

COPING WITH STRESS THE HEALTHY WAY



Learning to cope with stress in a healthy way will make us, the people we care about, and everyone around us, more resilient.

According to the Mayo Clinic stress symptoms can affect our bodies our thoughts and feelings and our behaviour. Being able to recognise common stress symptoms can help us to manage them. Stress that is left unchecked can contribute to many health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. [Click here](#) to visit the Mayo Clinic website for more.

Everyone may experience stress differently, from physical symptoms such as a headache, clenched jaw, tight muscles to feelings of anger, anxiety, depression, irritability, and impatience. Having trouble sleeping or lower energy levels is also a common sign of stress.

It is important to recognise how you respond to stress as this affects your health. Watch out for these red flags:

- ◆ Difficulty sleeping or have nightmares when we do fall asleep.
- ◆ Clenched jaw or hunched shoulders.
- ◆ Sleep more than usual.
- ◆ Physical reactions, (headaches, body pains, stomach problems, and skin rashes)
- ◆ Escalation of chronic health problems.
- ◆ Deterioration of our mental health.
- ◆ Increasingly finding substance-solace such as tobacco, alcohol, OTC medication.
- ◆ Eat more.
- ◆ Skip meals.
- ◆ Try do too many things at once.
- ◆ Procrastination (I will get to this (important thing) at some stage)

The Heart Foundation of SA say that stress is a normal physiological response to 'dangerous' situations and therefore often beneficial. In fact, most people need a little bit of stress to keep their lives interesting! But stress becomes unhealthy when it is excessive, chronic, and managed poorly. [Click here](#) to visit the Heart Foundation of SA website for more.

Stress is not only caused by negative situations or experiences, but by happy occasions too (such as organising a wedding during COVID). As we experience the ups and downs of everyday life or whenever there is a major change in our lives, stress occurs.

The key lies in cultivating a positive attitude towards stress and finding ways to recognise and manage it effectively. While we cannot always escape stress, managing stress effectively is important for a healthy lifestyle. Here are some tips to help manage stress better and keep your mental and physical health in check:

- ◆ **A good diet.** It is a good stress coping mechanism because certain nutrients are used up more rapidly when one is under stress such as B vitamins which are essential to a healthy central nervous system as well as vitamin C and zinc which are essential to the immune system.
- ◆ **Learn to say 'no'.** Practise saying 'no' when you are feeling over-burdened. This includes saying no to family and friends.
- ◆ **Get organised.** Use "to do" lists to help you prioritise and focus on most important tasks.
- ◆ **Remember to laugh.** It is your body's natural stress-release mechanism. And it's contagious!
- ◆ **Do something you enjoy.** Set aside some time for relaxation or doing something that you enjoy.
- ◆ **Get active.** Physical activity is an excellent stress-reliever because it provides a distraction, the release of mood-enhancing endorphins and provides an outlet for frustration. It also increases long-term resilience to stress. [Click here](#) for Home Workout and Fitness Tips
- ◆ **Get enough sleep.** Aim for 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Brush up on sleep hygiene if sleeping is a struggle. To read symptoms of poor sleep hygiene, please [click here](#).
- ◆ **Cut the bad habits.** Rather than turning to alcohol, smoking or caffeine to relieve your stress, exercise regularly and eat a healthy balanced diet; this will help you to feel energised and more able to tackle what life throws at you.
- ◆ **Learn to accept the things that you cannot change.** Focus your energy instead on the things that you have control over.

Here is a great link to no less than 101 things you can do to chill out. Just don't get stressed out reading it all! [Click here](#).

And lastly - **speak to someone** if you are having trouble handling stress. It can be a friend, family member or a professional such as a psychologist or social worker. Asking for help is a sign of strength in recognising that you need and are willing to ask for help to improve your wellbeing.

SASSETA' s health care contractor (Life Employee Health Solutions) offers free counselling. If you feel you cannot cope, call them on **0800 004 770** (toll-free) or **SMS 31581** for a call back to set up a consultation.

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