



Stress and How to Manage It

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Life is unpredictable. We often find ourselves in situations that require us to adapt quickly with little time to prepare. **Stress** is the physical and psychological response we feel when we don't have the tools to deal with a situation effectively. Significant or prolonged stress can have serious effects on our wellbeing, but we can learn skills to minimize these effects and stay healthy even in difficult circumstances.

What Causes Stress?

Much of our stress is caused by **environmental and social factors** beyond our control. Dramatic changes in your environment such as a job loss, relationship break, health crisis, or death of a loved one, can create a stress response. Less radical changes, such as increased job responsibilities, financial strain, or loneliness can cause a similar reaction.

Stress can also be caused by **unhealthy thinking patterns** that affect our beliefs about a situation or our ability to handle it. Some common "thinking traps" include all-or-nothing thinking (seeing things as either "great" or "terrible" with nothing in between), catastrophizing (expecting the worst to happen), overgeneralizing (expecting bad things to happen all the time after one thing goes wrong), or mental filtering (noticing only the worst aspects of a situation and ignoring the positive). These thinking processes can make an already stressful situation feel even more overwhelming.

The Stress Response

When we experience these stressors, our body responds as if there is a threat. Our heart rate increases, our pupils dilate to increase awareness, our blood circulation reduces to protect vital organs, and we produce increased adrenalin. When we stay in this state for too long, we can develop health issues such as heart problems, ulcers, depression, sexual dysfunction, and many more.

People generally respond to stress by **fighting** the stressful situation (addressing it directly in an attempt to solve the problem) or **fleeing** (trying to avoid the situation by denying or minimizing it). Some people have a **freeze** response, which causes them to feel paralyzed and unable to take any action at all. When we react in a way that is not appropriate for the situation, our response can make things even worse.

Learning to Manage Stress

Fortunately, there are many ways to build stress management skills. These skills work best when practiced often, so that they become well-learned and are available to you in stressful moments. Here are some good ones to try:

- Take care of your body through good nutrition, sleep, and exercise habits. Yoga, stretching exercises, and massage can help release muscle tension.
- Learn and practice relaxation skills such as deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery to calm the stress response once it has started.
- Develop and maintain healthy thinking habits to help you prevent and manage stress.
- Connect with family or friends who can provide emotional support or help with everyday tasks when you don't have the time or bandwidth to manage on your own.
- Make time for fun on your own or with others. Taking some time to enjoy life is refreshing and helps you manage your life with more efficiency and less stress.
- Self-help books such as [The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook](#) have lots of useful strategies you can try. Additional resources can be found on [The American Psychological Association](#) website and [The American Institute of Stress](#) website.
- Psychotherapy can provide individualized support as you learn stress management tools that fit your preferences and circumstances. In some cases, medication can help calm you so that you are better able to learn the skills to manage your stress more effectively.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.