



Understanding the Stress/Health Connection

Stress exists in your mind – but it’s also evident in your stomach, heart, muscles and even your toes. “In fact, stress may affect every cell in your body,” says Ronald Glaser, Ph.D., a researcher at Ohio State University Medical School.

During stressful times, your body produces various chemicals, including cortisol, an immune-suppressing hormone. The more cortisol produced, the weaker your immune cells become and the more susceptible you are to illness..

Common Reactions to Stress

- Migraine headaches
- Sleep disorders
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Depression, worry and anxiety
- Chest pain

By gaining a better understanding of the stress/disease connection, you can reduce your stress and improve your health and well-being.

Keeping Stress in Check

No one can avoid stress — and a certain amount is good for you. But it’s best to keep unhealthy levels in check.

The following steps can help you control everyday stress:

- **Recognize your stress signals.** Once you’re aware of your stressors, you can take steps to reduce them.
- **Notice when you’re most vulnerable to stress and prepare yourself.** Are you most affected in the mornings? On Mondays? In the winter?
- **Make time for physical activity.** Aerobic workouts — walking, cycling, swimming or running — can release pent-up frustrations while producing endorphins— brain chemicals that counteract stress.
- **Eat a healthful diet.** A balanced diet can help stabilize your mood. Limit your intake of caffeine and avoid alcohol and drugs.
- **Invest in meaningful relationships.** Social ties relieve stress and contribute to a positive attitude.
- **Spend time enjoying your hobbies.** Doing so allows you to focus on a pleasurable activity instead of your problems.
- **Try relaxation techniques.** Meditation, creative imagery, visualization, deep-breathing exercises, yoga and listening to relaxation tapes can help you relax.

- **Learn to set limits.** Don’t agree to unnecessary, stressful obligations.
- **Get enough sleep.** Stress interferes with relaxation, making it hard to get a good night’s sleep, which can lead to fatigue and a reduced ability to cope. To get the best sleep possible, try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.

Combating Serious Stress

“In combating serious stress, you should first carefully appraise the seriousness of the situation and the adequacy of your coping resources,” says Kenneth B. Matheny, Ph.D., A.B.P.P., director of counseling psychology at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

When faced with a highly stressful event in your life, the following strategies will help you cope:

- **Avoid unnecessary changes in your life.** Instead, reserve what energy you do have for dealing with the stressor at hand. If possible, stabilize your work and home environments while working out the primary problem.
- **Quiet your mind.** In times of stress, the mind makes things seem worse than they are by creating endless versions of impending disaster.
- **Stay in the present.** You can calm both your mind and body by keeping your mind in the present, which is less stressful than the imagined future. To keep your mind in the present, focus your attention on your breathing, a sound or visual pattern, a repetitive movement or meditation.
- **Face the stressor.** Resist any temptation to ignore the stressor. Instead, appraise the seriousness of the problem without magnifying it out of proportion.
- **Take inventory of your coping responses.** Review successes you’ve had with other stressful life situations. Recall some of the specific things you did to cope.
- **Take action.** Commit yourself to a reasonable course of action to deal with the stressor.

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Keeping Envy and Jealousy Under Control

When someone gets a raise or a special perk, can you say congratulations and mean it? Or do you see the inside and think, “That really should have been mine?”

“In today’s competitive world, it’s not unusual to desire what someone else has,” says Gregory White, Ph.D., a clinical and social psychologist who teaches at National University in Redding, California. “Unfortunately, if you let those emotions get the best of you, you could do yourself a lot more harm than good.”

Feelings of resentment at another’s good fortune take two forms, envy and jealousy, says Dr. White, who distinguishes these feelings in the following way:

- Envy rears its head when someone has a thing or a benefit you want for yourself — a bigger office, a bigger paycheck, a special privilege.
- Jealousy results when you covet a relationship. For example, you might feel jealous if your supervisor and co-worker are lunching buddies and leave you behind.

Both envy and jealousy are fanned by the perception that the “winner” had an unfair advantage. “If you think you’ve been treated unfairly, you dwell on that. You feel you need to even the score somehow,” says Dr. White.

In small doses, he says, these emotions can be motivating. When someone else has what you want, this increases your determination to get it. Some companies even encourage these feelings to create a more competitive environment.

When envy and jealousy get out of control, though, they can be highly destructive to people and to organizations. Plotting to “get even” with someone who just got a new title, for example, probably won’t change the situation, but it could make life in the office very unpleasant for you and everyone else.

In the same way, someone who decided to get back at the organization by coming in late or doing a less effective job would probably find it harder to get a promotion in the future.

Envy and jealousy also contribute to stress and anger, which are closely tied to several illnesses. Anger has been shown to be a risk factor for heart disease, Dr. White points out. Similarly, long-term stress impairs the immune system and has been associated with some forms of cancer.

Follow Your Own Star

“Instead of letting negative emotions run away with your well-being or your career, take control by making conscious choices about what you want in your life and career,” says Dr. White.

“Think about what you value most — your job status, for example — or whether you’d rather have a comfortable work environment or a healthful lifestyle.”

If you do decide the promotion is important, that’s fine. Then, decide how you can go after it in a positive way. That could mean learning helpful new skills or finding someone who can mentor your progress up the company ladder.

Steps to Take

Here are some other strategies for managing these negative emotions:

- **Use “decision language.”** Instead of casting yourself as the victim, describe the situation in words that put you in charge.
- **Count your assets.** Take an inventory of the positive things you’ve achieved in your work and in the rest of your life. Is it possible other people are envious of you?
- **Choose a stress-reducing lifestyle.** Regular exercise and a healthful diet can help you get a grip on feelings of anger and frustration. Look also at ways to manage or reduce other areas of stress.

“Focus on yourself and your work, instead of constantly comparing yourself with others,” says Dr. White. “Learn to steer your own course. If you’re guided by your own goals and values, it doesn’t matter what someone else has or doesn’t have.”

