



Wellness Wednesday Follow Up

Stress Part 2



Healthy evidence-based tools to help combat the negative effects of stress:

Try to eliminate the stressors: Whether you experience an intolerable level of psychological stress depends on the intensity of the situation and the person experiencing it. How you perceive and think about a stressor can make a big impact on how you respond. It's not always possible to escape a stressful situation or avoid a problem, but you can try to reduce the stress you are feeling. Can you change the situation that is causing you stress? Perhaps by dropping some responsibility, relaxing your standards, or asking for help?



Cultivate social support: Strong social support can improve resilience to stress. Reach out strategically. Some friends or family members may be good at listening and sympathizing. Others might excel at practical help, like bringing over a home-cooked meal or covering an hour of child care. Giving support can also increase positive emotions and decrease negative emotions. Just make sure your relationships stay in balance. A friend who requires support but never gives it may increase your stress level.

Seek good nutrition: When confronted with a stressor, the central nervous system releases adrenaline and cortisol, which affects the digestive tract among other physiological changes. Acute stress can kill the appetite, but the release of the hormone cortisol during chronic stress can cause fat and sugar cravings. Research also suggests that high cortisol combined with high sugar consumption may prompt the deposition of fat around our internal organs—visceral fat that is associated with cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. A diet high in a variety of nutrients can both protect health and provide more physical energy to deal with challenges. No need to go vegan or swear off cookies—just aim to consume a rainbow of fruits and vegetables as part of your daily diet. Avoid using substances such as alcohol to dampen the stress response since substances do not solve the root of the problem and can have serious health effects.



Relax your muscles: Because stress causes muscles to tense, being stressed out can create tension headaches, backaches, and general fatigue. Combat stress and these symptoms with stretches, massage, or warm baths. Try progressive muscle relaxation, a method that has been

shown to reduce anxiety and improve overall mental health. To practice progressive muscle relaxation, get in a comfortable position and choose a muscle group, like your lower leg muscles (most recommend starting with the lower body and working your way up). Inhale and contract the muscles for 5 to 10 seconds, then exhale and release the muscles. Relax for 10 or more seconds and then move on to the next muscle group. Another option is passive progressive muscle relaxation. This technique is similar to progressive muscle relaxation but skips the tensing step. Instead, simply picture each muscle group one at a time and focus on relaxing that portion of the body.



Meditate: A strong body of research shows that mindful meditation can reduce psychological stress and anxiety—even short-term mindfulness meditation programs work. To get started, set aside five minutes in a quiet place to sit and breathe. Focus on the present moment. When stray thoughts intrude, acknowledge them and then let them go. Don't judge yourself for any mental wavering. Gently refocus and bring the attention back to the present moment.

Protect your sleep: Daytime stress affects nighttime sleep. Making matters worse, losing shuteye can affect both cognition and mood. How to sleep better? Try to have a consistent sleep routine that allows time to wind down before lights out. Meditation and relaxation can help with insomnia. Also, avoid caffeine and alcohol in the late afternoon and evening. Put down your screens, as blue light can suppress the sleepy hormone melatonin (and checking social media may ramp up your emotions.) Finally, move your body during the day: A large body of research suggests that physical activity can improve sleep, especially for middle-aged and older adults.



Get physical: Brisk movement can not only improve sleep, but it can also directly combat stress. In one study, working adults who participated in moderate physical activity had half the perceived stress as working adults who did not participate. Physical activity may also cancel out some of the negative effects of stress, including the impact of stress on the immune system. Adding physical activity needn't be expensive or complex: A brisk 30-minute walk or a dance session in the living room can do the trick.



Take a moment in nature: Studies conducted in multiple countries have found that green space improves mood. Even nature videos can speed the recovery from stress compared with videos of



urban scenes. Taking a moment to notice nature—even in the form of a bustling city park—can refocus and calm your mind.

Keep your pleasurable activities: When life gets overwhelming, people often drop their leisure activities first. But cutting yourself off from pleasure can be counterproductive. Even when time is tight, look for opportunities to do something for yourself, whether that means reading a novel, singing along to your favorite tunes, or streaming your favorite comedy on Netflix. Humor and laughter can benefit both mental and physical health.



Reframe your thinking: One of the most research-supported treatments for stress and anxiety is cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT. At the root of this therapy approach is the understanding that our thoughts influence our emotions, which in turn influence our behaviors. Reframing your thoughts around a stressor can help manage your emotions, reducing feelings of stress. Some tips: If you feel yourself spiraling into imagining worst-case scenarios, stop and put your mind elsewhere. Set realistic expectations for yourself. Strive for acceptance of situations outside of your control.

Seek help: If you feel overwhelmed and self-help isn't helping, look for a psychologist or other mental health provider who can help you learn how to manage your stress effectively. He or she can help you identify situations or behaviors that contribute to your stress and then develop an action plan to change the stressors, change your environment, and change your responses.

Things to listen to:

Podcasts:

The Happiness Lab: How to Tame Stress

A Slight Change of Plans: How to Make Stress Your Friend and Can Stress Be Helpful?

Hidden Brain: Reframing Your Reality Part 1

TED talks (available at [ted.com](https://www.ted.com) or [youtube](https://www.youtube.com)):

Kelly McGonigal – How to Make Stress your Friend

Susan David – The gift and power of emotional courage

Nina Nesdoly – How to relieve stress when you're overwhelmed



Books to read:

The Stress Proof Brain by Melanie Greenberg

Mindfulness for Stress Management by Robert Schacter

The Stress Prescription: Seven Days to More Joy and Ease by Elissa Epel



Apps:

Breathe2Relax

Healthy Minds Program App

Calm, Headspace, Meditopia – require subscription, but can do a free trial

Smiling Mind

Insight Timer

Medito

The Way

