



Stress in America

Mind/Body Health: For a Healthy Mind and Body, Talk to a Psychologist

Stress Won't Go Away? Maybe You Are Suffering from Chronic Stress

Some stress is positive. It causes our bodies to release adrenaline, which helps us to accomplish assignments and projects, and can even enhance our performance and problem-solving ability. But chronic stress, which is constant and persists over an extended period of time, can be debilitating and overwhelming. Chronic stress can affect both our physical and psychological well-being by causing a variety of problems including anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system. Research shows that stress can contribute to the development of major illnesses, such as heart disease, depression and obesity. The consequences of chronic stress are serious. Yet, many Americans who experience prolonged stress are not making the necessary lifestyle changes to reduce stress and ultimately prevent health problems.

According to a 2009 survey by the American Psychological Association (APA), adults who were advised by their health care provider to make lifestyle changes specifically associated with behaviors or symptoms of stress — such as quitting smoking, eating healthy foods, getting more sleep or reducing stress overall — were the least likely to report success in making lifestyle changes.

Fortunately, it is possible to manage and alleviate chronic stress. Improving lifestyle and making better behavior choices are essential steps toward increasing overall health.

APA offers the following tips to address chronic stress:

Set limits. List all of the projects and commitments that are making you feel overwhelmed. Identify those tasks you feel you absolutely must do in order to survive, and cut back on anything non-essential. For projects that are work-related, discuss a list of your responsibilities with your supervisor and get his or her input on priorities and how best to tackle the projects at hand. For commitments that are social or non-work related, such as community or volunteer activities, consider contacting the people you've made these commitments to and letting them know that you cannot meet those obligations at this time. You also may ask for assistance in getting these tasks accomplished. Refrain from accepting any more commitments until you feel your stress is under control. Setting limits on non-essential obligations is important to mitigating chronic stress.

Tap into your support system. Reach out to a friend and/or relative with whom you've enjoyed a close relationship over the years. Let them know you are having a tough time and welcome their support and guidance; a shared burden is always lighter. Your friend or relative may have tackled similar challenges and have useful ideas and perspectives. There is no need to face challenging life circumstances alone. In fact, support from family or friends may help you start and sustain taking better care of yourself.

Make one health-related commitment. Do what is possible to bolster your health so that you can have the energy and strength to tackle the challenges you are facing. One small step, like

cutting back on your caffeine consumption, can have a positive effect. Studies show that without caffeine, people reported feeling more relaxed, less jittery or nervous, slept better, had more energy and experienced less heartburn and fewer muscle aches. Similarly, a brisk walk or other aerobic activity can increase your energy and concentration levels and lessen feelings of anxiety. Physical activity increases your body's production of good-feeling endorphins, a type of neurotransmitter in the brain, and decreases the production of stress hormones. Taking positive steps for your health will help you manage your stress.

Enhance your sleep quality. People who are chronically stressed often suffer from lack of adequate sleep and, in some cases, stress-induced insomnia. According to APA's 2009 Stress in America survey, 47 percent of all adults say they lie awake at night because of stress. It is important to take steps to increase the quality of your sleep. Experts recommend going to bed at a regular time each night, striving for at least 7-8 hours of sleep, and if possible, eliminating distractions, such as television and computers from your bedroom. Begin winding down an hour or two before you go to sleep and engage in calming activities such as listening to relaxing music, reading an enjoyable book, taking a soothing bath or practicing relaxation techniques like meditation. Avoid eating a heavy meal or engaging in intense exercise immediately before bedtime. If you tend to lie in bed and worry, write down your concerns well in advance of bedtime and then work on quieting your thoughts before lights-out. You can figure out how to address stressful issues in the morning, after a good night's sleep.

Strive for a positive outlook. Looking at situations more positively, seeing problems as opportunities and refuting negative thoughts are all important aspects of staying positive and trying to minimize your stress. In some people, stress can be caused by their attempts to handle things perfectly. Setting more realistic expectations and positively reframing the way you look at stressful situations can make life more manageable. Also, difficult circumstances have a way of working out; it is important to keep challenges in perspective and do what you can reasonably do to move forward.

Seek additional help. If you continue to feel overwhelmed, are feeling hopeless or are having trouble getting through your daily routine, seek consultation with a licensed mental health professional such as a psychologist. Psychologists are trained to help you develop strategies to manage stress effectively and make behavioral changes to help improve your overall health.

For additional information on managing stress, visit www.apahelpcenter.org.

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