Stress - Coping With Everyday Problems

Stress is a natural part of life. The expressions are familiar to us, I’m stressed out, I’m under too much stress, or Work is one big stress.

Stress is hard to define because it means different things to different people; however, its clear that most stress is a negative feeling rather than a positive feeling.

Stress can be both physical and mental.

You may feel physical stress which is the result of too much to do, not enough sleep, a poor diet or the effects of an illness. Stress can also be mental: when you worry about money, a loved one’s illness, retirement, or experience an emotionally devastating event, such as the death of a spouse or being fired from work.

However, much of our stress comes from less dramatic everyday responsibilities. Obligations and pressures which are both physical and mental are not always obvious to us. In response to these daily strains your body automatically increases blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, metabolism, and blood flow to you muscles. This response, is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to a high-pressure situation.

However, when you are constantly reacting to stressful situations without making adjustments to counter the effects, you will feel stress which can threaten your health and well-being.

It is essential to understand that external events, no matter how you perceive those events which may cause stress.

Stress often accompanies the feeling of being out of control.

How do I know if I am suffering from stress?

Remember, each person handles stress differently. Some people actually seek out situations which may appear stressful to others. A major life decision, such as changing careers or buying a house, might be overwhelming for some people, while others may welcome the change. Some find sitting in traffic too much to tolerate, while others take it in stride. The key is determining your personal tolerance levels for stressful situations.

Stress can cause physical, emotional and behavioral disorders which can affect your health, vitality, peace-of-mind, as well as personal and professional relationships. Too much stress can cause relatively minor illnesses like insomnia, backaches, or headaches, and can contribute to potentially life-threatening diseases like high blood pressure and heart disease.

Tips for reducing or controlling stress

As you read the following suggestions, remember that success will not come from a half hearted effort, nor will it come overnight. It will take determination, persistence and time. Some suggestions may help immediately, but if your stress is chronic, it may require more attention and/or lifestyle changes. Determine YOUR tolerance level for stress and try to live within these limits. Learn to accept or change stressful and tense situations whenever possible.

Be realistic. If you feel overwhelmed by some activities (yours and/or your family’s), learn to say NO! Eliminate an activity that is not absolutely necessary. You may be taking on more responsibility than you can or should handle. If you meet resistance, give reasons why you’re making the changes. Be willing to listen to other’s suggestions and be ready to compromise.

Shed the superman/superwoman urge. No one is perfect, so don’t expect perfection from yourself or others. Ask
yourself, “What really needs to be done? How much can I do? Is the deadline realistic? What adjustments can I make? Don’t hesitate to ask for help if you need it.

Meditate. Just ten to twenty minutes of quiet reflection may bring relief from chronic stress as well as increase your tolerance to it. Use the time to listen to music, relax and try to think of pleasant things or nothing.

Visualize. Use your imagination and picture how you can manage a stressful situation more successfully. Whether it’s a business presentation or moving to a new place, many people feel visual rehearsals boost self-confidence and enable them to take a more positive approach to a difficult task.

Take one thing at a time. For people under tension or stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable. The best way to cope with this feeling of being overwhelmed is to take one task at a time. Pick one urgent task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one. The positive feeling of checking off tasks is very satisfying. It will motivate you to keep going.

Exercise. Regular exercise is a popular way to relieve stress. Twenty to thirty minutes of physical activity benefits both the body and the mind.

Hobbies. Take a break from your worries by doing something you enjoy. Whether it’s gardening or painting, schedule time to indulge your interest.

Healthy life style. Good nutrition makes a difference. Limit intake of caffeine and alcohol (alcohol actually disturbs regular sleep patterns), get adequate rest, exercise, and balance work and play.

Share your feelings. A conversation with a friend lets you know that you are not the only one having a bad day, caring for a sick child or working in a busy office. Stay in touch with friends and family. Let them provide love, support and guidance. Don’t try to cope alone.

Give in occasionally. Be flexible! If you find you’re meeting constant opposition in either your personal or professional life, rethink your position or strategy. Arguing only intensifies stressful feelings. If you know you are right, stand your ground, but do so calmly and rationally. Make allowances for other’s opinions and be prepared to compromise. If you are willing to give in, others may meet you halfway. Not only will you reduce your stress, you may find better solutions to your problems.

Go easy with criticism. You may expect too much of yourself and others. Try not to feel frustrated, let down, disappointed or even trapped when another person does not measure up. The other person may be a wife, a husband, or child whom you are trying to change to suit yourself. Remember, everyone is unique, and has his or her own virtues, shortcomings, and right to develop as an individual.

Where to Get Help

Help may be as close as a friend or spouse. But if you think that you or someone you know may be under more stress than just dealing with a passing difficulty, it may be helpful to talk with your doctor, spiritual advisor, or employee assistance professional. They may suggest you visit with a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or other qualified counselor.

Ideas to consider when talking with a professional:

- List the things, which cause stress and tension in your life.
- How does this stress and tension affect you, your family and your job?
Can you identify the stress and tensions in your life as short or long term?
Do you have a support system of friends/family that will help you make positive changes?
What are your biggest obstacles to reducing stress?
What are you willing to change or give up for a less stressful and tension-filled life?
What have you tried already that didn't work for you?
If you do not have control of a situation, can you accept it and get on with your life?

Positive thinking: A skill for stress relief

Is your glass half-empty or half-full? How you answer this age-old question may reflect your outlook on life and whether you're optimistic or pessimistic.

In fact, studies show that these personality traits — optimism and pessimism — can affect how well you live and even how long you live.

Need an attitude adjustment? Find out how to reduce your stress by halting negative thoughts and practicing positive self-talk.

Be positive: Live longer, live healthier

Self-talk is the endless stream of thoughts that run through your head every day. These automatic thoughts can be positive or negative. If the thoughts that run through your head are mostly negative, your outlook on life is likely pessimistic. If your thoughts are mostly positive, you're likely an optimist.

Some of your self-talk comes from logic and reason. Other self-talk may arise from misconceptions that you create because of lack of information.

Researchers continue to explore the effects of optimism on health. The health benefits optimism may provide are:

- Decreased stress
- Greater resistance to catching the common cold
- A sense of well-being and improved health
- Reduced risk of coronary artery disease
- Breathing easier if you have chronic obstructive lung disease, such as emphysema
- Improved coping ability for women with high-risk pregnancies
- Living longer
- Better coping skills

It's unclear why optimists experience these health benefits. But one theory is that having a positive outlook
enables you to cope better with stressful situations, which reduces the effects of stress on your body.

**How to put a positive spin on negative thoughts**

Self-talk — the inner monologue sometimes referred to as automatic thinking — can be positive or negative. When the theme of your self-talk is mostly negative, your own misperceptions, lack of information and distorted ideas have overpowered your capacity for logic and reason. But if you weed out misconceptions and irrational thinking and challenge them with rational, positive thoughts, your self-talk will gradually become realistic and self-affirming.

Some common forms of irrational thinking are:

- **Filtering.** You magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones. For example, you had a great day at work. You completed your tasks ahead of time and were complimented for doing a speedy and thorough job. But you forgot one minor step. That evening, you focus only on your oversight and forget about the compliments you received.

- **Personalizing.** When something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself. For example, you hear that an evening out with friends is canceled and you assume that the change in plans is because no one wanted to be around you.

- **Catastrophizing.** You automatically anticipate the worst. You refuse to go out with friends for fear that you'll make a fool of yourself. Or one change in your daily routine leads you to think the day will be a disaster.

- **Polarizing.** You see things only as either good or bad, or black and white. There is no middle ground. You feel that you have to be perfect or you're a total failure.

You can learn to turn negative thoughts into positive ones. The process is simple, but it takes time and practice.

Throughout the day, stop and evaluate what you're thinking. If you find that your thoughts are negative, try to find a way to put a positive spin on them.

Start by following one simple rule: Don't say anything to yourself that you wouldn't say to anyone else.

Examples of typical negative self-talk and how you might apply a positive twist include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative self-talk</th>
<th>Positive spin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I've never done it before.</td>
<td>It's an opportunity to learn something new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's too complicated.</td>
<td>Let's look at it from a different angle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't have the resources.</td>
<td>Necessity is the mother of invention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There's not enough time.</td>
<td>Let's re-evaluate some priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There's no way it will work.</td>
<td>I can try to make it work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't have the expertise.</td>
<td>I'll find people who can help me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's good enough.</td>
<td>There's always room for improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's too radical a change.</td>
<td>Let's take a chance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one bothers to communicate with me.</td>
<td>I'll see if I can open the channels of communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm not going to get any better at this.</td>
<td>I'll give it one more try.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm never going to learn how to manage my stress.</td>
<td>I'm going to try to learn how to manage my stress.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Practice makes perfect**

If you tend to have a negative outlook, don't expect to become an optimist overnight. But eventually your self-talk will automatically contain less self-criticism and more self-acceptance.

Practicing positive self-talk will improve your outlook. When your state of mind is generally optimistic, you're able to handle everyday stress in a realistic and constructive way. That ability may contribute to the widely observed health benefits of being an optimist.

**Childhood Stress**

As providers and caretakers, adults tend to view the world of children as happy and carefree. After all, kids don't have jobs to keep or bills to pay, so what could they possibly have to worry about?

Plenty! Even very young children have worries and feel stress to some degree. Stress is a function of the demands placed on us and our ability (or sometimes our perceived ability) to meet them.

**Sources of Childhood Stress**

Pressures often come from outside sources (such as family, friends, or school), but they can also come from within. The pressure we place on ourselves can be most significant because there is often a discrepancy between what we think we ought to be doing and what we are actually doing in our lives.

Stress can affect anyone - even a child - who feels overwhelmed. A 2-year-old child, for example, may be anxious because the person he or she needs to feel good - a parent - isn't there enough to satisfy him or her. In preschoolers, separation from parents is the greatest cause of anxiety.

As children get older, academic and social pressures (especially the quest to fit in) create stress. In addition, well-meaning parents sometimes unwittingly add to the stress in their children's lives. For example, high-achieving parents often have great expectations for their children, who may lack their parents' motivation or capabilities. Parents who push their children to excel in sports or who enroll their children in too many activities may also cause unnecessary stress and frustration if their children don't share their goals.

Many professionals feel that a number of children are too busy and do not have time to play creatively or relax after school. Kids who begin to complain about the number of activities they are involved in or refuse to go to activities may be signaling to their parents that they are too busy. It's a good idea to talk with your child about how he or she is feeling about after-school activities. If he or she complains, talk about the pros and cons of quitting one of the activities. If quitting isn't an option, talk about ways that you can help your child manage his or her time and responsibilities so that they don't create so much anxiety.

Your child's stress level may be intensified by more than just what's happening in his or her own life. Does your child hear you talking about troubles at work, worrying about a relative's illness, or fighting with your spouse about financial matters? Parents need to be careful how they discuss such issues when their children are near because children will pick up on their parents' anxieties and start to worry themselves.

The events of September 11, 2001, and the changes in our world since then also added to the stress of many
children - and not just those who were directly affected by the tragedy. Children who watch replays of the disturbing images on TV or hear talk of plane crashes, war, and bioterrorism may worry about their own safety and that of the people they love. Talk to your child about what he or she sees and hears and monitor what he or she watches on TV so that you can help your child understand what's going on and reassure him or her.

Also, consider that complicating factors, such as an illness, death of a loved one, or a divorce, may be causing your child's stress. When these factors are added to the everyday pressures kids face, the stress is magnified. Even the most amicable divorce can be a difficult experience for children because their basic security system - their family - is undergoing a tough change. Separated or divorced parents should never put kids in a position of having to choose sides or expose them to negative comments about the other spouse.

**Recognizing Symptoms of Stress**

It's not always easy to recognize when your child is stressed out. Short-term behavioral changes, such as mood swings, acting out, changes in sleep patterns, or bedwetting, can be indicators of stress. Some children experience physical effects, including stomachaches and headaches. Others have trouble concentrating or completing schoolwork. Still others become withdrawn or spend a lot of time alone. Younger children may show signs of reacting to stress by picking up new habits like thumb sucking, hair twirling, or nose picking; older children may begin to lie, bully, or defy authority. A child who is stressed out may also have nightmares, difficulty leaving you, overreactions to minor problems, and drastic changes in academic performance.

**Reducing Your Child's Stress**

How can you help your child cope with stress? Proper rest and good nutrition can help increase your child's coping skills, as can good parenting. Make time for your child each day. Whether he or she needs to talk or just be in the same room with you, make yourself available. Even as your child gets older, this "quality time" is important. It's really hard for some people to come home after work, get down on the floor, and play with their kids or just talk to them about their day - especially if they've had a stressful day themselves. But by showing interest in your child's life, regardless of your child's age, you're showing your child that he or she is important to you.

Help your child cope with stress by talking with him or her about what may be causing it. Together, you can come up with a few solutions. Some possibilities are cutting back on after-school activities, spending more time talking with parents or teachers, developing an exercise regimen, or keeping a journal.

You can also help your child by anticipating potentially stressful situations and preparing him or her for them. For example, let your child know ahead of time that there is a doctor appointment coming up and talk about what will happen there.

Remember that some level of stress is normal; let your child know that it's OK to feel angry, scared, lonely, or anxious. Let him or her know that other people share his or her feelings.
Working Through the Stress With Your Child

When children are unwilling or have trouble discussing these issues, it may be helpful to talk with your child about your own concerns. This will help your child see that you are willing to discuss these issues and allow him or her to feel like he or she has someone to talk with when he or she is ready. If your child continues to show symptoms that concern you and is unwilling to talk, it might be helpful to see a counselor or another type of mental health care specialist.

Books are a great way to allow young children to identify with characters in stressful situations and learn how they cope. Some titles include *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst; *Tear Soup* by Pat Schreibert, Chuck DeKlyen, and Taylor Bills; and *Dinosaurs Divorce* by Marc Brown and Laurene Krasny Brown.

Most parents have the skills necessary to deal with their child's stress. The time to seek professional attention is when any change in behavior persists, when your child's stress is causing serious anxiety, or when the behavior is causing significant problems with your child's functioning at school or at home.

If you are unsuccessful after several attempts to get to the source of your child's troubles, see your child's doctor and talk to the counselors and teachers at your child's school. These sources can lead you to competent professional help.

Updated and reviewed by: David V. Sheslow, PhD, and Meredith Lutz Stehl, MS  Date reviewed: June 2005  Originally reviewed by: Pamela Bushnell, LCSW

Helping kids to be positive

So much depends on the way you look at life. Helping your child look on the bright side of life is a step towards preparing your child for a strong future.

What is optimism?

Optimism is being able to expect the best out of life's experiences. Being able to look on the bright side helps all of us to get on top of challenges and manage life's difficulties. It means having hope and a strong belief and confidence to deal with situations.

The building blocks of optimism include:

- having a go
- practicing
- coming to terms with success and failure
planning for the best outcome
having the belief and confidence to try again.

How do children develop optimism?

Some children are born with a 'sunny disposition' and a natural ability that lends itself to dealing with challenges and solving problems.

Other children may struggle to overcome difficulties, often expecting the worst to occur (making mountains out of molehills).

As children grow and develop they need as many opportunities as possible to experience success. Every time children achieve something they set out to do they start to develop a belief that they can go on trying and have more successes.

'Self talk' is what we say to ourselves to explain the things that happen through the day. When children can say to themselves that they can do something, they are more likely to succeed.

The way that adults think about and talk about their experiences are very powerful in shaping a child's beliefs about why success or failure might happen.

If we were to share our thoughts (our self talk) out loud, an optimist might be saying something like, "I was just saying to myself that most of the time when you allow enough time and really try hard with your math homework you get good results", rather than "You never allow yourself enough time and you never try hard enough with your math homework."

Why is optimism important?

If children believe they can succeed, they are more likely to give things a go. Optimists refuse to feel helpless and don't give up when faced with seemingly impossible problems.

They expect to succeed, believe in themselves and remain positive. Optimists are less likely to suffer from depression. Optimists are more likely to recognize and think about their past signs of successes and what they did to succeed.

The more optimistic children are, the more able they are to succeed and have a sense of the future and of being able to make friends and learn at school. Optimistic thinking words can be - maybe, sometimes, usually, possibly, perhaps.

Pessimism

Pessimists are people who feel down and helpless and, to them, everything seems too big and too hard to fix. There is often a sense of despair and hopelessness . . . looking on the worst side of the situation.

A tendency to make 'mountains out of molehills' means people can think problems are impossible and give up before even trying.

Pessimism gets worse with each set-back and soon becomes 'self-fulfilling'. For example, "Every time I try to throw a goal I miss anyway so I may as well not try anymore and not even go to practice. I never get picked for the team anyway."

Pessimists are more likely to give in to helplessness and are at a greater risk of developing depression.
Pessimistic thinking words can be - always, never, should, can't.

Special note. The world is not always bright and happy and bad things sometimes occur. Children need our help in learning how to weigh up situations realistically so that they can make safe decisions. It can be appropriate for children not to attempt a task if they determine that they are likely to be hurt. This is not being pessimistic.

What parents can do

- Be a good role model - Let your children hear your 'self talk' and share your positive thoughts with them.
- Teach your child to make realistic appraisals. "I'm hopeless at math" would give you the opportunity to ask, "Tell me what you can do well." After discussing the positives, look at ways of improving the math and talk about personal best rather than having to win all the time.
- 'Talk it again'. - Say things or use different words to make more positive sense out of a situation.
- Child: "I never have anyone to play with."
- Parent: "Sometimes it's hard to find a friend, but last week you had a good time with Mary."

Tell their own stories of overcoming hardships - "When I was at school I thought . . . but then I realized . . ."

- Use stories/videos of characters who overcome the odds to inspire children:
  - The Karate Kid
  - The Lion King
  - Free Willy

- Draw your child's attention to media and highlight public figures who have overcome hardship e.g. sporting celebrities who have a disability.

Give encouragement - what were the thoughts that popped into your head when you thought you were losing that tennis game? How did your thoughts change to enable you to change from losing to winning?

Help your children catch their helpful and unhelpful thoughts and stick with the helpful ones.

Remember some of the old sayings: 'If at first you don't succeed.' 'There's no such word as can't.' 'Every cloud has a silver lining.'

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Helping Teenagers With Stress

No. 66; Updated May 2005

Teenagers, like adults, may experience stress everyday and can benefit from learning stress management skills. Most teens experience more stress when they perceive a situation as dangerous, difficult, or painful and they do not have the resources to cope. Some sources of stress for teens might include:

- school demands and frustrations
- negative thoughts and feelings about themselves
- changes in their bodies
- problems with friends and/or peers at school
- unsafe living environment/neighborhood
- separation or divorce of parents
- chronic illness or severe problems in the family
- death of a loved one
- moving or changing schools
- taking on too many activities or having too high expectations
• family financial problems

Some teens become overloaded with stress. When it happens, inadequately managed stress can lead to anxiety, withdrawal, aggression, physical illness, or poor coping skills such as drug and/or alcohol use.

When we perceive a situation as difficult or painful, changes occur in our minds and bodies to prepare us to respond to danger. This "fight, flight, or freeze" response includes faster heart and breathing rate, increased blood to muscles of arms and legs, cold or clammy hands and feet, upset stomach and/or a sense of dread.

The same mechanism that turns on the stress response can turn it off. As soon as we decide that a situation is no longer dangerous, changes can occur in our minds and bodies to help us relax and calm down. This "relaxation response" includes decreased heart and breathing rate and a sense of well being. Teens that develop a "relaxation response" and other stress management skills feel less helpless and have more choices when responding to stress.

Parents can help their teen in these ways:

• Monitor if stress is affecting their teen's health, behavior, thoughts, or feelings
• Listen carefully to teens and watch for overloading
• Learn and model stress management skills
• Support involvement in sports and other pro-social activities

Teens can decrease stress with the following behaviors and techniques:

• Exercise and eat regularly
• Avoid excess caffeine intake which can increase feelings of anxiety and agitation
• Avoid illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco
• Learn relaxation exercises (abdominal breathing and muscle relaxation techniques)
• Develop assertiveness training skills. For example, state feelings in polite firm and not overly aggressive or passive ways: ("I feel angry when you yell at me" "Please stop yelling.")
• Rehearse and practice situations which cause stress. One example is taking a speech class if talking in front of a class makes you anxious
• Learn practical coping skills. For example, break a large task into smaller, more attainable tasks
• Decrease negative self talk: challenge negative thoughts about yourself with alternative neutral or positive thoughts. "My life will never get better” can be transformed into "I may feel hopeless now, but my life will probably get better if I work at it and get some help"
• Learn to feel good about doing a competent or "good enough” job rather than demanding perfection from yourself and others
• Take a break from stressful situations. Activities like listening to music, talking to a friend, drawing, writing, or spending time with a pet can reduce stress
• Build a network of friends who help you cope in a positive way

By using these and other techniques, teenagers can begin to manage stress. If a teen talks about or shows signs of being overly stressed, a consultation with a child and adolescent psychiatrist or qualified mental health professional may be helpful.

Relax: Techniques to help you achieve tranquility
You may think that taking a few minutes to unwind at the end of the day is all the relaxation you need. Unfortunately, a few minutes won't provide the stress-reducing benefits of deep relaxation.

When you truly relax, you eliminate tension from your body and your mind. And if you're experiencing a lot of stress in your life, you need to make time to relax. Otherwise, the negative effects of your body's stress response — which may include headaches, insomnia or increased risk of heart disease — can harm your health.

Learning to relax doesn't have to be difficult. Try some simple techniques to get started on your way to tranquility and the health benefits it provides.

Why relax?

With so many things to do, it's easy to put off taking time to relax each day. But in doing so, you miss out on the health benefits of relaxation. Relaxation can improve how your body responds to stress by:

- Slowing your heart rate, meaning less work for your heart
- Reducing blood pressure
- Slowing your breathing rate
- Reducing the need for oxygen
- Increasing blood flow to the major muscles
- Lessening muscle tension

After practicing relaxation skills, you may experience the following benefits:

- Fewer symptoms of illness, such as headaches, nausea, diarrhea and pain
- Few emotional responses such as anger, crying, anxiety, apprehension and frustration
- More energy
- Improved concentration
- Greater ability to handle problems
- More efficiency in daily activities

As you learn to relax, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations caused by the stress response. In time, you may even notice your body's reaction before you take mental note of your stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to switch to relaxation mode the moment your muscles start to tense.

Relaxation techniques

So how do you truly relax? These techniques can help you get started. Don't be discouraged if you don't feel the benefits right away. Be patient, take your time and practice. And stay motivated by imagining the peace and serenity you're learning to achieve.

Relaxed breathing  Have you ever noticed how you breathe when you're stressed? Stress typically causes rapid, shallow breathing. This kind of breathing sustains other aspects of the stress response, such as rapid heart rate and perspiration. If you can get control of your breathing, the spiraling effects of acute stress will automatically become less intense. Relaxed breathing, also called diaphragmatic breathing, can help you.
Practice this basic technique twice a day, every day, and whenever you feel tense. Follow these steps:

- **Inhale.** With your mouth closed and your shoulders relaxed, inhale as slowly and deeply as you can to the count of six. As you do that, push your stomach out. Allow the air to fill your diaphragm.
- **Hold.** Keep the air in your lungs as you slowly count to four.
- **Exhale.** Release the air through your mouth as you slowly count to six.
- **Repeat.** Complete the inhale-hold-exhale cycle three to five times.

**Progressive muscle relaxation** The goal of progressive muscle relaxation is to reduce the tension in your muscles. First, find a quiet place where you'll be free from interruption. Loosen tight clothing and remove your glasses or contacts if you'd like.

Tense each muscle group for at least five seconds and then relax for at least 30 seconds. Repeat before moving to the next muscle group.

- **Upper part of your face.** Lift your eyebrows toward the ceiling, feeling the tension in your forehead and scalp. Relax. Repeat.
- **Central part of your face.** Squint your eyes tightly and wrinkle your nose and mouth, feeling the tension in the center of your face. Relax. Repeat.
- **Lower part of your face.** Clench your teeth and pull back the corners of your mouth toward your ears. Show your teeth like a snarling dog. Relax. Repeat.
- **Neck.** Gently touch your chin to your chest. Feel the pull in the back of your neck as it spreads into your head. Relax. Repeat.
- **Shoulders.** Pull your shoulders up toward your ears, feeling the tension in your shoulders, head, neck and upper back. Relax. Repeat.
- **Upper arms.** Pull your arms back and press your elbows in toward the sides of your body. Try not to tense your lower arms. Feel the tension in your arms, shoulders and into your back. Relax. Repeat.
- **Hands and lower arms.** Make a tight fist and pull up your wrists. Feel the tension in your hands, knuckles and lower arms. Relax. Repeat.
- **Chest, shoulders and upper back.** Pull your shoulders back as if you're trying to make your shoulder blades touch. Relax. Repeat.
- **Stomach.** Pull your stomach in toward your spine, tightening your abdominal muscles. Relax. Repeat.
- **Upper legs.** Squeeze your knees together and lift your legs up off the chair or from wherever you're relaxing. Feel the tension in your thighs. Relax. Repeat.
- **Lower legs.** Raise your feet toward the ceiling while flexing them toward your body. Feel the tension in your calves. Relax. Repeat.
- **Feet.** Turn your feet inward and curl your toes up and out. Relax. Repeat.
- Perform progressive muscle relaxation at least once or twice each day to get the maximum benefit. Each session should last about 10 minutes.

**Autogenic relaxation** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. During this type of relaxation, you repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax and reduce the tension in your muscles. Find a peaceful place where you'll be free of interruptions. Then follow these steps:

- Choose a focus word, phrase, or image you find relaxing. Examples of words or phrases include
"peace" or "I am peaceful". This is called a mantra.

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes.
- Relax your muscles, starting at your head, working down your body to your feet.
- Breathe slowly and naturally, focusing on your word, phrase or image.
- Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. If your mind wanders, that's OK. Gently return your focus to your breathing and the word, phrase or image you selected.
- After time is up, sit quietly for a few minutes with your eyes closed. Open your eyes and sit in silence for a few more minutes.

**Listen to soothing sounds** If you have about 10 minutes and a quiet room, you can take a mental vacation almost anytime. Consider these two types of relaxation CDs or tapes to help you unwind, rest your mind or take a visual journey to a peaceful place.

- **Spoken word.** These CDs use spoken suggestions to guide your meditation, educate you on stress reduction or take you on an imaginary visual journey to a peaceful place.
- **Soothing music or nature sounds.** Music has the power to affect your thoughts and feelings. Soft, soothing music can help you relax and lower your stress level.

No one CD works for everyone, so try several CDs to find which works best for you. When possible, listen to samples in the store. Consider asking your friends or a trusted professional for recommendations.

**Combine movement with meditation**  Yoga is a specific system of exercises for reaching physical and mental control and well-being. Tai chi is a slow, dance-like martial art that focuses on concentration, stretching, balance and grace. Yoga and Tai chi can help you relax. They also help you maintain muscle and joint flexibility.

**Keep practicing**

Relaxation is a skill. As with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself. Stay motivated to lessen the negative impact of stress on your body and to experience a greater sense of calm in your life.

**Work-life balance: Ways to restore harmony and reduce stress**

Finding work-life balance in today's frenetically-paced world is no simple task. Spend more time at work than at home and you miss out on a rewarding personal life. Then again, if you're facing challenges in your personal life such as caring for an aging parent or coping with marital or financial problems, concentrating on your job can be difficult.

Whether the problem is too much focus on work or too little, when your work life and your personal life feel out of balance, stress — and its harmful effects — is the result.

To take control, first consider how the world of work has changed, then reevaluate your relationship to work and apply these strategies for striking a more healthy balance.

**How work invades your personal life**
There was a time when employees showed up for work Monday through Friday and worked eight to nine hours. The boundaries between work and home were fairly clear then. But the world has changed and, unfortunately, the boundaries have blurred for many workers. Here's why:

**Global economy.** As more skilled workers enter the global labor market and companies outsource or move more jobs to reduce labor costs, people feel pressured to work longer and produce more to protect their jobs.

**International business.** Work continues around the world 24 hours a day for some people. If you work in an international organization, you might be on call around the clock for troubleshooting or consulting.

**Advanced communication technology.** People now have the ability to work anywhere — from their home, from their car and even on vacation. And some managers expect that.

**Longer hours.** Employers commonly ask employees to work longer hours than they're scheduled. Often, overtime is mandatory. If you hope to move up the career ladder, you may find yourself regularly working more than 40 hours a week to achieve and exceed expectations.

**Changes in family roles.** Today's married worker is typically part of a dual-career couple, which makes it difficult to find time to meet commitments to family, friends and community.

If you've experienced any of these challenges, you understand how easy it is for work to invade your personal life.

**Overtime obsession**

It's tempting to work overtime if you're an hourly employee. By doing so, you can earn extra money for a child's college fund or dream vacation. Some people need to work overtime to stay on top of family finances or pay for extra, unplanned expenses.

If you're on salary, working more hours may not provide extra cash, but it can help you keep up with your workload. Being willing to arrive early and stay late every day may also help earn that promotion or bonus.

Before you sign up for overtime, consider the pros and cons of working extra hours on your work-life balance:

**Fatigue.** Your ability to think and your eye-hand coordination decrease when you're tired. This means you're less productive and may make mistakes. These mistakes can lead to injury or rework and negatively impact your professional reputation.

**Family.** You may miss out on important events, such as your child's first bike ride, your father's 60th birthday or your high-school reunion. Missing out on important milestones may harm relationships with your loved ones.

**Friends.** Trusted friends are a key part of your support system. But if you're spending time at the office instead of with them, you'll find it difficult to nurture those friendships.

**Expectations.** If you work extra hours as a general rule, you may be given more responsibility. This could create a never-ending and increasing cycle, causing more concerns and challenges.

Sometimes working overtime is important. It's a choice you can make to adjust to a new job or new boss or to pay your bills. If you work for a company that requires mandatory overtime, you won't be able to avoid it, but you can learn to manage it.

If you work overtime for financial reasons or to climb the corporate ladder, do so in moderation. Most importantly, say no when you're too tired, when it's affecting your health or when you have crucial family obligations.

**Striking the best work-life balance**

It isn't easy to juggle the demands of career and personal life. For most people, it's an ongoing challenge to reduce stress and maintain harmony in key areas of their life. Here are some ideas to help you find the balance that's best for you:

**Keep a log.** Track everything you do for one week. Include work-related and non-work-related activities. Decide what's necessary and satisfies you the most. Cut or delegate activities you don't enjoy, don't have time for or do
only out of guilt. If you don't have the authority to make certain decisions, talk to your supervisor.

**Take advantage of your options.** Find out if your employer offers flex hours, a compressed work week, job-sharing or telecommuting for your role. The flexibility may alleviate some of your stress and free up some time.

**Manage your time.** Organize household tasks efficiently. Doing one or two loads of laundry every day rather than saving it all for your day off, and running errands in batches rather than going back and forth several times are good places to begin. A weekly family calendar of important dates and a daily list of to-dos will help you avoid deadline panic. If your employer offers a course in time management, sign up for it.

**Rethink your cleaning standards.** An unmade bed or sink of dirty dishes won't impact the quality of your life. Do what needs to be done and let the rest go. If you can afford it, pay someone else to clean your house.

**Communicate clearly.** Limit time-consuming misunderstandings by communicating clearly and listening carefully. Take notes if it helps.

**Fight the guilt.** Remember, having a family and a job is okay — for both men and women.

**Nurture yourself.** Set aside time each day for an activity that you enjoy, such as walking, working out or listening to music. Unwind after a hectic workday by reading, practicing yoga or taking a bath or shower.

**Set aside one night each week for recreation.** Take the phone off the hook, power down the computer and turn off the TV. Discover activities you can do with your partner, family or friends, such as playing golf, fishing or canoeing. Making time for activities you enjoy will rejuvenate you.

**Protect your day off.** Try to schedule some of your routine chores on workdays so that your days off are more relaxing.

**Get enough sleep.** There's nothing as stressful and potentially dangerous as working when you're sleep-deprived. Not only is your productivity affected, but you can also make costly mistakes. You may then have to work even more hours to make up for these mistakes.

**Bolster your support system.** Give yourself the gift of a trusted friend or co-worker to talk with during times of stress or hardship. If you're part of a religious community, take advantage of the support your religious leader can provide. Ensure you have trusted friends and relatives who can assist you when you need to work overtime or travel for your job.

**Seek professional help.** Everyone needs help from time to time. If your life feels too chaotic to manage and you're spinning your wheels worrying about it, talk with a professional such as your doctor, a psychologist or a counselor recommended by your employee assistance program (EAP).

Services provided by your EAP are usually free of charge and confidential. This means no one but you will know what you discuss. And if you're experiencing high levels of stress because of marital, financial, chemical dependency or legal problems, an EAP counselor can link you to helpful services in your community.

You now have some suggestions for improving the balance between your work and your personal life. Why not take the next step and give these suggestions a try?

Balance doesn't mean doing everything. Examine your priorities and set boundaries. Be firm in what you can and cannot do. Only you can restore harmony to your lifestyle.

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**By Mayo Clinic Staff**

### Stress, depression and the holidays: 12 tips for coping

For some people, the holidays bring unwelcome guests — stress and depression. And it's no wonder. In an effort to pull off a perfect Hallmark holiday, you might find yourself facing a dizzying array of demands — work, parties, shopping, baking, cleaning, caring for elderly parents or kids on school break, and scores of other chores. So much for peace and joy, right?

Actually, with some practical tips, you can minimize the stress and depression that often accompany the holidays. You may even end up enjoying the holidays more than you thought you would.
The trigger points of holiday stress

Holiday stress and depression are often the result of three main trigger points. Understanding these trigger points can help you plan ahead on how to accommodate them.

Here are the three areas that commonly trigger holiday stress or depression:

**Relationships.** Relationships can cause turmoil, conflict or stress at any time. But tensions are often heightened during the holidays. Family misunderstandings and conflict can intensify — especially if you're all thrust together for several days. Conflicts are bound to arise with so many needs and interests to accommodate. On the other hand, if you're facing the holidays without a loved one, you may find yourself especially lonely or sad.

**Finances.** Like your relationships, your financial situation can cause stress at any time of the year. Overspending during the holidays on gifts, travel, food and entertainment can increase stress as you try to make ends meet while ensuring that everyone on your gift list is happy.

**Physical demands.** The strain of shopping, attending social gatherings and preparing holiday meals can wipe you out. Feeling exhausted increases your stress, creating a vicious cycle. Exercise and sleep — good antidotes for stress and fatigue — may take a back seat to chores and errands. High demands, stress, lack of exercise, and overindulgence in food and drink — these are all ingredients for holiday illness.

12 pre-emptive strategies for holiday stress

When stress is at its peak, it's hard to stop and regroup. Take steps to help prevent normal holiday depression from progressing into chronic depression. Try these tips:

**Acknowledge your feelings.** If a loved one has recently died or you aren't near your loved ones, realize that it's normal to feel sadness or grief. It's OK now and then to take time just to cry or express your feelings. You can't force yourself to be happy just because it's the holiday season.

**Seek support.** If you feel isolated or down, seek out family members and friends, or community, religious or social services. They can offer support and companionship. Consider volunteering at a community or religious function. Getting involved and helping others can lift your spirits and broaden your social circle. Also, enlist support for organizing holiday gatherings, as well as meal preparation and cleanup. You don't have to go it alone. Don't be a martyr.

**Be realistic.** As families change and grow, traditions often change as well. Hold on to those you can and want to. But understand in some cases that may no longer be possible. Perhaps your entire extended family can't gather together at your house. Instead, find new ways to celebrate together from afar, such as sharing pictures, e-mails or videotapes.

**Set differences aside.** Try to accept family members and friends as they are, even if they don't live up to all your expectations. Set aside grievances until a more appropriate time for discussion. With stress and activity levels high, the holidays might not be conducive to making quality time for relationships. And be understanding if others get upset or distressed when something goes awry. Chances are, they're feeling the effects of holiday stress, too.

**Stick to a budget.** Before you go shopping, decide how much money you can afford to spend on gifts and other items. Then be sure to stick to your budget. If you don't, you could feel anxious and tense for months afterward as you struggle to pay the bills. Don't try to buy happiness with an avalanche of gifts. Donate to a charity in someone's name, give homemade gifts or start a family gift exchange.

**Plan ahead.** Set aside specific days for shopping, baking, visiting friends and other activities. Plan your menus and then make one big food-shopping trip. That'll help prevent a last-minute scramble to buy forgotten ingredients — and you'll have time to make another pie, if the first one's a flop. Allow extra
time for travel so that delays won't worsen your stress.

**Learn to say no.** Believe it or not, people will understand if you can't do certain projects or activities. If you say yes only to what you really want to do, you'll avoid feeling resentful and overwhelmed. If it's really not possible to say no when your boss asks you to work overtime, try to remove something else from your agenda to make up for the lost time.

**Don't abandon healthy habits.** Don't let the holidays become a dietary free-for-all. Some indulgence is OK, but overindulgence only adds to your stress and guilt. Have a healthy snack before holiday parties so that you don't go overboard on sweets, cheese or drinks. Continue to get plenty of sleep and schedule time for physical activity.

**Take a breather.** Make some time for yourself. Spending just 15 minutes alone, without distractions, may refresh you enough to handle everything you need to do. Steal away to a quiet place, even if it's the bathroom, for a few moments of solitude. Take a walk at night and stargaze. Listen to soothing music. Find something that clears your mind, slows your breathing and restores your calm.

**Rethink resolutions.** Resolutions can set you up for failure if they're unrealistic. Don't resolve to change your whole life to make up for past excess. Instead, try to return to basic, healthy lifestyle routines. Set smaller, more specific goals with a reasonable time frame. Choose only those resolutions that help you feel valuable and provide more than only fleeting moments of happiness.

**Forget about perfection.** Holiday TV specials are filled with happy endings. But in real life, people don't usually resolve problems within an hour or two. Something always comes up. You may get stuck late at the office and miss your daughter's school play, your sister may dredge up an old argument, you may forget to put nuts in the cake, and your mother may criticize how you and your partner are raising the kids. All in the same day. Expect and accept imperfections.

**Seek professional help if you need it.** Despite your best efforts, you may find yourself feeling persistently sad or anxious, plagued by physical complaints, unable to sleep, irritable and hopeless, and unable to face routine chores. If these feelings last for several weeks, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. You may have depression.

**Have it both ways**

Remember, one key to minimizing holiday stress and depression is knowing that the holidays can trigger stress and depression. Accept that things aren't always going to go as planned. Then take active steps to manage stress and depression during the holidays. You may actually enjoy the holidays this year more than you thought you could.