

Healthy Ways to Cope with Stress

Not all stress is bad for us. Some stress is good—it helps our minds focus and our senses sharpen. However, continual high levels of stress have the opposite effect, actually interfering with our ability to function and taking a toll on our health. Therefore, it's important to find healthy ways to cope with stress.



From time to time we all feel anxious and overwhelmed by problems—work demands, relationship issues, parenting or eldercare responsibilities, illness, or financial difficulties—that can make us feel physically unwell and emotionally drained. Stress affects each of us differently and we all cope in our own way. Unfortunately, some of us cope in unhealthy ways that can actually increase our stress and further damage our physical and mental health. These include:¹

- smoking;
- drinking too much alcohol;
- consuming too much caffeine;
- overeating or undereating;
- relying on prescription medication or illegal drugs to relax;
- withdrawing from friends, family, and activities;
- sleeping too much or too little;
- irritability, angry outbursts or physical violence; and/or
- procrastination or avoiding problems.

So why do many people with high pressure, high stress lives seem to cope so well? They're probably managing their stress in healthy, productive ways.

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It is possible to greatly reduce the impact of stress with some easy steps, including:

- **Exercise**². We all know that exercise keeps our bodies and minds in tip-top shape, but it is also a great stress-busting tool. Physical activity helps to increase the production of endorphins—our body's feel-good chemicals. Working up a sweat will help you shed the day's stresses, elevate your mood, and help you remain calm. Exercise can also help you sleep better.
- **Stop and breathe**³. Find ways to relax and refocus. This can include breathing exercises, meditation, massage, yoga, tai chi or even a relaxing bubble bath.



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- **Talk to a friend or family member**⁴. Opening up and sharing your problems can help put problems into perspective. You'll also receive support and helpful advice from people who have your best interests at heart.
- **Laugh**⁵. Laughter also triggers the release of endorphins that can improve your well-being. It's hard to feel angry, anxious, or sad when you're laughing. Call someone and go to a funny movie or get together with friends and play cards or board games.
- **Set boundaries**⁶. Many of us find it hard to say no and, as a result, find ourselves overwhelmed with work, family and social obligations, leaving our own needs unmet. Setting boundaries can be difficult; therefore, many experts suggest starting with small things. For example, when asked to make your special cookies for a family or community event, politely say that unfortunately, you just don't have time, but you can bring some store-bought goodies. Remember that setting boundaries is a skill that takes practise.
- **Take action**⁷. Sometimes we increase our stress by fretting about a problem instead of doing something about it. For example, instead of worrying constantly about financial difficulties and seeing your stress levels continue to soar, call your bank or your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP), and make an appointment with a financial advisor. Taking action immediately may make you feel less stressed.
- **Eat well**⁸. No matter how tired, frustrated or upset you are—try not to rely on eating fast foods, highly processed meals or sugary, fatty treats. Instead, focus on eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, lean meats and whole grains. You'll feel better—inside and out.
- **Practise positivity**⁹. Focus on what is great about your life, not the things that are causing you stress. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal in which they write down what they are thankful for every day, including their own talents and abilities.

If you feel overwhelmed, anxious or even depressed, talk to your doctor or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP).

1. Harvard Medical School / Health Canada

2. My Health Alberta / Canadian Women's Health Network

3. Canadian Mental Health Association. "Coping with Stress." / My Health Alberta / Canadian Women's Health Network

4. Health Canada / Canadian Women's Health Network

5. Canadian Mental Health Association. "Coping with Stress."

6. Public Health Agency of Canada / Mayo Clinic

7. Health Canada / American Heart Association

8. Health Canada / American Heart Association

9. My Health Alberta



We want your questions, comments, and suggestions—lifelines@homewoodhealth.com

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