

## How to Manage Your Stress

Taking time for yourself is not selfish—it helps you to be the best mother/father, spouse, friend, employee, and person you can. Though this is obvious, it is often overlooked.

Stress management seems to be the most difficult change for people to make. Though we can empathize with this difficulty, and understand the commitment needed to make such a change, we cannot shy away from the significant need to implement stress management. Clearly stated, if you're not doing some form of stress management, you will sabotage all of your best efforts with diet, exercise, and supplements. It is just that essential.

Stress is, of course, an inevitable part of life, and it isn't even all bad. When the total amount of stress you are experiencing at a given time exceeds your ability to cope with it, that's when stress wreaks havoc on your health. Since you can't avoid all stress in life, try to minimize the impact of stress by:

- Reducing your total exposure to psychological or physiological stress
- Mitigating the harmful effects of stress you can't avoid
- Adopting strategies for stress management

### Reduce the amount of stress you experience

- Learn to say no. Know your limits and be aware of over-committing yourself.
- Avoid people who stress you out. Limit your time with people who might be prone to drama or conflict, if you can't avoid them entirely.
- Turn off the news, or at least limit your exposure. So much of the media coverage today is sensationalistic. Try looking for more neutral sources of news.
- Give up pointless arguments.
- Limit your to-do list. Ask yourself which items on your list are essential and see if you can cross anything off your list.
- Reduce your exposure to online stress.

## Your patterns of thought affect your perceptions of stress

Consider these different strategies for decreasing the stress you experience:

- Reframe the situation. Look for a more positive light. For example, if you find yourself stuck in traffic, can you enjoy a podcast or use it as an opportunity for contemplation and solitude.
- Lower your expectations and standards. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good. Let good be good enough.
- Practice acceptance. Learn to accept the things you can't change.
- Be grateful. Try keeping a gratitude journal and writing down three things from each day that you are grateful for, and how your actions contributed.
- Cultivate empathy.
- Manage your time. Setting careful boundaries for your time can be helpful.

## Find an option for stress management that works for you

There are a number of different clinically proven ways to manage stress, from yoga to deep breathing to biofeedback. Below are several points to consider, and a few options for specific techniques.

- Start small. If you're new to meditation, start with just five minutes each day. Gradually increase that time as you become more accustomed to the practice.
- Make it a priority. Consider putting it on your calendar, just as you would any other important task for the day.
- Be gentle with yourself. It's okay if you miss a day, and it's okay if you don't feel like you're "good" at it.
- Choose a mix of practices. Some days sitting still on the cushion may feel near impossible, and yoga or another movement-based practice may be a better fit for the day.
- Try progressive relaxation, or mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). There is a free guided body scan at <http://www.buddhanet.net/audio-meditation.htm>
- For about \$20 you can purchase four guided meditations by Jon Kabat-Zinn (the pioneer of MBSR) at <http://www.soundstrue.com/store/guided-mindfulness-meditation-3947.html>
- If sleep is a significant issue, consider the Sounder Sleep System for about \$40: <http://www.soundersleep.com/marketplace/?category=audio>
- Biofeedback is another option that some people prefer, since it provides a more tangible measure of how we modify our physiological response through relaxation. There are many options available that work with a tablet or smartphone, such as Emwave2, BioZen and Quantum Life.

## Get Sleep, and Plenty of It

Sleep affects the function of almost every system of the body, and improving the quality, duration, and timing of your sleep is one of the single most powerful interventions you can make to improve your health.

**Make sleep a priority.** Research suggests that most adults need seven to nine hours of sleep each night. So start by setting aside at least eight hours each night for sleep, and consider increasing this amount if you still don't feel you're getting enough.

**Control your exposure to light.** Both natural and artificial light can have a significant impact on your circadian rhythm.

- Avoid or minimize using computers and tablets within two to three hours of your bedtime. If you need to use your computer closer to bedtime, consider using software such as f.lux (<https://justgetflux.com>) to minimize the sleep disrupting effects.
- Orange-tinted glasses are another way to block out the spectrum of light that suppresses melatonin (an important hormone for sleep). Studies have shown that they may improve sleep quality and mood, and are especially important if you are using electronic media, such as smartphones and TV, in the evening. These can be purchased at [amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca).
- Dim, cover or remove anything in your bedroom that emits light, such as an alarm clock.
- Consider using blackout shades to make your bedroom as dark as possible. Or use an eye mask when you sleep to block out any light.
- Increase your exposure to light in the morning and during the day. Try exposing yourself to bright light first thing in the morning. If it's light outside when you wake up, try going outside (without sunglasses) for a fifteen- to thirty-minute walk. Alternatively, consider buying a light machine that emits ten thousand lux of light and sit in front of it for fifteen to twenty minutes.

**Move your body.** See below for a few specific recommendations about exercise. But don't just think about exercise—it's even more important to reduce your sedentary time and increase non-exercise physical activity throughout your day.

**Optimize your sleep nutrition.** In general, it's best to be neither overly full nor hungry when you go to bed.

- Based on clinical experience, both low-fat and low-carbohydrate diets seem to increase the likelihood of insomnia.
- Carbohydrates help increase the production of serotonin and melatonin (both of which help you fall asleep). If you eat a low-carb diet, and struggle with falling asleep at night, try eating a few more carbohydrates, particularly with dinner. Even if you already eat a moderate carbohydrate diet, you can still adjust your carbs so that most are eaten later in the day.
- Balance your intake of muscle meats and eggs with bone broths and fattier cuts of meat to achieve a more balanced intake of amino acids, which can also help with the production of serotonin and melatonin.

**Beware of stimulants.** Caffeine, whether from coffee, tea or other sources, is a stimulant. Though many people tolerate caffeine well, if you have trouble sleeping, remove caffeine completely for at least 30 days. For some people, even a morning cup of coffee can contribute to difficulty sleeping.

- Dark chocolate also contains some caffeine—enough to cause insomnia for some. Try removing dark chocolate from your diet as well during your 30 day trial without caffeine.
- If your sleep doesn't improve while you're off caffeine, and doesn't worsen once you add it back, then it is probably safe to reason that caffeine is not contributing to your sleep difficulties.

**Create an environment that is conducive to sleep.** Use your bed (and preferably your bedroom) only for sleep and sex. Make it a relaxing environment, keep it slightly cool, and use white noise machines or earplugs to minimize disturbance from any outside noises.

## Go Outside

- Research has proven that spending time outdoors, including contact with nature, is just as important to health and well-being as sleep, exercise and a healthy diet.
- Get outside when you can, and aim for 15 to 20 minutes of midday sun exposure (without sunscreen) two to three days each week. This amount of time will vary based on skin tone, time of year and latitude.
- Spend as much time in nature as your schedule and lifestyle permit. Aim for a minimum of two excursions into nature, including urban parks and green spaces, each week.
- Put plants in your home and workspace. If you have outdoor space, plant a simple garden.
- Exercise outdoors whenever possible, and on varied terrain that includes hills, trails, rocks, and other natural features.

## Get Serious about Play

- In our culture, play is often dismissed as a waste of time. However, research suggests that play may encourage flexibility and variability in behavior and adaptation to a changing environment. Some research (specifically studying bears) even suggests that play may contribute to living longer and healthier lives, along with directly contributing to the growth of certain brain regions.
- Try adding more play into your life. Think about what you enjoyed as a kid and see if you can bring that joy back into your life.
- Make a list of play activities. Write down a list of ways you love to play and put it somewhere you'll see it every day. It's easy to leave out play when we are caught up in everyday life, trying to get through our to-do list, so leave the list where it will nudge you to find a few minutes for play.
- Create opportunities for play. Throw a ball for your dog, play hide-and-seek with your kids, or just go for an aimless walk in your favourite park.

## **Exercise**

- When it comes to exercise, listen to your body. Overtraining is common amongst high-level athletes and CrossFit enthusiasts. Exercise is a form of stress. In appropriate amounts, it's a positive stressor: it promotes healthy adaptations that make the body stronger and more resilient. In inappropriate amounts, it is maladaptive: it breaks the body down and increases the risk of disease.
- Signs of overtraining include difficulty recovering from workouts, a plateau or decrease in performance, fat gain despite regular exercise, insomnia, restlessness, anxiety, fatigue, muscle or joint pain, frequent illness and depression.