



Autoimmune Resource and Research Centre Information Sheet

Coping with Stress

One of the first steps toward good stress management is understanding how you react to stress. Some people seem to take everything in stride. Their naturally laid-back attitudes shine through, even in stressful situations. They can handle it. The dishwasher is leaking? No problem, it will be a simple repair. Others get anxious at the first sign of a stressful situation. Running late for a meeting? Time to panic! Stuck in a traffic jam? Let the cursing begin!



Signs of stress

- Smoking
- Drinking too much
- Bingeing on junk or comfort food
- Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities
- Crying without warning over little things
- Using pills or drugs to relax
- Sleeping too much
- Procrastinating
- Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems
- Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence)
- Depression

Learning to handle stress in healthy ways is very important. Fortunately, it is easy to learn simple techniques that help. These include recognising and changing the behaviours that contribute to stress, as well as techniques for reducing stress once it has occurred. The following tips can help you look after your mind and body, and reduce stress and its impact on your health.

- **Start stress journal** (even writing things down can reduce stress)

- How you felt, both physically and emotionally
- How you acted in response
- What you did to make yourself feel better

- **Identify warning signs**
These vary from person to person, but might include things like tensing your jaw, grinding your teeth, getting headaches, or feeling irritable and short tempered.
- **Identify triggers**
There are often known triggers which raise our stress levels and make it more difficult for us to manage. If you know what the likely triggers are, you can aim to anticipate them and practise calming yourself down beforehand, or even find ways of removing the trigger. Triggers might include late nights, deadlines, seeing particular people, hunger or over-tired children.
- **Establish routines**
Having predictable rhythms and routines in your day, or over a week, such as regular times for exercise and relaxation, meal times, waking and bedtimes, can be very calming and reassuring, and can help you to manage your stress.
- **Look after your health**
Make sure you are eating healthy food and getting regular exercise. Take time to do activities you find calming or uplifting, such as listening to music, walking or dancing. Avoid using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to cope.
- **Notice your 'self-talk'**
When we are stressed we sometimes say things in our head, over and over, that just add to our stress. This unhelpful self-talk might include things like: 'I can't cope', or 'I'm too busy', or 'I'm so tired', or 'It's not fair'. Try more helpful self-talk like 'I'm coping well given what's on my plate', or 'Calm down', or 'Breathe easy'.
- **Scale back** Cut back on your obligations when possible. While it may seem easier said than done, take a close look at your daily, weekly and monthly schedule and find meetings, activities, dinners or chores that you can cut back on or delegate to someone else.
- **Prepare** Stay ahead of stress by preparing for meetings or trips, scheduling your time better, and setting realistic goals for tasks both big and small. Stress mounts when you run

out of time because something comes up that you didn't account for — build in time for traffic jams, for example.

- **Reach out** Make or renew connections with others. Surrounding yourself with supportive family, friends, co-workers, or clergy and spiritual leaders can have a positive effect on your mental well-being and your ability to cope with stress. Volunteer in your community.
- **Take up a hobby** When you engage in something enjoyable, it can soothe and calm your restless mind. Try reading, gardening, crafts, tinkering with electronics, fishing, carpentry, music - things that you don't get competitive or more stressed out about.
- **Relax** Physical activity, meditation, yoga, massage, deep breathing and other relaxation techniques can help you manage stress. It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body.
- **Get enough sleep** Lack of sufficient sleep affects your immune system and your judgment and makes you more likely to snap over minor irritations. Most people need seven to nine hours of sleep a day.

- **Get enough rest**

Fatigue is a warning signal from your body; listen, slow down. Resting, even for five minutes, will be beneficial. This is a sign of strength to recognise and do as your body requests. If you have a strenuous task to do, break it up with relaxing activity. Don't feel you have to complete a task after you have started it, eg. cleaning the house. Dust, sit down and plan what you will have for dinner. Vacuum, then have a cup of tea. Clean the bathroom tomorrow.

- **Family co-operation** Set tasks for each member of the family. Let them know why you are doing this, and then stick to the plan.

Pace Yourself

- Write a list of things each morning that you want to do that day. Now single out those you have to do and give priority to these. This gives you a chance to organise your day allowing time for yourself.
- Build resting periods into your day so that you are not always rushed. This doesn't mean you have to lie down. Just stop for a while; take a few deep breaths, eg. break up shopping trips with a lunch break.
- Reassess your need to take 3 course meals for dinner, have an absolutely spotless house, and iron everything. When cooking some meals, make twice as much as you need and freeze half for a day when you feel too tired to cook.
- **Look for the upside** When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.

- **Learn to forgive** Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on.
- **Get professional help** If your stress management efforts aren't helpful enough, see your doctor. Chronic, uncontrolled stress can lead to a variety of potentially serious health problems, including depression and pain.

Information taken from The Mayo Clinic, Stress Management
Australian Psychological Society: Stress and Well Being
Help Guide.org: Stress Management

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ARRC provides education, support and research services for people living with a range of systemic and organ-specific autoimmune diseases. For more information, education and support contact ARRC

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ARRC information for patients, carers & Health Professionals

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