

Reducing Your Body's Unhealthy Stress Responses

Objective

To reduce the effects of unhealthy stress by increasing activities that support your body's natural relaxation response.

What to Know

The stress response ("fight or flight") keeps you safe in challenging or threatening situations. When your stress response is turned on, your body releases adrenaline and cortisol. Often called the "stress hormone," cortisol causes an increase in your heart rate and blood pressure. It alters your immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system, and growth processes.

Unfortunately, the stress response can work against you because it can turn on when you do not really need it. Your body perceives something as an emergency when it is not. It can even turn on when you are thinking about past or future events. Harmless, chronic situations can be intensified by the stress response activating too often, with too much intensity, or for too long.

In response to your body's stress response, the parasympathetic nervous system is designed to turn on your body's relaxation response. Your behaviors and thinking can either help or stop your natural relaxation response from operating at its best. Relaxing every day for even brief periods of time can help reduce the unpleasant effects of stress, minimize stressful thinking, and help your body's natural relaxation response be more effective.

Below are some common stress responses you might have. Circle the symptoms you have had in the last 2 weeks. An arrow up means "increase" and an arrow down means "decrease."

Muscle aches	↑ Heart rate	Weight gain	Constipation
Muscle twitching	Low energy	Tight chest	Dizziness
Stomach cramps	Insomnia	Headache	Nausea
Dry mouth	Weight loss	Weakness	Diarrhea
Trembling	Chills	Leg cramps	Choking feeling
Hot flashes/sweating	Pounding heart	Chest pain	↑ Body checking
Numb/tingling hands/feet	↑ Blood Pressure	Dry throat	Teeth clenching
Face flushing	Feeling Faint	Neck Pain	↑ Urination
Under- or overeating eating	Restlessness	Agitation	Worthlessness
Depression	Guilt	Anger	Nightmares
Sensitivity	Numbness	Mood swings	↓ Concentration

Preoccupation	Insecurity	Anxiety	Depression
Hopelessness	Defensiveness	Racing thoughts	Expecting the worst
Lack of motivation	Forgetfulness	Rigidity	Intolerance
Avoidance	Neglecting tasks	↑ Smoking	Poor hygiene
↑ Spending	Light headedness	Nail biting	Skin picking
Sexual problems	Fidgeting	↓ Exercise	Aggression
Seeking reassurance	↑ Sleeping	↑ Alcohol use	Frequent arguments

Many of these symptoms can be associated with other medical problems; seek the advice of your doctor if you have any of these symptoms for a prolonged period of time.

How many symptoms did you circle? _____

If you circled more than five, it is a good idea to find ways to relax.

Here are some strategies for responding to stress in healthy ways to de-escalate your stress response.

1. Find outlets for frustration. When you deal effectively with frustration, it lessens the stress response. Do something positive and healthy.

2. Practice breathing exercises. It only takes three minutes to turn off the stress reaction and turn on the relaxation response with deep breathing. Deep breathing sends a powerful signal through the nervous system. Here is what to do:

- Breathe into your belly and lower ribs, allowing your lungs to fill up completely.
- Breathe out slowly, feeling your body relax.
- Repeat for three minutes.

3. Exercise. Physical activity enhances your mood and decreases the stress response for up to 24 hours after the exercise session. It reduces stress as long it is an activity you *want* to do – if you feel forced, it will not have the same stress-reducing effect.

4. Meditate. Meditation creates changes in the brain, especially in the areas of memory and attention. It also reduces muscle tension and glucocorticoid levels during the meditation itself. Try joining a class or using an app on your smartphone.

5. Relaxation. You can do informal activities like taking a bath, journaling, or listening to music, or you can practice progressive muscle relaxation or visual imagery.

6. Build your social support network. Research shows that when people experience a stress reaction with strangers, the reaction is greater than when with friends or loved ones. When you have social support during a stressful experience, the cardiovascular stress response and resting cortisol levels are lower. So, spend time talking with people you trust and who support you. In

addition, offer support to others – kindness to others is also protective against the negative effects of stress.

7. Create predictability and routine. Predictability makes stressors less stressful. For example, think about getting stuck in rush hour traffic. If this happens every day, will it be more stressful or less stressful? Probably less stressful, because it is expected and you can plan around it (e.g., give yourself extra time to get to work). Even when a particular stressor is absent, the unpredictability of that stressor can trigger the stress response. Create schedules and routines so the mental load of activities is reduced.

8. Learn how to budget. Seek support for stability in housing, finances, and work. Be mindful of impulsive behaviors like excessive spending.

9. Determine what you can control. Just feeling like you are in control can help lower stress. When there is high demand and low control, stress increases. If you think you have control over a stressor that is not really in your control, you might blame yourself for not controlling the situation. In these cases, it is not always helpful to have control – if there is not much you can do about something, thinking you are in control can lead to self-blame. Be aware of trying to control past events (where things have already happened and are beyond your control).

10. Create realistic SMART goals. SMART goals provide a sense of direction, motivation, clear focus, and clarify importance. By setting goals, you give yourself a target to aim for. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. You can reduce the negative impact of stress by focusing your efforts to increase the chance of achieving your goal.

11. Get in touch with your feelings. Self-awareness is essential. Pay attention to how you habitually respond to stress. Do you become irritable? Angry or frustrated? Note the emotions you experience when faced with a stressor.

This worksheet will help you practice these strategies to reduce your body’s unhealthy stress responses.

What to Do

Now, choose at least three strategies or activities to try for the next week to ease your stress. List your selected strategies here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

As you begin to do things to reduce your stress, each day for the next two weeks use the chart on the next page to rate the severity of your stress before and after you engage in your selected strategies. Use a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = not stressed at all, and 10 = severe stress; unable to function. Use the ‘Notes’ section to share your observations about your experiences.

Date	Stress Level Before (1-10)	Strategy/Activity	Stress Level After (1-10)	Notes

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Which strategies did you find most effective in reducing your stress? Explain.

Were there resources or people that you found most helpful or supportive? Explain.

Did you come up with other ways to cope with stress? Describe.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
