

Self-care and stress

A healthy balance

You've been stressed before, but not like this. Your recently divorced daughter's move home with her small children and your husband's difficult recovery from open-heart surgery have left you emotionally frayed and beyond exhausted.

Chronic stress can literally add up to a point that may compromise your well-being. Learn to recognize signs of stress and steps you can take to more effectively manage it and its impact on your health.

Inner workings

Stress is determined by your physical and emotional response to a particular situation. Stress isn't the event or situation itself — it's how you respond to what you encounter.

The stress response — also known as the "fight-or-flight" reaction — occurs automatically and rapidly when you feel threatened. Historically, it's been critical to human survival. Physical changes associated with the stress response may include an increase in heart rate and blood pressure.

Increased strength and agility, as well as quicker reaction times, can also be components of the fight-or-flight reaction. This response to stress evolved as a defense mechanism to deal with physical threats, such as predators or aggressors. And fortunately, under normal circumstances, it's typically a self-regulating response — once a crisis ends, the body is usually able to return to its normal state.

That said, not all stress is bad. Stress can be positive when its energy is channeled toward growth or positive change. Depending on your individual stress tolerance, it can be

a motivator and even help move things forward, such as moving to a new home or making preparations for a family get-together. But this type of stress needs to be time limited and restricted to meeting the acute need at hand.

Stress points

The stress response isn't limited to physical threats. It also can be triggered by psychological "threats," such as work difficulties, troubled relationships and illness, or the death of a loved one. Even the way you perceive everyday demands can feed into your stress response. Some people experience temporary stress when life hands them a variety of challenges, while others tend to feel they're always under stress, regardless of their circumstances.

Unfortunately, psychological threats in today's world tend to be prolonged and can pile up one after another. The end result can be a fight-or-flight response that runs far too long for your own good.

Long-term stress is associated with disruption of certain normal body processes. Digestive difficulties, from stomachaches to diarrhea, may occur. Persistent feelings of anxiety or irritability may develop. Unrelenting stress can also be associated with insomnia and depression.

Ways to cope

Your reaction to stress differs from anyone else's. That's due in part to genetic variations — as well as previous life experiences — which help shape the way you react. If stress is a dominant feature in your life, you can take steps to put it in perspective and reduce its effect:

■ *Start by identifying what's causing your stress* — Is the stress due to external factors, such as family troubles, job difficulties or chronic illness? Or is the stress related to internal factors, such as a tendency to be a perfectionist?

More than stress?

It can happen out of the blue, washing over you like a sudden wave and producing an episode of intense, unprovoked terror. Unlike stress, a panic attack begins abruptly and typically peaks within 10 minutes.

During an attack, signs and symptoms may include a racing heartbeat, nausea, feeling dizzy or lightheaded, shortness of breath or a feeling of being smothered, a choking feeling, trembling, chills, sweating, hot flashes, chest pain or discomfort. You may also experience an overwhelming sense of doom, a fear of losing control or even a fear of dying.

If you think you're having panic attacks, talk with your doctor. Various treatment approaches can help.

■ *Concentrate on dealing with the stressors you can change* — For instance, you may not be able to change the fact that you have diabetes, but you can decide to work closely with your doctor to better manage the condition.

■ *Look for ways to limit needless daily stressors* — Plan your day, leaving ample time between activities to avoid conflicts. Pace yourself, and learn to say no to added commitments you're not up to.

■ *Change the pace* — Break your routine. Take time each day to relax and do something enjoyable, such as pleasure reading, gardening, interacting with a companion animal or walking with a friend. Take a mini-vacation from the usual.

■ *Recognize signs of stress* — Some people experience neck pain when they're stressed, or they get

pain in their back. Others become more forgetful. Whatever your early stress signs, learn to pay attention to them so that you can interrupt the stress cycle and make changes within your control. Adopt healthy habits, such as regular physical activity and eating nutritional foods.

Relaxation techniques — such as taking a warm bath, deep breathing, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation or guided imagery — can be especially helpful when dealing with stress. Relaxation counters the fight-or-flight response by producing a state of calm. Being relaxed may help improve alertness, energy levels and productivity.

For stressors beyond your control — such as the death of a loved one — it may be helpful to recognize the stressful situation for what it is, and try to accept it. Consider how you're reacting to the stress. Look for constructive ways to view it, and take ownership of responses over which you have control. Avoid letting the situation and thoughts about it become all-consuming. Give yourself a break. Seeking out diversions can help you keep a healthy perspective.

When to get help

It's not good for your body to always be in a fight-or-flight mode. If you find that stress has significantly and persistently disrupted your day-to-day life and your ability to function for two weeks or longer, seek professional help.

For some, it may be appropriate to seek help sooner, for instance, if you're having self-destructive thoughts or are turning to unhealthy behaviors — such as increased alcohol consumption — to cope.

Avoid stress that takes a persistent toll on your personal, social or occupational life. Visit with your primary doctor, who may refer you to a counselor, psychotherapist or support group for further help. □