

# HealthTalk *Express*

## STRESS: Friend or Foe



**\* Stress is both a friend and a foe. It's a friend because some amount of stress keeps us motivated and productive, but too much stress can harm our health. \***

# S t R e S s

## "Acute" or "Chronic"



- **Acute or short-term** is the most common form and is our flight or fight response
- **Episodic acute** occurs frequently and particularly in individuals who tend to worry and those with Type A personality
- **Chronic** happens when people see no way out of their problem

## Stress Response



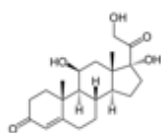
**Threat:** An attack, harmful event, or threat to survival



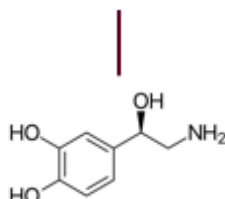
Brain processes the signals



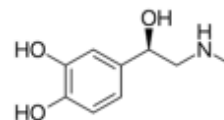
Pituitary gland secretes ACHT hormone



Cortisol



Norepinephrine



Adrenaline

### Physical Effects

- Heart rate increase
- Shaking
- Dry mouth
- Flushed face
- Tunnel vision
- Dilated pupils



# Stress Myths

***Stress is  
the same for  
everyone***

**Myth #1: Stress is the same for everyone.**

This is a common misunderstanding. Stress is unique for each individual. What is stressful for one person may not be for another. We can all recall a time when we experienced a stressful event that caused us to have a negative reaction while someone else undergoing that same situation was unaffected. To manage stress, we need to learn what our “stress triggers” are and how we respond physically and psychologically.

***Stress is  
always bad  
for you***

**Myth #2: Stress is always bad for you.**

This is a wrong view. Stress is both good and bad. Stress is our human condition. Imagine stress like the tension in a violin string: too little and the music is dull and raspy, but too much and the music is shrill or the string snaps. The real issue is how we manage our stress. Managed stress makes us productive and happy. Mismanaged stress can affect our health and even kill us. A mild amount of stress is needed for our body to function at its best. Acute stress can even boost our immune system. Chronic, unmanaged stress is toxic to our health and can lead to serious health conditions.

***No symptoms,  
no stress***

**Myth #3. Stress is everywhere, so you can’t do anything about it.**

Not so! You can plan your life, so stress does not overwhelm you. Effectively managing your stress involves setting priorities to work on simple problems first, solving them, and moving on to more complex issues. Stress may appear to be everywhere when you are poorly managing your problems, and prioritizing becomes difficult.

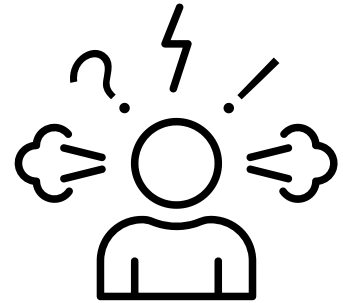
***Stress is  
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anything about it***

**Myth #4. No symptoms, no stress.**

Again, this is an incorrect view. Minor symptoms such as headaches or stomach acid cannot be ignored. These physical signs may indicate that stress is getting out of hand, and we need to address the problem. Identifying strategies to better cope with your stress is critical to handling life’s challenges.

# How Do You Respond To Stress?

- I EAT TO CALM DOWN
- I WORK TOO MUCH
- I SLOW DOWN
- I TRY TO DO TOO MANY THINGS AT ONCE
- I DRINK ALCOHOL OR SMOKE TO CALM DOWN
- I RUSH AROUND BUT DO NOT GET MUCH DONE
- I PUT OFF DOING THE THINGS I NEED TO DO



Because stress is a normal part of life, managing stress has to be part of your daily lifestyle habits. Learning what are your stressors and symptoms will help you find positive ways to counteract the bad effects of stress so that you can live a balanced, satisfied life.

Thinking back to a recent stressful event and how you responded, do any of these behaviors apply to you? If any of these behaviors are your typical response to stress, it may mean that you are not dealing with stress as well as you can. Positive, healthy approaches to coping with your stress may be needed, especially to lower your risk for chronic stress.

Whether it's good or bad stress, we need to control the level of stress we experience. Implementing simple lifestyle changes is a strategy to lower your stress. Health-enhancing behaviors like diet and physical activity can protect people from disease. For example, there is strong evidence showing that eating healthy and exercising can minimize the conditions that cause cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Protecting your brain is another reason to better manage stress. There is research showing that specific areas of your brain can be damaged by chronic stress. For example, the hippocampus is an organ in the back of the brain that plays a role in processing emotions. Chronic stress can impair the hippocampus, causing it to lose its ability to shut down the stress response. Neuroimaging studies of people with severe depression and anxiety disorders have shown that their hippocampus has shrunk in size. The good news is that the brain can heal, and this effect is reversible.

Managing our stress is critical to maintaining a strong immune system. An interesting fact about stress is that it can be good and bad for our immune system. During acute stress, our immune system is able to move immune cells to areas of the body where they are needed to defend a pathogen or a disease-causing agent, such as viruses or bacteria. However, with chronic stress, our immune system is suppressed and unable to prevent disease, which makes us prone to illness.



# “Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one.”

*Hans Selye*

Hans Selye, the father of stress research, once said: “Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one.” That holds true for you today. Believing you have the power to change is the positive attitude you need to make healthy choices. There are many practical strategies to tame your stress. Listed below are five strategies: practicing positive self-talk, engaging in physical activity, finding pleasure by doing things that you enjoy, connecting with others, and getting enough sleep. Keep in mind, that while stress management activities are helpful in many ways, it does not replace any treatment you may need if you’re suffering from chronic stress. If that is you, talk to your doctor.

- **Activity #1: Positive self-talk.** Optimism is important to manage stress. It is looking at the glass half full rather than half empty. It doesn’t mean being in denial about life’s unpleasant situations. When you think positively, you can approach unpleasantness in a productive, healthy way. Self-talk is the endless stream of unspoken thoughts that run through your head. These automatic thoughts can be positive or negative. Some of your self-talk comes from logic and reason. Other self-talk may arise from false thoughts you create because of a lack of information. When your self-talk is mostly positive, you will have a healthier outlook on life and attitude toward yourself. This allows you to better cope with stressful situations, which reduces the harmful health effects of stress on your body.
- **Activity #2: Be active.** Physical activity in combination with a stress-reduction program is extremely important for many reasons. It is an effective distraction from stressful events. It lowers the harmful effects of stress on blood pressure and the heart. In fact, exercise protects the heart. Physical activity improves the quality of sleep, allowing you to rest better at night. Physical activity also reduces your risk for depression and loss of mental functioning. Virtually any form of exercise is beneficial. Physical activity pumps up your feel-good endorphins and other natural neural chemicals that enhance your sense of well-being.
- **Activity #3: Find pleasure.** When stress makes you feel bad, do something that makes you feel good. Even if you’re ill or down, you can find pleasure in simple things, such as going for a drive, chatting with a friend, or reading a good book.
- **Activity #4: Connect with others.** When you’re stressed and irritable, you likely want to be left alone. Instead, reach out to family and friends, and make social connections. A dose of friendship is great medicine because it offers distraction and provides support to tolerate life’s ups and downs. So, take a coffee break with a family member or friend; email a relative; or visit your place of worship. Another way to connect is to volunteer for a charitable group, which will benefit you while you serve others.
- **Activity #5: Get your zzz’s.** Sleep is necessary for your brain and body to recharge. When you are sleep deprived, your mood is affected; you have low energy levels; and you’re unable to concentrate. With six to eight hours of restful sleep, you are able to function optimally, which includes handling the stresses of the day. Most healthy adults are built for 16 hours of wakefulness and need an average of eight hours of sleep at night. If you are having trouble getting the shut-eye you need, make sure that you have a quiet, relaxing bedtime routine. Listen to soothing music and stick to a regular sleeping schedule.