



Stress Management

Stress comes in a variety of forms. Some are motivating and exciting. Some forms of stress are silent and compounding and some are loud and acute. Understanding what stress is, how to utilize it, how to identify when it passes tolerable thresholds, and how to increase your coping tools will give your body and brain the break they need to be in a more positive position for change.

WHAT IS STRESS?

The World Health Organization defines stress as “...your body’s response to anything that requires attention or action.” It is “any type of change that causes physical, emotional, or psychological strain.”

PAUSE: Have you ever considered stress as both a positive influence as well as a negative one?

Stress is often considered a negative experience. Negative stress experiences can range in severity, such as: job loss or threat of loss, death of a loved one, divorce, moving, and chronic illness or injury. This is considered *distress*. These experiences can cause symptoms like headaches, fatigue, insomnia, gastrointestinal problems, brain fog, heart problems, anxiety, and lowered immune response.

Consider the other end of the spectrum: positive stress experiences. Think about a first date experience, a job offer, or a major moment in your life that channels energy and excitement. It’s like you can take on the world and do not need to sleep. This stress response is invigorating! It’s a type of good stress called *eustress*. These experiences can make you feel more proactive, be more productive, more creative, makes life more thrilling, increases energy, encourages positive feelings, increases resilience to negative stress, and can make you feel more confident.

We also have daily stress on our plates. These are the things that occur frequently or as a part of our lifestyle. Things like getting to school and work on time, running out of gas, losing body fat, completing projects well and on time, finding time for self-care, wanting to finish the last

episode of your current show despite needing to sleep...these are smaller influences that push us in a direction each day.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Stress is a necessary part of our lives. It can create momentum and motivation to take action through healthy tension or create feelings of exhaustion, panic, anxiety, and anger through stress overload.

STRESS RESPONSE HABITS

Stress response habits exist to automate our responses. It is an evolutionary advantage to not have to think about running away from a lion, you just do it. However, this stress response is often triggered in non-life-threatening moments like being late to work or being confronted at the school drop-off line about something your child did. They also can be triggered when our expectations do not align with reality. Wanting to be a different body shape or size, wishing you didn't eat the whole sleeve of Oreos last night, or realizing that once again you are choosing to sit on the couch instead of get on your Peloton despite your New Year's Resolution, can fire up a stress response. These responses are not as evolutionarily advantageous. In fact, they may be part of the reason why behavior change is so hard.

REDUCE STRESS & INCREASE COPING SKILLS

To address the negative stress response habits created over time, focusing on both reducing negative stress exposure as well as increasing coping tools will aid in reducing the barriers in your health journey.

Can you control how much exposure you have to a particular stressor? Or how you react to them? Consider these steps:

1 | Avoid

- Take control of your surroundings. If traffic creates stress, choose an alternate route or leave earlier. If you struggle with dessert temptations, plan ahead by giving yourself one goal-supportive option that feels indulgent without derailing you.
- Say no to things that do not promote your health-conscious goals. Both in food and exercise but also in social obligation.
- Avoid interactions with people who create feelings of stress by politely disengaging with a closed response.

2 | Alter

- Take inventory of the stressor then make a change. This can be either from you or by asking others. If evenings are often the time of day that is the hardest to avoid emotional eating, is there another place in the house you can do your evening routine? If mornings create a feeling of being out of control that often leads you to ordering a low-nutrient coffee treat, what actions can you put in place the night before to reduce decision-making in the morning?
- Communicate your feelings. Use “I” statements instead of accusatory “you” statements.
- Prioritize your to-do list. Divide your list into High, Medium, and Low Priority. Attack the high priority list first each day.
- Have a gameplan to reduce unpredictable stress. Put your movement into your daily schedule and add reminders for snacks if you tend to forget. Keep some nuts in your purse and pack a large water bottle daily. Consider grouping activities together to avoid mental fatigue from switching back and forth between different tasks.

- Give yourself limits in advance. Allow yourself to get all tasks done spontaneously if they take 5 minutes or less. Anything more requires dedicated time. Allocate time to focus on a particular stressor in your day then allow yourself to table it until the next time. Dividing up stressors into smaller time-based activities helps to reduce their compounding effects.

3| Accept

- Accept the situation, and your feelings, for what they are. It takes a tremendous toll to fight reality. Thoughts of “I wish I would have” or “if only I could just...” create a divide between what we think and what is.
- Forgive yourself. Plan for missteps! It’s normal. Accept that you will make mistakes and allow yourself to get back up. Remind yourself that you have survived 100% of your worst days and that failure is another learning experience.
- Talk with a supportive friend, family member, or a professional. Your feelings are legitimate and sharing with a positive support system may lessen their hold on you. Putting your feelings into words may allow you to see the stressful situation in a different light.
- Meet your body where it is at. Your thoughts should follow your body’s cues instead of forcing your body to follow your thoughts or expectations. What you can do one day may be different than the next.

4| Adapt

- Turn your inner voice into its own persona. Note the voice inside your head. Is she telling you negative things about yourself? Imagine if that was coming from someone else entirely. Give her a name and when those thoughts come around, recognize that Mean Matilda is back again. Dismiss her and reframe that negative thought into a productive one. Instead of “I will never lose 50 pounds,” try “I have

learned from my previous habits and I am addressing my behavior in a new way that will help me make goal-supportive choices”

- Adjust big standards into smaller pieces.. Instead of “lose 50 pounds” try “eat a vegetable at each meal” or “consider my plate before digging in.” Smaller standards allow for consistent wins.
- Adopt a go-to saying. “I am resilient” when faced with goal-reductive behavior or “these small choices compound to a great effect” when you make goal-supportive behaviors reframe each experience into a small win. Small wins builds confidence and resilience.
- Zoom out. Will this particular stressor be a game-changer for my life? The answer usually is no. Lessening the gravity of impact can aid in reducing the friction needed to make a health-conscious decision.
- Ask yourself if it is true. Then ask why. Rumination and worry surrounding weight, fat, diet, exercise, body image can feel like a blackhole. To separate yourself from getting sucked in, ask yourself: “Is this true?” “Why?” Explore this question as many times as needed.

EXERCISE: Ask yourself: “What do I need to feel success in my health journey today?”

Answer, then ask: “Is that true?”

Answer, then ask: “Why?”

Repeat these two questions until the answer is “yes.”