

# 5 Ways to Manage Stress for a Healthier Life

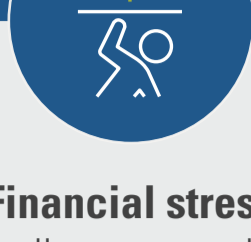
## In small doses, stress can be helpful.

It motivates us to get up in the morning and take care of our daily responsibilities.

## Chronic stress is a different story.

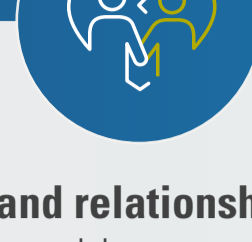
Sleeplessness, migraines, weight gain, irritation, and lack of concentration are a few of its side effects, which can impact your ability to function.<sup>1</sup> There's also a connection between stress and health issues such as diabetes and heart disease.

## Here are some of the most common types of stress:



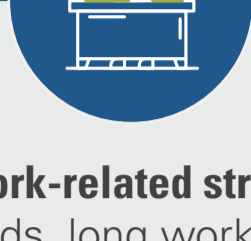
### Financial stress

Economic challenges such as job loss, reduced work hours, financial instability, and debt can be significant sources of stress.



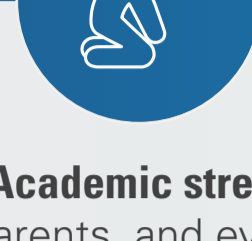
### Family and relationship stress

Marital problems, caregiving responsibilities, parenting challenges, and conflicts with family members have a big impact on stress levels.



### Work-related stress

High workloads, long working hours, job insecurity, and lack of work-life balance can impact mental health and overall well-being. These stressors can lead to disinterest in work, distractions, and a lack of motivation.



### Academic stress

Students, parents, and even educators may experience stress related to academic performance, adapting to learning environments, managing homework, the college entry process, and extracurricular expectations.

Knowing how to deal with stress can help you maintain your physical and mental health, improve your cognitive function, and enhance your quality of life.

## Five Ways to Manage Stress

### 1 Make time for self-care

Self-care means doing things you enjoy that will help you live well. Whether you take time to read, listen to your favorite music, learn a new craft, or something else, make sure to do something you love.



#### Consider the following:

- **Make it part of your lifestyle.** Self-care is often confused with self-indulgence, but you don't have to go on a lavish vacation or buy expensive clothing to take care of yourself. An excellent self-care practice often involves activities you enjoy that don't cost much.
- **Let your self-care practice evolve.** Life is constantly changing. Relationships come and go, interests change, and you're always learning. Explore self-care habits that fit your needs and interests. If you feel like trying something new, go for it.
- **Don't forget elimination.** Self-care is often associated with adding things to your life, but taking things off your plate can be just as impactful. Are there ways you can reorganize your schedule to find more time for yourself?
- **Your self-care practice should be as unique as you are.** It's okay if your self-care routine doesn't match up to others'. Just identify your needs and incorporate them into a routine that will help achieve your goals.

### 2 Practice mindfulness

A type of meditation called mindfulness can help you get out of your head and engage with the world around you when you're overwhelmed. Mindfulness enables you to focus on your feelings in any given moment. It can involve breathing exercises, guided imagery, and other practices to relax your body.



#### Here are some examples of mindfulness exercises:

- **Pay attention.** Slow down and observe your surroundings. Focus on your senses—sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste—to bring your mind back to the present.
- **Live in the moment.** Be present and give your attention to your current task, activity, or experience. Try to find joy in the simple things in life.
- **Accept yourself.** Treat yourself the way you would treat a good friend.
- **Focus on your breathing.** The next time you have negative thoughts, sit down, close your eyes, and take a deep breath. Focus on your breath as it moves in and out of your body.

### 3 Get moving

Whether you take a yoga class or go on a brisk walk, moving can help with your mental health.



#### Here's why even a little exercise can be extremely helpful:

- **It increases endorphins.** Physical activity can bump up the production of endorphins, also known as your brain's feel-good neurotransmitters. Any kind of activity, including a game of tennis or a nature hike, can boost endorphins.
- **It helps your body work through stress.** Exercise imitates the effects of stress, such as the flight or fight response, and helps your body work through those effects. It also builds up physical strength in your cardiovascular, digestive, and immune systems.
- **It promotes meditation.** Taking a long walk or swimming several laps in the pool can help clear your mind of daily stressors. Shedding tension through movement can give you more energy, optimism, and focus.
- **It improves your mood.** Regular exercise can increase confidence, promote better sleep, and help reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety.

### 4 Prioritize nutrition

When it comes to stress management, food can be one of your biggest allies—or enemies. Pay attention to what you're eating when you're feeling frazzled.



Alcohol, caffeine, high-sugar foods, simple carbs, and soda can cause stress levels to rise. Conversely, nutrient-rich foods can positively impact your physical and mental health.<sup>2</sup>

#### The next time you feel stressed, try including the following foods into your diet:

- **Herbal teas.** Drinking a warm cup of tea is an excellent way to help manage your stress. Warm liquids have a soothing effect, and herbs like lavender and chamomile promote relaxation.
- **Dark chocolate.** Did you know dark chocolate is packed with stress-relieving antioxidants? According to a study, eating 1.5 ounces of dark chocolate daily can help reduce stress by lowering levels of stress hormones in the body.<sup>3</sup> Consider a dark chocolate that doesn't have a lot of added sugar.
- **Whole grains.** Research suggests that carbohydrates can temporarily increase levels of serotonin, a hormone that boosts mood and reduces stress.<sup>4</sup> Unrefined carbohydrates like sweet potatoes and whole grains are a healthier option because your body won't convert them to sugar as fast as it does with carbs like white rice or pasta.
- **Avocados.** Avocados have omega-3 fatty acids, which can positively impact your health. Try mashing them into guacamole or adding slices to a sandwich.
- **Fatty fish.** Fish is high in omega-3s, which can help ease stressful moods. Tuna, halibut, salmon, herring, mackerel, sardines, and lake trout are packed with nutrients that interact with mood-related brain molecules.

### 5 Seek professional help

Mental health providers and counselors can help you learn additional strategies to manage stress. If stress is affecting your ability to handle your daily responsibilities or relationships, consider getting professional help.



#### Look into professional help if you have experienced any of these symptoms for more than two weeks:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Changes in appetite or unplanned weight changes
- Difficulty getting out of bed in the morning
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in things you usually find enjoyable
- Inability to complete usual tasks and activities
- Feelings of irritability, frustration, or restlessness



#### If you want to learn more about stress management, we recommend the following:

- ▶ [The 10 Best Foods to Help Fight Stress](#) – Everyday Health, September 2023
- ▶ [The importance of stress management](#) – Clarity Clinic, April 2023
- ▶ [Caring for Your Mental Health](#) – National Institute of Mental Health, February 2024
- ▶ [Exercise and stress: Get moving to manage stress](#) – Mayo Clinic, August 2022
- ▶ [Mindfulness exercises](#) – Mayo Clinic, October 2022
- ▶ [What are the four golden rules of self-care?](#) – Huffington Post, June 2017
- ▶ [Importance of Stress Management](#) – Clarity Clinic, April 2023
- ▶ [Metabolic Effects of Dark Chocolate Consumption on Energy, Gut Microbiota, and Stress-Related Metabolism in Free-Living Subjects](#) – Journal of Proteome Research, October 2009
- ▶ [Association of Use of Omega-3 Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids With Changes in Severity of Anxiety Symptoms](#) – JAMA Network Open, September 2018

Sources:  
1. Why Stress Management is Important: Self-Care Tips That Anyone Can Put into Practice – USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, April 2018

2. Stress exposure, food intake and emotional state – The International Journal on the Biology of Stress, February 2015

3. Consumption of 85% cocoa dark chocolate improves mood in association with gut microbial changes in healthy adults: a randomized controlled trial – The Journal of Nutritional Biochemistry, January 2022

4. Carbohydrate ingestion, blood glucose and mood – Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews, May 2022