

Mental Health: Managing Stress



Everyone experiences stress. Sometimes it can help you focus and get the task at hand done. But when stress is frequent and intense, it can strain your body and make it impossible to function. Finding effective ways to deal is crucial to living well.

How Stress Affects You

Stress affects your entire body, mentally as well as physically. Some common signs include:

- Headaches
- Trouble sleeping
- Jaw pain
- Changes in appetite
- Frequent mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling overwhelmed

When experiencing long-term stress, your brain is exposed to increased levels of a hormone called cortisol. This exposure weakens your immune system, making it easier for you to get sick.

Stress can contribute to worsening symptoms of a mental health condition. For example, in schizophrenia, it can encourage hallucinations and delusions, while in bipolar disorder, it can trigger episodes of both mania and depression. Knowing what situations cause it is the first step in coping with this very common experience.

When You Are Most Vulnerable to Stress

People are most susceptible to stress when they are:

- Not getting enough sleep
- Not having a network of support

- Experiencing a major life change such as moving, the death of a loved one, starting a new job, having a child or getting married
- Experiencing poor physical health
- Not eating well

Everyone has his own threshold. Certain things that may upset you out might not even make one of your friends raise an eyebrow. Some people are affected when they experience large crowds and noisy environments, while others react to silence and free time.

Ways to Reduce Stress

Developing a personalized approach to reducing stress can help you manage your mental health and improve your quality of life. Once you've learned what your triggers are, experiment with coping strategies. Some common ones include:

- **Accept your needs.** Recognize what your triggers are. What situations make you feel physically and mentally agitated? Once you know this, you can avoid them when it's reasonable to, and to cope when you can't.
- **Manage your time.** Prioritizing your activities can help you use your time well. Making a day-to-day schedule helps ensure you don't feel overwhelmed by everyday tasks and deadlines.
- **Practice relaxation.** Deep breathing, meditation and progressive muscle relaxation are good ways to calm yourself. Taking a break to refocus can have benefits beyond the immediate moment.

- **Exercise daily.** Schedule time to walk outside, bike or join a dance class. Whatever you do, make sure it's fun. Daily exercise naturally produces stress-relieving hormones in your body and improves your overall physical health.
- **Set aside time for yourself.** Schedule something that makes you feel good. It might be reading a book, going to the movies, getting a massage or taking your dog for a walk.
- **Eat well.** Eating unprocessed foods, like whole grains, vegetables, and fresh fruit is the foundation for a healthy body and mind. Eating well can also help stabilize your mood.
- **Get enough sleep.** Symptoms of some mental health conditions, like mania in bipolar disorder, can be triggered by getting too little sleep.
- **Dedicate time for prayer and meditation.** If faith is important to you, schedule time for prayer and meditation.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs.** They don't actually reduce stress: in fact, they often worsen it. If you're struggling with substance abuse, educate yourself and get help.
- **Talk to someone.** Whether to friends, family, a faith leader, a counselor or a support group, airing out and talking can help. Consider attending a NAMI Connection Recovery Support Group.

Getting Help

If the steps you've taken aren't working, it may be time to share with a mental health professional. He or she can help you pinpoint specific events that trigger you and help you create an action plan to change them.

For more information visit www.nami.org/aka