

SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

Everyone experiences stress at some point in their life. Stress can look and feel different depending on the cause. It can be ongoing, accumulating over time due to prolonged stressors, such as illness, or simply in response to common, everyday responsibilities. Caretaking for loved ones, balancing work and personal life, finances and more can all take a toll on our emotional wellbeing over time. Stress can also be acute, following a particular event or situation, such as a death of a loved one or the loss of a job. No matter the cause, stress can stand in the way of feeling and functioning at your best. The information below will help you identify when you may be experiencing the effects of stress, and some strategies for coping with it effectively.

Indicators of stress

You may not always notice the impact of stress, or you may attribute the effects to something else. Keep in mind, your response to stress may look different from someone else's. It is important to be aware of what unhealthy levels of stress look like for you so you can address it proactively. Below are some common indicators you may notice when stress is reaching unhealthy levels:

PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Low energy › Changes in appetite › Jaw clenching › Headaches, migraines › Difficulty sleeping › Fatigue › Nausea, upset stomach › Muscle tension/aches › Frequent illness › High blood pressure › Sweating › Weight gain/loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Forgetfulness › Difficulty making decisions › “Overthinking,” fixating on an issue › Difficulty concentrating › Persistent negative thoughts › Disorientation, feeling “dazed” › Distressing dreams › Racing thoughts › Thoughts or images of a particular event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Anxiety, worry, fear › Irritability, frustration, anger › Sensitivity to criticism › Restlessness › Feeling unmotivated › Feeling “frazzled” or disorganized › Sadness › Overwhelmed › Emotional outbursts › Helplessness › Grief, sense of loss › Numbness or apathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Nervous habits (e.g., nail biting) › Job performance issues › Procrastination, avoiding responsibilities › Withdrawal from social connections › Disrupted eating patterns › Conflicts with others › Communication difficulties › Increased use of tobacco, alcohol, or drugs

These effects of stress are usually temporary, but their severity and duration can be reduced when you practice good self-care. Read on to learn strategies for coping with stress in a healthy way.

Physical self-care strategies

- › **Getting enough sleep to feel rested** is key to stress management. It impacts both mood and energy level. Establish a routine and get to bed at a reasonable hour.
- › **Physical activity** is a good way to reduce feelings of stress and tension. It will also help you sleep better, if it's done at least several hours before bedtime. Talk to your doctor before starting any exercise routine.
- › **Be mindful about what you're eating.** Stress encourages you to reach for unhealthy foods (such as chips or cookies) because they trigger comforting brain chemicals. Try to resist cravings by planning meals ahead of time and staying well-stocked in healthy snack items (fruits, vegetables).
- › Try **deep breathing, meditation or progressive relaxation exercises.** These are easy ways to help you release tension in the moment, and can help you refocus on the tasks of the day. Search online for easy relaxation techniques you can incorporate into your day.
- › **Avoid alcohol and drugs** as a means to cope, unless your doctor gives you a needed prescription.

Cognitive strategies

- › **Focus on what you have control over.** Give your mind a break from worries about things outside of your control. Do what you can to address the immediate needs of you and those around you. Let go of the rest.
- › **Move thoughts to the present.** "Worst case scenario" thinking can spiral into negative thought patterns. Take a long, deep breath and bring your thoughts to the present moment. What is constant, unchanged, and "okay" in your world right now?
- › **Use a mantra.** Repeat encouraging and positive self-statements, such as "I can handle this". Write down an inspirational quote or phrase, and put it in an accessible place. Glance at it throughout the day and repeat to yourself when you feel stress.
- › **Remind yourself of your abilities and strengths.** Think about other times in your life that have been difficult. How did you get through them? Can you use those same strategies now?
- › **Give yourself credit.** Review what you accomplished at the end of each day to help you feel purposeful. Recognize what you've done to support others. Focus on what you have done, rather than all that is left to do.

Emotional self-care strategies

- › **Reach out for support.** Consider friends, family members, spiritual communities, support groups, or even a professional counselor as support. Talk out your thoughts and worries with others who can give voice to your fears or help brainstorm solutions.
- › **Laugh!** Watch a funny movie or TV show. Frame photos of fond memories and have them easily accessible. Finding a way to laugh helps us feel lighter and more positive.
- › **Be compassionate with yourself.** Remember that you can't "fix" every situation or have all of the answers. Treat yourself as you would a friend who is facing challenges – by giving comfort and kindness.

Behavioral self-care strategies

- › **Structure your time.** Large blocks of unstructured time will tempt your thoughts to center endlessly around what troubles you most. Create daily routines and a normal schedule to help you feel balanced.
- › **Set short-term goals.** What are some things that you want to get done in the next hour? The next day? The next week? Focus on short-term accomplishments to help you feel in control.
- › Nurture yourself by **doing something calming and relaxing** in your free time. Maybe it's a hot bath, reading a book, or sitting outside in the sunshine. Make time for these activities to recharge your batteries.

Get support.

Your **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** is available 24/7 to offer support to you and your household members. Find resources on legal, financial, work/life, and emotional support to help you manage your stressors.

