



# Chronic Stress and How to Manage It

Friday, November 13, 2020



Everyone seems stressed these days. From the current pandemic to economic pressures, racial unrest, political tensions and natural disasters, the start of the new decade has seemed to throw one stressor after another.

At some point, that stress may become something you can't simply shake off: Experiencing stress over an extended period may indicate that stress is chronic.

Chronic stress can take a toll on your mind and body. Fortunately, there are things you can do to back on the path to mental and physical wellbeing.

## **What is Stress?**

Stress might seem like a bad thing, but that's not always the case. The stress response (fight or flight) is natural: It helps our bodies gear up for action—like avoiding an oncoming bus or meeting a tight deadline. When we feel threatened, our body releases hormones like adrenaline and cortisol that can boost mental clarity, tighten muscles, and accelerate the heart rate.

Stress that helps you stay more alert is known as acute stress—this type of stress comes and goes—and we all have it from time to time. It doesn't last long-term.

But for some people, the stress goes on for a long time. The body still reacts to it in the same way—as if bracing for potential danger—but that danger never comes. It keeps you in a constant state of vigilance, even when it doesn't have to do so.

This is known as chronic stress, and it's not healthy.

## **When Does Stress Become Chronic?**

Stress that lasts for weeks or months indicate chronic stress.

Chronic stress can impact your overall health. One risk is high blood pressure, also known as hypertension. For example, studies have shown that chronic stress is associated with a hypertension (or high blood pressure). Furthermore, some risks can snowball into others: Hypertension, for example, can raise your risk for other health problems, such as heart attack or stroke.

Similarly, the hormone cortisol—which gets released during chronic stress—may also lead to cravings of sweets and fats. As we all know, unhealthy eating can also raise your risk for obesity or other chronic diseases.

But the consequences of chronic stress don't stop with the physical effects. Stress can affect your emotional or mental health too—not just making you more prone to nervous or anxious feelings, but also more depressed. Recently, the American Medical Association acknowledged how anxiety and depression can be connected, as well as how the isolation of COVID-19 may exacerbate problems.

## **Signs and Symptoms**

Chronic stress can have several physical and emotional symptoms, which can make daily functioning more challenging.

Signs and symptoms of chronic stress may include:

Forgetting things or having trouble concentrating  
Fatigue or experiencing too much or too little sleep  
Irritability  
Sexual dysfunction  
Headaches or other pains throughout the body  
Stiffness in the muscles, particularly the jaw or neck  
Digestive issues like diarrhea, constipation, or nausea  
Use of alcohol or drugs to relax

## **Tips for Managing Chronic Stress**

Successful management of chronic stress can vary from person to person; what works for you may not for someone else. Here are some stress-busting tips that may help you cope with stress:

**Get active.** Physical activity can positively affect your mood and reduce stress. Walking is a great way to start, but if you want something more invigorating, try a heart-pumping aerobic activity like jogging, dance, or swimming. Just make sure you check with your doctor first. Try tai-chi or other relaxation exercises. Activities like tai-chi, yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises may take you out of your comfort zone, but they can be a worthwhile experience for many people. For example, one study among older individuals published in *The Journals of Gerontology* found that tai chi helped reduce participants' stressful feelings while increasing positive emotions.

**Prioritize your sleep.** Getting enough sleep is important for many areas of your health and wellbeing, and its benefits on stress management are no different. When you sleep, your brain unpacks much of the day's activities and stressors during the various phases of sleep, including rapid-eye-movement. These tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can help train your brain to sleep longer and better for optimal health benefits.

**Focus on what you can change.** Having a sense of control can help you feel more grounded. Some things we can't control, like the weather. Others, like planning what you have for dinner tonight, can give you a center of gravity in an unsure time.

Give yourself some grace. It's okay if your patience slips or you're not able to release stressful feelings as well as others. Kindness can go a long way, particularly when you're giving it to yourself.

Avoid self-isolation. Surround yourself with a support network of people who care about your wellbeing, and use that network (in a safe, socially-distanced way) when you need it.

## **Signs It's Time to Seek Help**

Even with a good self-management plan, sometimes you may need more support. A mental health professional can be a great resource, but they're particularly important to see more urgently if you have thoughts of self-harm or feel drawn to drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Seek help right away if you have suicidal thoughts. Call your healthcare provider or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Call 911 if you or someone you know is in immediate danger or go to the nearest emergency room.

Remember: Chronic stress is something many people experience, but it doesn't mean you have to slog through it, and certainly not alone. The sooner you get care and prioritize your own healing, the sooner you can feel more like yourself.

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Originally published, Friday, November 13, 2020