HEALTH BASICS

Stress management

Stress management uses practical skills and support to reduce stress and its health effects.

WHAT IT IS
Practical ways to reduce stress and its effects

WHERE IT COMES UP
Work, caregiving, illness, relationships, money, and major life changes

WHY IT MATTERS
Supports sleep, mood, daily function, and physical health

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Primary care clinician, psychologist, counsellor, or support service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No single test; questionnaires can assess perceived stress

Overview

Stress management means using practical steps to reduce stress or change how you respond to it. It is not a disease, diagnosis, or single treatment.

Stress is the mind and body's response to pressure or demand. It may follow a difficult event, such as illness or bereavement. It can also build from everyday pressures involving work, money, relationships, discrimination, caregiving, or housing.

Not all stress can or should be removed. A short stress response may help you react quickly, meet a deadline, or focus on a challenge. Stress management becomes especially useful when pressure continues, feels unmanageable, or interferes with sleep and daily life.

Different methods suit different people and situations. Stress caused by an unsafe workplace, for example, may require practical changes rather than relaxation alone. Managing stress does not mean that the source of it is your fault.

How it works

When your brain detects a challenge, it activates a stress response. Your heart rate and breathing may increase, your muscles may tense, and hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol help make energy available. These changes prepare you to respond.

The body usually settles after a short-term challenge passes. With repeated or continuing pressure, however, you may have fewer chances to recover. This can affect concentration, sleep, mood, appetite, and how you experience pain.

Stress-management methods work in several ways. Some calm physical arousal. Others help you solve practical problems, recover between demands, or notice thought patterns that increase distress. Social support can reduce isolation and provide practical help.

Useful approaches may include:

No single technique works for everyone. A method that helps in one situation may be less useful in another.

- Changing a stressful situation where possible
- Using breathing, grounding, or muscle-relaxation exercises
- Protecting time for sleep, movement, meals, and recovery
- Talking with supportive people
- Learning coping and problem-solving skills in therapy
- Seeking help with work, money, housing, caregiving, or safety

Why it matters for your health

Ongoing stress can make it harder to sleep, concentrate, remember information, or make decisions. It may contribute to headaches, muscle tension, digestive discomfort, irritability, or changes in appetite. These experiences can have other causes, so stress should not automatically be assumed to explain them.

Long-term stress may also affect health behaviours. When overwhelmed, you may have less time or energy for physical activity, medical appointments, regular meals, or contact with other people. Some people rely more heavily on alcohol, nicotine, drugs, gambling, or spending to cope.

Stress management cannot guarantee that health problems will not occur. It can, however, support daily functioning and make difficult periods more manageable. Regular physical activity can benefit sleep and mental well-being, while structured psychological approaches can help people develop coping and problem-solving skills.

Mindfulness and meditation help some people, but they are options rather than requirements. Research suggests that mindfulness programs may produce modest improvements in stress-related outcomes for some adults. They should not replace care for a mental or physical health condition.

What can go wrong

Stress can overlap with health conditions that need assessment. Persistent fear or worry may be related to an anxiety disorder. Loss of interest, low mood, or hopelessness may be related to depression. Distress following trauma may be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, known as PTSD.

Work-related pressure may contribute to burnout. The World Health Organization describes burnout as an occupational phenomenon linked to chronic workplace stress, not as a medical disease. Similar exhaustion can have other causes, including depression, sleep disorders, anaemia, thyroid conditions, medication effects, or physical illness.

Attempts to cope can sometimes create further problems. Frequent heavy drinking, non-prescribed drug use, self-harm, disordered eating, or compulsive gambling deserve direct support rather than being treated only as "bad habits."

Arrange routine follow-up with a primary care or mental health clinician if stress:

Seek urgent help if distress is escalating quickly, you cannot manage basic needs, or you feel unable to remain safe.

Call local emergency services or use an emergency crisis service if you may harm yourself or someone else. Sudden chest pain, severe breathing difficulty, fainting, new weakness, or confusion also needs emergency assessment rather than being assumed to be stress.

- Continues for several weeks
- Regularly disrupts sleep, work, study, relationships, or self-care
- Leads you to rely on alcohol, drugs, or other harmful coping
- Comes with persistent anxiety, low mood, or distress after trauma
- Is accompanied by physical changes that are new or unexplained

What you can do

Start by identifying what is placing you under pressure. A brief record can help. Note the

situation, how your body felt, what you were thinking, what you did, and whether anything helped. This is not a diagnostic test, but it may reveal patterns.

Separate problems you can act on from those you cannot control. For a practical problem, choose one small next step. This could mean asking about a deadline, contacting a caregiver service, reviewing bills, discussing workplace adjustments, or arranging a medical appointment.

Build short recovery periods into your day when possible. You might take a walk, stretch, spend time outdoors, listen to music, or contact someone supportive. Physical activity can be adapted to your health, ability, and surroundings.

A simple calming practice may also help. Try breathing gently and allowing the out-breath to become slightly slower, without forcing a deep breath. Another option is to tense and release one muscle group at a time. Stop if an exercise makes you dizzy, panicked, or more uncomfortable.

Keep sleep and wake times reasonably consistent. Reduce avoidable work or upsetting media close to bedtime. If sleep problems continue, ask a clinician about them rather than repeatedly trying to "catch up" with very long sleep periods.

You can ask a primary care clinician:

There is no blood test or scan that measures stress itself. A clinician may use a questionnaire and ask about your circumstances, sleep, mood, physical health, medicines, and substance use. Tests may be offered when symptoms suggest another medical cause.

- Could a health condition or medicine be contributing to how I feel?
- Is a stress, anxiety, depression, or trauma questionnaire appropriate?
- What counselling or psychological therapy services are available?
- Are there local supports for work, caregiving, money, housing, or substance use?

Common questions

Can stress be removed completely?

Usually not. Some pressure is unavoidable, and short-term stress can be useful. The aim is to reduce unnecessary demands, improve recovery, and get support when the load exceeds your resources.

Is stress the same as anxiety?

No. Stress usually relates to an outside pressure, although its effects can continue afterward.

Anxiety is fear or worry that may persist even without an immediate threat. They can occur together, and an anxiety disorder is a clinical diagnosis.

Do watches or phone apps measure stress?

They may estimate changes in heart rate, movement, or sleep. These signals are affected by exercise, illness, caffeine, medicines, and other factors. They cannot diagnose stress or a mental health condition.

Do I have to meditate?

No. Meditation is one possible tool. Exercise, problem-solving, therapy, social contact, creative activities, and practical changes may be more suitable. If meditation increases distress or brings up traumatic memories, stop and discuss other options with a mental health professional.

Can supplements treat stress?

Evidence differs between products, and "natural" does not always mean safe. Supplements can cause side effects or interact with medicines. Ask a pharmacist or clinician before using one, especially if you take regular medicine or are pregnant.

Sources

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