



Work Force Of Interest

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Understanding the Stress/Health Connection

Stress exists in your mind — but it's also evident in your stomach, heart, muscles and even your toes.

"In fact, stress may affect every cell in your body," says Ronald Glaser, Ph.D., a researcher at Ohio State University Medical School.

During stressful times, your body produces various chemicals, including cortisol, an immune-suppressing hormone. The more cortisol produced, the weaker your immune cells become and the more susceptible you are to illness.



"A one-day stressor isn't going to make a big change in your risk of getting a cold, for example," says Dr. Glaser. "But a chronic stressor that lasts a few weeks could dampen your immune response and create a risk of disease."

Migraine headaches, sleep disorders, backaches, skin rashes, fatigue, irritability, headache, depression, worry, mood swings, chest pain, anxiety, upset stomach, ulcers, and high blood pressure are common reactions to stress.

By gaining a better understanding of the stress/disease connection, you can reduce your stress and, in turn, improve your health and well-being.

Holiday Stress

The holiday season can be a particularly stressful time. Busy schedules, family get-togethers, and added financial pressures can increase the stress of everyday life. Follow these tips to deal with stress during the holidays:

- **Have realistic expectations.** Don't expect everything to be perfect. Don't count on the holidays to make family tensions or disagreements disappear.
- **Know your financial limits and budget your spending.** Don't feel like you have to buy everyone an expensive gift.
- **Don't try to do too much.** You shouldn't have to rearrange your whole schedule to deal with the holidays. Ask others for help when you need it.
- **It's okay to say no.** Don't feel that you need to accept every invitation you receive.
- **If you've recently experienced a breakup, death in the family, or other tragedy, holidays can be especially stressful.** Ask friends and family to be understanding if you don't feel like participating in the festivities.

There is no such thing as a stress-free life. No evidence has ever been presented which suggests that a stress-free life can ever be achieved. Stress can be managed, relieved and lessened, but never eliminated."

-Gudjon Bergmann

Combatting Serious Stress

"In combating serious stress, you should first carefully appraise the seriousness of the situation and the adequacy of your coping resources," says Kenneth B. Matheny, Ph.D., A.B.P.P., director of counseling psychology at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

When faced with a highly stressful event in your life — perhaps the death of a loved one, a life-threatening illness or a serious financial loss — the following strategies will help you cope:

- Avoid unnecessary changes in your life. Instead, reserve what energy you do have for dealing with the stressor at hand. If possible, stabilize your work and home environments while working out the primary problem.
- Quiet your mind. In times of stress, the mind makes things seem worse than they are by creating endless versions of impending disaster. Because the body can't tell the difference between fact and fantasy, it responds with heightened physical response.
- Keep in the present. You can calm both your mind and body by keeping your mind in the present, which is seldom as stressful as an imagined future or regrettable past. To keep your mind in the present, focus your attention on your breathing, a sound or visual pattern, a repetitive movement, or meditation.
- Courageously and aggressively face the stressor. Resist any temptation to ignore the stressor. Instead, carefully appraise the seriousness of the problem without magnifying it out of proportion. In addition, confirm your view of the stressor by talking with others. Make a special effort to speak to family, friends, or co-workers who have dealt with similar experiences.
- Take inventory of your coping responses. Confidence is a valuable ally in combating stress, and it builds on memories of past successes. Review successes you've had with other stressful life situations. Recall some of the specific things you did to cope.
- Take action. Commit yourself to a reasonable course of action to deal with the stressor. Action is a powerful stress-reducer. Research shows the body lowers its production of epinephrine, a powerful stress hormone, when a person shifts into action.
- Take time out to relax. At least once or twice a day, take time to decompress by relaxing — perhaps by listening to soothing music, taking a walk, gardening, reading, or exercising.

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