friend, family member, teacher or counselor can help you see your problem in a different light. If you think your problem is serious, you should seek professional help from a psychologist, psychiatrist or clinical counselor.

Know your limits: If a problem is beyond your control, and you have tried to change it, don't fight the situation. Learn to accept what you cannot change.

Take care of yourself: Get enough rest and eat well. If you are irritable and tense from lack of sleep, or if you are not eating healthy, you will be less able to deal with stressful situations. If stress repeatedly keeps you from sleeping, you should ask your doctor for help.

Make time for fun: Play can be just as important to your well-being as work; you need a break from your daily routine to relax or have fun.

Check off your tasks: Trying to take care of everything at once can seem overwhelming, and as a result you may not accomplish anything. Instead, make a list of what tasks you have to do and do them one at a time, checking them off as they're completed. Give priority to the most important ones and do those first.

Let go of the little things: Do other people upset you, particularly when they don't do things your way? Try cooperation instead of confrontation; it's better than fighting and always being "right." A little give and take on both sides will reduce the strain and make you both feel more comfortable.

WHAT'S PRESSURING US?

Responsibilities	Our culture
Family	Technology
Work	Information overload
Relationships	Poor economy
Volunteerism	"Entitled" kids
Home maintenance	Do more, faster
Paperwork	Advertising
Finances	

It's ok to cry: A good cry can be a healthy way to bring relief to your anxiety, and it might even prevent a headache or other physical consequence. Practice diaphragmatic breathing; it will release tension.

Create a quiet scene: You can't always get away, but you can use your imagination. Envisioning a quiet country scene or a walk in the woods can take you out of the turmoil of a stressful situation. Read a good book or play beautiful music to create a sense of peace and tranquility.

Avoid self-medication: Although it may be tempting to use alcohol or other drugs to relieve stress temporarily, they do not remove the conditions that caused the stress in the first place. They can be habit-forming, creating more problems. Prescription medications should be taken only upon the advice of your doctor.

The best strategy for avoiding stress is to learn how to relax. Unfortunately, many people try to relax at the same pace that they lead the rest of their lives. For a while, tune out your worries about time, productivity and "doing it right." You will find satisfaction in just "being" without striving. Find activities that give you pleasure and that are good for your mental and physical well-being. Focus on relaxation, enjoyment and health. Be good to yourself.

Dealing with anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders are defined as excessive nervousness and worry occurring over at least six months. Individuals with an anxiety disorder find it difficult to control their worrying. Many patients with anxiety disorders report having felt anxious and nervous for most of their lives. Stress often makes feelings of anxiety worse.

Understanding anxiety

Anxiety is good in the appropriate context and amounts. But when the body reacts in a fight-or-flight response to irrational fear, it can have negative effects.

Causes are:

- Not feeling in control of a situation
- High levels of stress
- Misperceived levels of risk
- Fear of fear (panic attacks)

Undiagnosed anxiety disorders result in:

- Frequent doctor visits
- Trips to the emergency department
- Increase in stress-related illness
- Under-effectiveness at work, home or school; increased absenteeism

SYMPTOMS OF AN ANXIETY DISORDER

An anxiety disorder is often accompanied by some or many of the following symptoms

Restlessness	Cold and clammy hands
Fatigue	Dry mouth
Difficulty concentrating	Rapid thoughts
Irritability	Nausea or diarrhea
Muscle tension, muscle aches and soreness	Frequent urination
Difficulty waking up or sleeping	Trembling, twitching or shakiness
Difficulty swallowing	Easily startled
Rapid heartbeat	

ANXIETY SELF-CARE

Exercise, nutrition	Give yourself permission to say "no," nicely
Practice relaxation	Ask for help, delegate
Understand that external events play a role in stress, but our perception of events causes most of the trouble	Don't waste time, attention or energy (emotion) on what you cannot control
Choose your response to events and people	Consciously choose what you want to include in your life
Be a human "being," not a human "doing"	Get enough sleep