

Stress Tip Sheet: American Psychological Association Help Center

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In today's fast-paced and ever-connected world, stress has become a fact of life. Stress can cause people to feel overwhelmed or pushed to the limit. The American Psychological Association's 2007 "Stress in America" poll found that one-third of people in the U.S. report experiencing extreme levels of stress. In addition, nearly one-in-five report that they are experiencing high levels of stress 15 or more days per month. While low to moderate levels of stress can be good for you when managed in healthy ways, extreme stress takes both an emotional and physical toll on the individual.

With the consequences of poorly managed stress ranging from fatigue to heart disease and obesity, it is important to know how to recognize high stress levels and take action to handle it in healthy ways. Being able to control stress is a learned behavior, and stress can be effectively managed by taking small steps toward changing unhealthy behaviors.

APA offers the following tips on how to manage your stress:

Understand how you experience stress. Everyone experiences stress differently. How do you know when you are stressed? How are your thoughts or behaviors different from times when you do not feel stressed?

Identify your sources of stress. What events or situations trigger stressful feelings? Are they related to your children, family, health, financial decisions, work, relationships or something else?

Learn your own stress signals. People experience stress in different ways. You may have a hard time concentrating or making decisions, feel angry, irritable or out of control, or experience headaches, muscle tension or a lack of energy. Gauge your stress signals.

Recognize how you deal with stress. Determine if you are using unhealthy behaviors (such as smoking, drinking alcohol and over or under eating) to cope. Is this a routine behavior, or is it specific to certain events or situations? Do you make unhealthy choices as a result of feeling rushed and overwhelmed?

Find healthy ways to manage stress. Consider healthy, stress-reducing activities such as meditation, exercising or talking things out with friends or family. Keep in mind that unhealthy behaviors develop over time and can be difficult to change. Don't take on too much at once. Focus on changing only one behavior at a time.

Take care of yourself. Eat right, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water and engage in regular physical activity. Ensure that you have a healthy mind and body through activities like yoga, taking a short walk, going to the gym, or playing sports that will enhance both your physical and mental health. Take regular vacations or other breaks from work. No matter how hectic life gets, make time for yourself — even if it's just to do simple things like reading a good book or listening to your favorite music.

Reach out for support. Accepting help from supportive friends and family can improve your ability to manage stress. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behaviors.

Click here for tips on managing your workplace stress (<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/work-stress.aspx>)

Click here to take the Stress Smarts Quiz (<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-smarts.aspx>)

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