



## Stress Awareness: Learning to Relax

### What is stress?

We are all familiar with the word “stress.” It’s synonymous with change. Anything that causes a change in your life can cause stress, regardless of whether it is a positive or negative change. Getting a promotion or being terminated can both cause stress. If it is a change in your life, it is stress as far as your body is concerned. However, stress can help or hinder us depending on how we react to it. Positive stress can help propel us into action. Negative stress can result in health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and chronic migraines.

### Symptoms of stress

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, stress can cause health problems or make problems worse if you don’t learn appropriate and healthy ways to deal with it. Talk with a qualified health professional if you have any of the symptoms below. It’s important to first make sure that your symptoms aren’t caused by other health problems.

- anxiety
- back pain
- constipation or diarrhea
- depression
- fatigue
- headaches
- high blood pressure
- insomnia
- problems with relationships
- shortness of breath
- stiff neck
- upset stomach
- weight gain or loss

### Stress reducers

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, you first need to recognize when you’re feeling stressed. Early warning signs of stress include tension in your shoulders and neck or clenching your hands into fists.

The next step is to choose a way to deal with your stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to your stress — but often this is not possible. A second way is to change how you react to stress. This is often the better way.

Other suggestions for reducing stress include avoiding caffeine, which can increase heart rate, anxiety, and adrenaline rush; trying cooperation instead of confrontation when frustrated with a coworker; scheduling recreation, which is essential for good physical and mental health; taking a hot bath and allowing the heat to reduce muscle tension; delegating work to responsible coworkers.

## Coping skills

There are different kinds of coping skills, some good and some bad. Constructive coping mechanisms help us. They allow us to use stress toward something productive. Examples include exercise, reading, relaxing, cooking, playing, outdoor activities, listening to music, and not worrying about things we can't control, such as the weather.

Destructive coping mechanisms hinder us. Not only are they negative health habits, but also they usually make us feel bad afterwards, and that makes us more susceptible to stress. Examples include smoking, drinking, violence, and eating poorly



## How does stress affect my body and my health?

Everyone has stress. Sometimes we have short-term stress, the kind that hits us when we get lost while driving or when we miss the bus. Even everyday events, such as planning a meal or making time for errands, can be stressful. This kind of stress can make us feel worried or anxious.

Other times, we face long-term stress, such as racial discrimination, a life-threatening illness, or divorce. These stressful events also affect your health on many levels. Long-term stress is real and can increase your risk for some health problems, like depression.

Both short- and long-term stress can have effects on your body. Research is starting to show the serious effects of stress on our bodies. Stress triggers changes in our bodies and makes us more likely to get sick. It can worsen problems we already have.

If you think stress is causing you any of the problems listed at the right, make an appointment to see your doctor. He or she can provide suggestions to reduce or manage your stress and keep you as healthy as possible.

Stress can also play a part in the following problems:

- trouble sleeping
- headaches
- constipation
- diarrhea
- irritability
- lack of energy
- lack of concentration
- eating too much or not at all
- anger
- sadness
- tension
- stomach cramping
- stomach bloating
- skin problems, like hives
- depression
- anxiety
- weight gain or loss
- heart problems
- high blood pressure
- irritable bowel syndrome
- diabetes
- neck and/or back pain
- reduced sexual desire
- difficulty getting pregnant
- higher risk of asthma and arthritis flare-ups

