

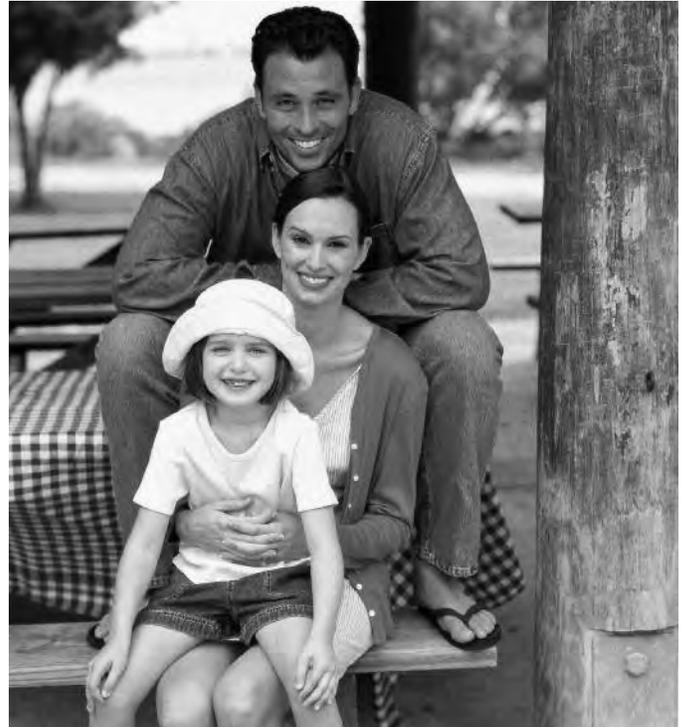
Balancing Stress for Healthy Living

Understanding Stress

Understanding stress

Congratulations on taking a step toward improving your overall health and well-being. This information is designed to help you discover the proper skills, tools and techniques to combat stress — today and in the future. Stress is not discriminating — it's a part of life and something everyone experiences. The real question is not whether you have stress, but rather, what do you do when things get stressful?

Stress is individual — what is stressful for you may not be for someone else. As for coping with or managing it, there are a variety of ways to tackle stress. Through talking with your health coach, you can learn about communication, time management, relaxation techniques and healthy living.



Balancing stress ... for healthy living

Picture this...

A glorious day — bright sunshine, flowers in bloom, fresh-cut grass, an ice-cold glass of lemonade, and you. In the midst of it all, your phone rings. On the other end of the line, a voice offers you that exciting new job you've been hoping for ... at last.



Now picture this...

Monday morning — you're late for work and stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. Making matters worse, another driver cuts you off. You slam on your brakes and your coffee spills everywhere. Not a good start to your work week, let alone your day.



Both scenarios generate stress — one positive and one negative. You've likely experienced both types, yet never guessed that a happy situation is actually classified as stress. Read on to learn more about the different types of stress and how it affects you.

What is stress?

Stress is:

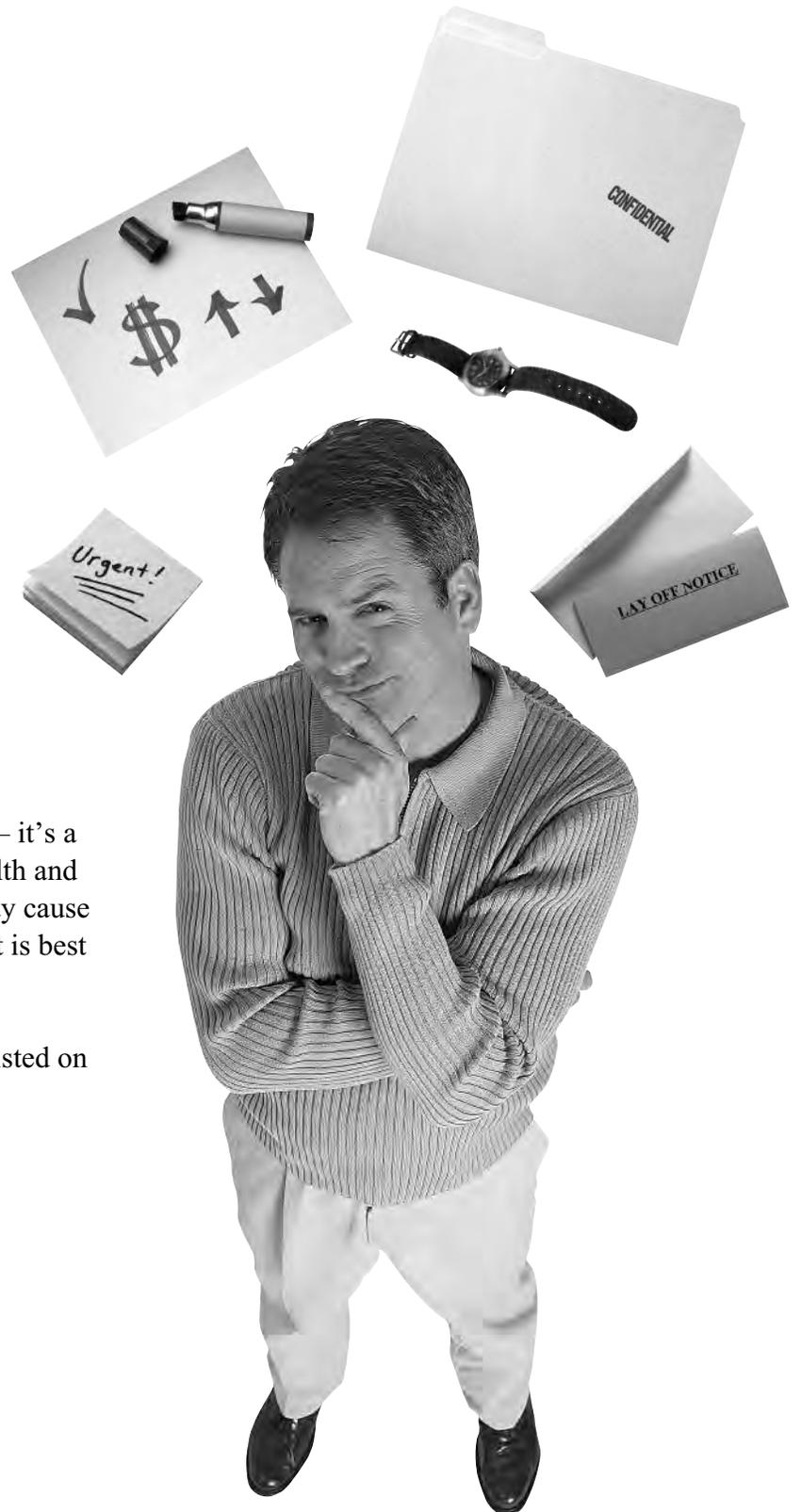
- Your body's physiological and behavioral response to the demands in your environment.
- Different for everyone — what's stressful for one person may not be stressful for another.
- Inevitable, since our lives are ever-changing and filled with demands.

Stress can be:

- Both positive and negative.
- Harmful to your health if it becomes overwhelming.

Stress is something everyone experiences — it's a part of life. Too much stress may cause health and relationship problems, whereas too little may cause boredom. The key is to find the balance that is best for you.

Take a look at the different types of stress listed on the following page.



The different types of stress

Eustress

Eustress is the positive or “good” stress that happens during pleasant situations. It may surprise you, but certain stressors can lead to positive outcomes. Remember how you felt earlier, imagining the scenario of ultimately being offered that exciting new job? That is just one example of eustress. Other examples include the excitement of buying a new home, getting married, or the feeling you get from a good workout. Eustress can help boost confidence, teach new skills and increase motivation. Although this type of stress is often overlooked when thinking about stress management, understanding positive coping techniques can help you address “distress” more effectively.

Distress

Distress is the negative or “bad” stress that occurs when you perceive stress as dangerous, difficult, unfair or painful. Examples include the loss of a job, death of a loved one, long-term illness, serious injury, divorce and depression.

Acute stress

Acute stress is short-term stress. It can be eustress or distress. An example of acute stress is presenting in front of a group of people. You sweat, your heart races and your breathing quickens — all signs of stress. These feelings only last a short time and your body recovers quickly.

Chronic stress

Chronic stress lasts for longer periods of time. This type of stress is due to significant events, yet also occurs when little stressors accumulate and you are unable to bounce back from them. Examples of chronic stress include long-term illness, downsizing or reorganizing at your workplace, and long-term marital troubles. Chronic stress is probably the most dangerous to your health, as you become more prone to burnout and other negative effects.

There is no “magic bullet” when it comes to managing stress. We’re all capable of handling some stress. Some people tend to be more resilient, bouncing back from stress fairly easily, while others have a harder time adjusting. By learning about stress management, you can become more resilient and improve your overall well-being and quality of life.

The real question is not whether you have stress, but rather, *what do you do when things get stressful? How do you react? How does it affect your health?*

Stress can be the fuel that increases your productivity and moves you toward better health.

Stress — causes and responses

What causes stress?

Things that cause stress are called “stressors.” They are the demands, changes and pressures cast upon you. They can range from daily hassles, like losing your car keys, to major life events, like a change in your job or getting married.

What is a stress response?

A stress response is how we react to a stressor. The way you perceive your stressors determines the intensity of your stress response. So whether or not you feel stressed depends on your perception of the situation and how you react to it. Here’s a simple example:

Stressor:

You realize that even though you made every attempt to be on time, you are going to arrive a few minutes late for a very important meeting.

Stress response:

Your breathing and heart rate quicken. Your body releases extra energy into your bloodstream. Your blood flow increases to your large muscles.

This stress response allows you to walk more quickly to get to your meeting faster.

A stress response by itself is not a negative thing. In fact, your body reacts to stress in order to help you cope. Yet over time, the physical changes that occur in response to stressors can be damaging. Most people find that they cope better with some stressors than others, and that their stress response varies depending on other life factors. At the same time, we can usually identify our individual patterns and coping style.

In order to learn how to manage stress, it’s important to understand how it happens.

For stress to occur, there must be two distinct ingredients:

- 1** A situation that has the potential to be stressful
- 2** A reaction to the stressful situation



Why do stressors affect us?

Because we care. Stressors involve things that matter to us, like tackling our to-do list, meeting our family responsibilities, taking time to do things we enjoy, or improving the quality of our community. When stressors impact us, we respond.

Stress and your body

Stress starts in your brain. Once you perceive a situation as stressful, your body produces a reaction that physically prepares you to experience the *fight or flight response*. Your body automatically responds by producing hormones that prepare you to do

something (physically) to address the impending danger or demands. The fight or flight process is a response to stress hormones that are released from your adrenal glands after a signal occurs in your brain.

What are these stress hormones?

- **Adrenaline** increases your breathing, heart rate and blood pressure.
- **Cortisol** increases the amount of blood glucose (sugar) to your brain (to help you think fast and focus your attention) and to your muscles (to help you run fast and increase your strength).

The purpose of these stress hormones is to get your body ready to react (the “fight or flight” response). When this triggers, your body gears up for action. Here are some examples of how your body prepares:

- Heart rate increases
- Blood pressure rises
- Muscular strength increases (or tightens)
- Brain activity increases
- Breathing rate quickens
- Metabolic rate speeds up
- Potential energy sources (sugar and cholesterol) release into your circulation



Regardless of the situation, your body’s reaction remains the same whenever you encounter a stressor. All systems in your body gear up to defend against the perceived threat or danger, which is actually very helpful in life-threatening situations. On the other hand, it’s not so helpful if the stress

you’re experiencing is caused from chronic things in your daily life (e.g., your job, finances, family matters, etc.). Unfortunately, your body cannot tell the difference. So if your stress is ongoing, those stress hormones can interfere with your health.

Indicators of stress

The way in which we respond to stress varies from person to person. Symptoms that develop as a result of stress also vary and may depend on a number of

things, like genetics, your prior experiences and your health. Typically, the effects of stress are physical, emotional, mental and behavioral.

Physical effects:

As you've already read, when you are under stress, your body releases stress hormones. Stress itself and an accumulation of stress hormones over time may contribute to infection and illness. Here are some examples of how your physical health may be affected:

Brain — Can trigger mental and emotional problems, like anxiety, personality changes, depression, irritability, insomnia and memory loss.

Digestive system — Can lead to nausea and diarrhea or intestinal problems (e.g., irritable bowel syndrome or peptic ulcers).

Reproductive organs — Can cause menstrual disorders, decreased fertility and erectile dysfunction.

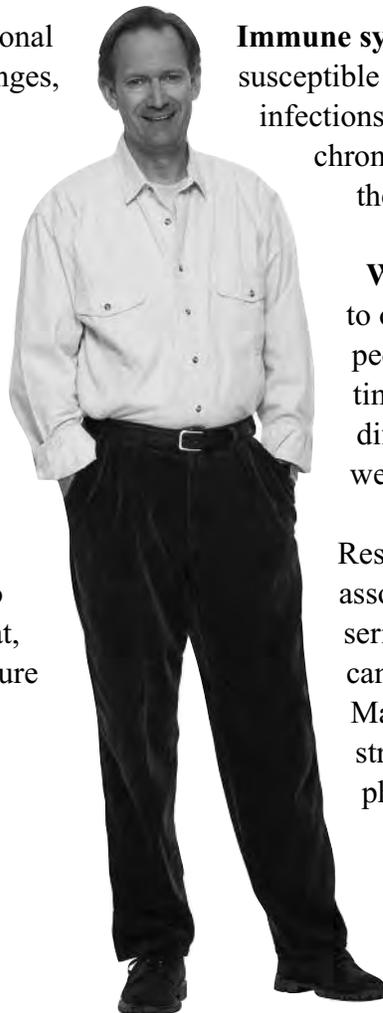
Cardiovascular system — Can lead to high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat, high cholesterol, heart attack, heart failure and coronary artery disease.

Lungs — Can increase symptoms of asthma and COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease).

Immune system — Can make you more susceptible to illnesses from colds and minor infections to major diseases. Or if you have chronic illness already, stress can make these symptoms worse.

Weight gain and obesity — Can lead to overeating and less activity for some people. If this lasts for a long period of time, these may become habits that are difficult to change, therefore causing weight gain and obesity.

Research shows that stress is also associated with the development of serious health conditions like diabetes, cancer and even Alzheimer's disease. Many of us don't realize we are under stress until we start to suffer from the physical consequences.



Indicators of stress

Emotional, mental and behavioral effects:

Stress causes a wide range of emotional reactions, including anxiety, depression, anger, impatience, worry and nervousness. It can also decrease concentration, memory and sense of humor. When overwhelmed, you can feel a loss of control over your environment and external demands. This can trigger unhealthy lifestyle behaviors, including smoking, overeating, less activity and exercise, and using alcohol or drugs.

Signs of unmanaged stress

Physical:

- Fatigue
- Insomnia

Emotional, mental and behavioral:

- Negative thinking
- Mind racing
- Worry
- Lack of motivation
- Anger
- Overeating
- Sedentary lifestyle



Signs of managed stress

Physical:

- Good energy level
- Feeling rested

Emotional, mental and behavioral:

- Positive self-image
- Setting realistic limits
- Feeling calm or reassured
- Sense of accomplishment
- Feeling content or happy
- Eating balanced meals
- Being physically active



The first step in managing stress is to identify its source.

Getting started: Stress less ... in 3 steps

Learn how to manage stress better by following these three steps:

1

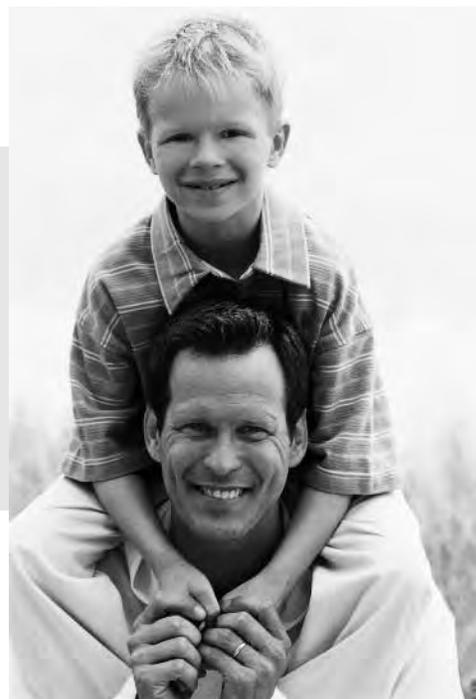
Identify your stressors.

2

Prevent the ones you can.

3

Cope with the ones you cannot avoid.



Get started with step one right away by figuring out what your individual stressors are. To do this, grab a notebook and log your stressors for a couple of weeks. It's a great way to actually see what your stressors are and how you respond to them.

Once you take a minute to write things down, you will have a clear idea of your stressors and what you are currently doing (or not doing) to manage them. This activity will prove helpful when you and your health coach begin discussing ideas to help you avoid or cope with your stressors.

Time/Date	Stressor	My response	What could I do differently next time?
July 4th	Driving through holiday traffic	Skipped exercise and took a nap	Take a relaxing walk while practicing deep breathing

Stress management and health go hand in hand

When you take positive steps to manage your stress, your attitude naturally improves. Remember, stress management includes awareness and acceptance of your feelings — which helps in acquiring effective coping skills, using positive self-talk, and engaging in physical and social activities.

It's also important to remember that you can control your perception and response to stressful demands by choosing what's important, planning ahead and keeping things in perspective. But above all, if you are experiencing overwhelming stress and/or depressive symptoms, it's critical that you seek help. Your physical and emotional well-being really do go hand in hand.

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*Grant me the serenity
to accept the things I
cannot change, courage to
change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know
the difference.*

— Reinhold Niebuhr

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