



UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING STRESS

Feeling stressed? You're not alone. Research consistently shows that many people are experiencing higher levels of stress than in the past, and for longer periods of time. While some stress is a normal part of life, chronic or unmanaged stress can take a significant toll on both physical and mental well-being.

Stress is the body's natural response to challenges, demands, or changes. It can be short-term, long-term, or recurring, and it exists on a spectrum ranging from mild and manageable to severe and overwhelming.

Our stress response is wired into our biology and is commonly known as the fight, flight, or freeze response. When we encounter a stressful situation, our brain signals the release of stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones prepare us to respond quickly by increasing alertness, sharpening focus, and providing a temporary boost of energy.

This response has been essential to human survival, particularly when facing immediate dangers. However, today's stressors are often less about short-term threats and more about ongoing responsibilities and uncertainty. Financial pressures, demanding workloads, caregiving responsibilities, health concerns, and constant exposure to news and technology can keep our stress response activated for extended periods without giving our minds and bodies the opportunity to recover.

When stress hormones remain elevated for weeks, months, or even years, they can begin to affect nearly every aspect of health. Chronic stress has been linked to fatigue, headaches, digestive issues, weakened immune function, sleep disturbances, anxiety, depression, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and changes in behavior. Over time, unmanaged stress can also contribute to burnout and make everyday challenges feel increasingly difficult to navigate.

While life's common stressors have long included finances, work, family responsibilities, and health concerns, many people today are also feeling the effects of broader societal challenges such as economic uncertainty, inflation, violence, and political division. These larger issues can create a sense of uncertainty because they often fall outside of our direct control.

Although it's helpful to address the sources of stress whenever possible, not every challenge has an immediate solution. Learning healthy ways to respond to stress can help reduce its impact and improve overall well-being. Consider these strategies:



Accept that uncertainty is a part of life.

While it may be uncomfortable, recognizing that not everything is within our control can reduce unnecessary worry. Instead, focus your time and energy on the choices and actions you can influence.

Challenge unhelpful thought patterns.

It's easy to become caught in cycles of rumination or worst-case thinking. When you notice your thoughts spiraling, pause and ask yourself whether there is another perspective or a more balanced way to view the situation. Shifting your attention toward realistic solutions can help reduce stress and build resilience.

Build healthy daily routines.

Consistent habits such as getting enough sleep, eating nutritious foods, staying physically active, maintaining social connections, and making time for enjoyable activities all help strengthen your ability to cope with stress. Small, sustainable habits often have the greatest long-term impact.

Take meaningful action.

Stress often feels more manageable when we focus on what we can do rather than what we can't. Volunteering, participating in community activities, staying informed without becoming overwhelmed, reaching out to friends or family, or working toward personal goals can all create a greater sense of purpose and control.

Make time to recharge.

Rest is not a luxury—it's an important part of maintaining overall health. Whether it's spending time outdoors, practicing mindfulness, pursuing hobbies, or simply taking regular breaks throughout the day, intentionally creating moments of recovery can help replenish your physical and emotional energy.

Remember that stress is a normal part of life, but it doesn't have to define your well-being. By recognizing the signs of stress early and practicing healthy coping strategies, you can build resilience, improve your overall health, and feel better equipped to navigate life's challenges—both the expected and the unexpected.