



stress less

strategies to ease your mind and be healthy



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Stress is a natural part of life for most people, but not everyone reacts to it in the same way. If stress is not managed and gets out of control, it can harm your health in real ways.

Take charge and learn to manage your stress! By thinking in new ways and practicing techniques to help you relax, you **can** and **will** feel better.



“Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass...
it’s about learning to dance in the rain.”

– VIVIAN GREENE

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What is stress?

Stress is a physical or mental challenge that causes you to react or adapt. It is the way you respond with your body, mind, and emotions to various conditions, changes, and demands of life (stressors).

Some stressors can be positive and healthy, such as getting married or having a baby. Stress can be short-term. It can become long-term (chronic) stress if not addressed.

Stress can lead to changes in your body that have real symptoms like those caused by any other illness. If you have stress too often or it lasts too long, it can make you more likely to get sick. It also can make symptoms of some diseases worse. If you tense up when you are stressed, you may develop neck, shoulder, or low back pain. Stress is also linked to high blood pressure and heart disease.

Types of stress

- Personal
- Financial
- Health
- Environment
- Routine
- Traumatic events
- Chemical/hormonal imbalances

Types of stress that cause illness (chronic stress)

Current stresses	Personal, family, and work issues; money worries; not enough personal time
Traumatic events	Events that threaten personal safety or emotional or physical well-being
Chemical/hormonal imbalance	Imbalances that can be inherited, part of your body's makeup, the result of ongoing chronic stress, or many of these factors
Childhood stress	Severe stress in childhood, such as abuse, neglect, abandonment, or taking on an adult role at an early age

Stress can be useful, because it helps you get things done and can motivate you to do well. However, if stressful events go beyond a “breaking point,” it can feel like your life is out of control. Too much stress can harm you mentally and physically. Recognizing when you are under too much stress can help you manage it in a healthy way.

Think about a stressful situation, such as being stuck in traffic, going on a trip, or preparing for a party. Ask yourself what about that situation is stressful to you. What is the real problem? Do you hate to be late? Are trips always stressful because you are the only one doing the packing? Does planning a party mean a lot of shopping and cooking or spending a lot of money?

When you have figured out the problem, look for ways to solve it so you can reduce some of the stress. Can you leave a few minutes earlier or carpool? Can you ask other members of your travel group for help? Can you prepare for a party in advance, host a potluck, or take a short nap before it starts?

What situations cause you stress?

You can successfully manage some types of stress by looking at the situation and doing some problem-solving to change it. However, some types of stress can happen when you least expect them. It is important to listen to and recognize your body’s signals that tension and stress are building.

One way to keep stress under control is to become aware of how stress affects you.

What are your personal stress reactions?

Check off any of the following reactions that you have had.

Are they physical?

- Sweating
- Headache
- Muscle tightness
- Fast heart rate
- Too much or too little sleep

Are they thinking and reasoning?

- Trouble making decisions
- Trouble focusing
- Forgetfulness
- Confusion

Are they emotional or behavioral?

- Mood swings
- Eating too much or too little
- Avoiding family or friends
- Drinking more alcohol
- Feeling of impending doom
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of worthlessness

Once you learn what your stressors are and how you react to them, you can create a plan to change how you act when you face stress. Now let's assess your readiness to make changes to help manage your stress.

On a scale of 0 to 10, how ready are you to find and practice ways to manage your stress?



0 = not at all ready

10 = totally ready

0 to 3: Not ready

What needs to happen to make you more ready in the future? Even if you don't feel ready to tackle it right now, it is important to keep reading this booklet so you can learn more about how reducing stress can help you.

4 to 6: Unsure

Think about whether reducing the stress in your life is important to you by answering the following questions.

What are the advantages?

How would reducing stress benefit you physically?

How would reducing stress benefit you mentally?

What might happen if you did not do anything about reducing the stress in your life?

7 to 10: I am ready

You are ready to take action! Setting a personal action plan will help you. Relax, take a deep breath, and keep reading for more information.

You identified your personal reactions to stress on page 3. They might include some or all of these symptoms:

- **Physical:** sweating, stomach in knots, tight muscles, headaches, heart beats faster
- **Mental:** worrying, anxious, feeling helpless, not able to focus
- **Behavioral:** yelling, crying, withdrawing, changing eating habits, drinking

The better you become at listening to and understanding your body's signals, the better you will become at managing your stress and stressful situations.

Examples of behaviors to reduce stress

Healthy eating

- The foods you eat and how much you eat both affect your body and your mood.
- Eating small meals at regular times during the day can give you more energy.
- Some foods are healthier than others. Try:
 - ◆ Whole grains
 - ◆ Fresh fruits and vegetables
 - ◆ Lean proteins
 - ◆ Fewer sugary foods, less caffeine, and less alcohol
 - ◆ Plenty of water

What changes will you make to eat healthier?

Physical activity/Exercise

- Getting exercise can physically and mentally decrease stress.
- It can help you have more energy and feel more alert.
- Can you think of a way to become more active and fit it into your schedule?
 - ◆ It is important to start slowly and be very realistic about what you can do.
 - ◆ For example, if you have not been exercising at all, you may want to start with 10-minute walks and increase your time each week.
 - ◆ Set a goal for yourself and think about who can support you as you try to reach it.

What will you do to add some physical activity into your day?

Relaxation (deep breathing, visual imagery, or stretching)

- Deep breathing is very different from everyday breathing, which tends to be more shallow.
 - ◆ It can be calming and help tense muscles loosen up.
 - ◆ It can also help you let go of stress and worries and focus quietly on the present moment.
 - ◆ Try it out:
 - Get into a comfortable position.
 - Close your eyes to help quiet your mind.
 - Notice how you are breathing.
 - Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth slowly. Imagine the tension and stress leaving your body as you exhale.

- If you get dizzy or feel lightheaded, you may be breathing too deeply or breathing out too quickly. Stop until the symptoms pass.
- Remember that deep breathing for relaxation is a practiced skill. Be patient with yourself.
- Visual imagery is imagining yourself in another place or time. Think back to a pleasant vacation. Picture yourself at the beach or in the woods or just lazing about not doing anything.
- Stretching helps you be more flexible. With practice, it allows you to move more easily with less muscle tension. Be sure to hold a stretch, but don't bounce, as this can strain muscles.

Which relaxation activity will you add to your day?

Planned pleasant or fun activity

- Doing things that make you laugh is both healthy and relaxing.
- Planned activities give you a chance to enjoy your life. This helps your body relax.
- Which of these ideas appeal to you?
 - ◆ Spending time outside
 - ◆ Reading
 - ◆ Going to a movie, play, or concert
 - ◆ Taking a trip
 - ◆ Enjoying a good meal
 - ◆ Learning to do something new
 - ◆ Taking a short nap
 - ◆ Getting together with your family, spouse, or friends

Which activity will you make time to do?

Affirmations

- An affirmation is a statement of something you want, said in a positive way and as if it is already true.
- It can help guide you toward thinking and acting in a more positive way.
- Affirmations are simple and personal and spoken or written in the present tense.
- Saying your affirmations over and over can help you believe them to be real and meaningful.
- Affirmations can help you lower your stress level by taking the place of negative, harmful thoughts.

What is one affirmation you will begin to use?

Problem solving

- To help solve a problem, ask these questions:
 - ◆ What is the problem that is causing me increased stress?
 - ◆ Why do I want to solve this problem now?
 - ◆ Are there reasons why I may not want to solve this problem?
 - ◆ What are possible solutions for this problem?
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
- Choose a solution to try.
- Put it into a personal action plan (see example in the next section).
- Check in after one week and start again if needed.

Your stress-reducing action plan

When I am having physical reactions to stress, I will:

When I am having emotional reactions to stress, I will:

When I find my behavior changing as a reaction to stress, I will:

You can also create a weekly personal action plan to deal with your stressors. Personal action plans are short-term plans to help you reach your goal of taking control of the stress in your life. They include a specific action or behavior that you want to do and know that you will be able to do in a week. To be effective, your plan must answer these questions:

- **What** are you going to do?
- **How much** are you going to do?
- **When** are you going to do it?
- **How many** days of the week are you going to do it?

Action plan example: “This week I will walk (*what*) for 10 minutes (*how much*) after work (*when*) on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (*how many*). I have a confidence level of 8 that I can complete my plan.”

Healthy eating habits

This week I will: _____
_____ (what)
_____ (how much) _____ (when) _____ (how many)

Physical activity

This week I will: _____
_____ (what)
_____ (how much) _____ (when) _____ (how many)

Relaxation skills

This week I will: _____
_____ (what)
_____ (how much) _____ (when) _____ (how many)

Mental health activities

This week I will: _____
_____ (what)
_____ (how much) _____ (when) _____ (how many)

How **confident** are you on a scale of 0 (not confident at all) to 10 (completely confident) that you can complete your plan this week?



0 = not confident at all

10 = completely confident

Remember, the better you become at listening to and understanding your reactions and the signals that your body gives you, the better you will become at managing stress and stressful events. The path to managing stress well takes time and dedication.

Finding balance

Try to find a balance in what you take on at home, at work, or in your community.

- Set limits.
 - ◆ What can I finish today? Schedule the most important activities first.
 - ◆ What will have to wait? Budget time for the unexpected.
- Identify your priorities.
 - ◆ What are the three most important things in my life right now?
 - ◆ How can I make sure I give some attention to those three things?
 - ◆ Make sure that **you** are one of your priorities.
- Learn to accept support.
 - ◆ We can all benefit from other people in our lives. Who are the people in your life that can offer support?
 - ◆ Others feel good when they can help. If you accept help and support when offered, it is a “win-win.”

Stress is a part of life.

With some effort and a little practice, you can think in a positive and healthy way, learn new methods to reduce your symptoms, and feel empowered to take control over stress!

RESOURCES

Kaiser Permanente self-care resources

Which ones will you make part of your personal action plan?

- Contact Health Engagement and Wellness Services for programs that can help you deal with stress and anxiety by working on weight management, quitting smoking, or managing diabetes. Check kp.org/healthengagement/classes for programs.
- You can listen to audio programs (podcasts) on your home computer or download them into your digital audio (mp3) player from Kaiser Permanente's Healthy Living To Go Audio Library. Topics include exercise, stress, and pain. To listen or download, go to kp.org/listen.
- Call Talk with a Health Coach for support and motivation. A health coach can help you quit tobacco, lose weight, eat healthy, get physically active, or manage stress. This service is available to Kaiser Permanente members Monday through Friday. *Information about the coaching services you receive will be included in your electronic health record and accessible by your Kaiser Permanente care team.*
- Check out kp.org/healthylifestyles for online personalized programs to help you manage depression, reduce stress, sleep better, quit tobacco, or eat healthy.

National mental health resources

National Institute of Mental Health
1-866-615-6464
nimh.nih.gov

American Psychiatric
Association
healthyinds.org

American Psychological
Association
apa.org/helpcenter



“The key is not to prioritize what’s on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.”

– STEPHEN COVEY



kp.org/healthengagement