

Signs of Stress Overload

People who are experiencing stress overload may notice some of the following signs:

- anxiety or panic attacks
- a feeling of being constantly pressured, hassled, and hurried
- irritability and moodiness
- physical symptoms, such as stomach problems, headaches, or even chest pain
- allergic reactions, such as eczema or asthma
- problems sleeping
- drinking too much, smoking, overeating, or doing drugs
- sadness or depression

Everyone experiences stress a little differently. Some people become angry and act out their stress or take it out on others. Some people internalize it and develop eating disorders or substance abuse problems. And some people who have a chronic illness may find that the symptoms of their illness flare up under an overload of stress.

Keep Stress Under Control

What can you do to deal with stress overload or, better yet, to avoid it in the first place? The most helpful method of dealing with stress is learning how to manage the stress that comes along with any new challenge, good or bad. Stress-management skills work best when they're used regularly, not just when the pressure's on. Knowing how to "de-stress" and doing it when things are relatively calm can help you get through challenging circumstances that may arise. Here are some things that can help keep stress under control.

- **Take a stand against over scheduling.** If you're feeling stretched, consider cutting out an activity or two, opting for just the ones that are most important to you.
- **Be realistic.** Don't try to be perfect - no one is. And expecting others to be perfect can add to your stress level, too (not to mention put a lot of pressure on them!). If you need help on something, like schoolwork, ask for it.
- **Get a good night's sleep.** Getting enough sleep helps keep your body and mind in top shape, making you better equipped to deal with any negative stressors. Because the biological "sleep clock" shifts during adolescence, many teens prefer staying up a little later at night and sleeping a little later in the morning. But if you stay up late and still need to get up early for school, you may not get all the hours of sleep you need.
- **Learn to relax.** The body's natural antidote to stress is called the **relaxation response**. It's your body's opposite of stress, and it creates a sense of well-being and calm. The chemical benefits of the relaxation response can be activated simply by relaxing. You can help

trigger the relaxation response by learning simple breathing exercises and then using them when you're caught up in stressful situations. (Click on the button to try one.) And ensure you stay relaxed by building time into your schedule for activities that are calming and pleasurable: reading a good book or making time for a hobby, spending time with your pet, or just taking a relaxing bath.

- **Treat your body well.** Experts agree that getting regular exercise helps people manage stress. (Excessive or **compulsive** exercise can contribute to stress, though, so as in all things, use moderation.) And eat well to help your body get the right fuel to function at its best. It's easy when you're stressed out to eat on the run or eat junk food or fast food. But under stressful conditions, the body needs its vitamins and minerals more than ever. Some people may turn to substance abuse as a way to ease tension. Although alcohol or drugs may seem to lift the stress temporarily, relying on them to cope with stress actually promotes more stress because it wears down the body's ability to bounce back.
- **Watch what you're thinking.** Your outlook, attitude, and thoughts influence the way you see things. Is your cup half full or half empty? A healthy dose of optimism can help you make the best of stressful circumstances. Even if you're out of practice, or tend to be a bit of a pessimist, everyone can learn to think more optimistically and reap the benefits.
- **Solve the little problems.** Learning to solve everyday problems can give you a sense of control. But avoiding them can leave you feeling like you have little control and that just adds to stress. Develop skills to calmly look at a problem, figure out options, and take some action toward a solution. Feeling capable of solving little problems builds the inner confidence to move on to life's bigger ones - and it can serve you well in times of stress.

Build Your Resilience

Ever notice that certain people seem to adapt quickly to stressful circumstances and take things in stride? They're cool under pressure and able to handle problems as they come up. Researchers have identified the qualities that make some people seem naturally resilient even when faced with high levels of stress. If you want to build your resilience, work on developing these attitudes and behaviors:

- Think of change as a challenging and normal part of life.
- See setbacks and problems as temporary and solvable.
- Believe that you will succeed if you keep working toward your goals.
- Take action to solve problems that crop up.
- Build strong relationships and keep commitments to family and friends.
- Have a support system and ask for help.
- Participate regularly in activities for relaxation and fun.

Learn to think of challenges as opportunities and stressors as temporary problems, not disasters. Practice solving problems and asking others for help and guidance rather than complaining and letting stress build. Make goals and keep track of your progress. Make time for relaxation. Be optimistic. Believe in yourself. Be sure to breathe. And let a little stress motivate you into positive action to reach your goals.

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