Stress: Win control over the stress in your life  
By Mayo Clinic staff

Your body's stress reaction was meant to protect you. But when it's constantly on alert, your health can pay the price. Take steps to control your stress.

Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the demands of life. But when you're unable to cope well with the stress in your life, your mind and body may pay the price.

Your body is hard-wired by nature to react to stress in a way originally meant to protect you against perceived threats from predators and aggressors. But today's many demands may include managing a huge workload, making ends meet, taking care of aging parents as well as young children, and simply making it through the morning rush hour. You may feel overwhelmed by these daily stressors and wonder if you'll ever get a handle on all of these extra "threats" — you can empower yourself to do so.

Understanding the natural stress response

If your mind and body are constantly on edge because of excessive stress in your life, you may face serious health problems. That's because your body's "fight-or-flight reaction" — its natural alarm system — is constantly on. When you encounter perceived threats — a large dog barks at you during your morning walk, for instance — your hypothalamus, a tiny region at the base of your brain, sets off an alarm system in your body. Through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts your adrenal glands, located atop your kidneys, to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

- **Adrenaline** increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies.
- **Cortisol**, the primary stress hormone, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues. Cortisol also curbs functions that would be nonessential or detrimental in a fight-or-flight situation. It alters immune system responses and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and growth processes.

This complex natural alarm system also communicates with regions of your brain that control mood, motivation and fear.

When the natural stress response goes haywire

The body's stress-response system is usually self-regulating. It decreases hormone levels and enables your body to return to normal once a perceived threat has passed. As adrenaline and cortisol levels drop, your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.

But when the stressors of your life are always present, leaving you constantly feeling stressed, tense, nervous or on edge, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on. The less control you have over potentially stress-inducing events and the more uncertainty they create, the more likely you are to feel stressed. Even the typical day-to-day demands of living can contribute to your body's stress response.

The long-term activation of the stress-response system — and the subsequent overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones — can disrupt almost all your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk of numerous health problems, including:

- Heart disease
- Sleep problems
- Digestive problems
- Depression
- Obesity
- Memory impairment
- Worsening of skin conditions, such as eczema

That's why it's so important to learn healthy ways to cope with the stressors in your life.

Why you react to life stressors the way you do

Your reaction to a potentially stressful event is different from anyone else's. How you react to stressors in your life includes such factors as:
- Genetics. The genes that control the stress response keep most people on a fairly even keel, only occasionally priming the body for fight or flight. Overactive or underactive stress responses may stem from slight differences in these genes.
- Life experiences. Strong stress reactions sometimes can be traced to early environmental factors. People who were exposed to extremely stressful events as children, such as neglect or abuse, tend to be particularly vulnerable to stress as adults.

You may have some friends who seem laid-back about almost everything and others who react strongly at the slightest stress. Most reactions to life stressors fall somewhere between those extremes.

**Learning to react to life stressors in a healthy way**

Stressful events are a fact of life. And you may not be able to change your current situation. But you can take steps to manage the impact these events have on you. You can learn to identify what stresses you out, how to take control of some stress-inducing circumstances, and how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally in the face of stressful situations.

Stress management strategies may include:

- Exercise
- Relaxation techniques
- Fostering healthy friendships
- Getting plenty of sleep
- Professional counseling or psychotherapy

The payoff of managing stress is peace of mind and — perhaps — a longer, healthier life.

**Stress relief from laughter? Yes, no joke  By Mayo Clinic staff**

*When it comes to relieving stress, more giggles and guffaws are just what the doctor ordered. Here's why.*

Whether you're overcome with giggles during the most hysterical moments of a Monty Python movie or you twitter away at the highbrow humor of a New Yorker cartoon, laughing does you good. Laughter helps you deal with a variety of maladies, including the stresses of daily life.

**Stress-relief benefits from a belly laugh**

Laughter's health benefits are no joke. A good sense of humor can't cure all ailments, but data are mounting about the positive things laughter can do.

**Short-term benefits**

A good laugh has great short-term effects. When you start to laugh, it doesn't just lighten your load mentally, it actually induces physical changes in your body. Laughter can:

- **Stimulate your organs.** Laughter enhances your intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates your heart, lungs and muscles, and increases the endorphins that are released by your brain.
- **Activate and relieve your stress response.** A rollicking laugh fires up and then cools down your stress response and increases your heart rate and blood pressure. The result? A good, relaxed feeling.
- **Soothe tension and stomachaches.** Laughter can also ease digestion and stimulate circulation, which helps reduce some of the physical symptoms of stress.

**Long-term effects**

Laughter isn't just a quick pick-me-up, though. It's also good for you over the long haul. Laughter may:

- **Improve your immune system.** Negative thoughts manifest into chemical reactions that can impact your body by bringing more stress into your system and decreasing your immunity. In contrast, positive thoughts actually release neuropeptides that help fight stress and potentially more-serious illnesses.
- **Relieve pain.** Laughter may ease pain by causing the body to produce its own natural painkillers.
- **Increase personal satisfaction.** Laughter can also make difficult situations a little bit easier.
How to have — or gain — a sense of humor

Are you afraid you have an underdeveloped — or nonexistent — funny bone? Developing or refining your own particular sense of humor may be easier than you think.

- **Put humor on your horizon.** Find a few simple items, such as photos or comic strips, that elicit a chuckle from you or others. Then hang them at home, in your office or even on the visor of your car.
- **Laugh and the world laughs with you.** Find a way to laugh about your own situations and watch your stress begin to fade away.
- **Think positive.** Look for the positive or the humorous in every situation and surround yourself with others who do the same.
- **Knock-knock.** Browse through your local bookstore or library's selection of joke books and get a few rib ticklers in your repertoire that you can share with friends.
- **Know what isn't funny.** Don't laugh at the expense of others. Some forms of humor aren't appropriate. Use your best judgment to discern a good joke from a bad, or hurtful, one.

Laughter is the best medicine

Go ahead and give it a try. Turn the corners of your mouth up into a smile and then give a laugh, even if it feels a little forced. Once you've had your hearty chuckle, take stock of how you're feeling. Are your muscles a little less tense? Do you feel more relaxed or buoyant? That's the natural wonder of laughing at work.

Spirituality and stress relief: Make the connection  By Mayo Clinic staff

**Taking the path less traveled by exploring your spirituality can lead to a clearer life purpose, better personal relationships and enhanced stress management skills.**

Certain tools to reduce stress are very tangible: exercising more, eating healthy foods and talking with friends. But there is another tool for helping you manage difficult times that can be just as beneficial, albeit harder to pin down — embracing your spirituality.

What is spirituality?

Spirituality has many definitions, but at its core spirituality helps to give our lives context. It's not necessarily connected to a specific belief system or even religious worship. Instead, it arises from your connection with yourself and with others, the development of your personal value system, and your search for meaning in life. For many, this takes the form of religious observance, prayer, meditation or a belief in a higher power. For others, it can be found in nature, music, art or a secular community. Spirituality is different for everyone.

How can spirituality help you?

Spirituality has many benefits. It can help you:

- **Focus on personal goals.** Cultivating your spirituality may help uncover what's most meaningful in your life. By clarifying what's most important, you can focus less on the unimportant things and eliminate stress.
- **Connect to the world.** The more you feel you have a purpose in the world, the less solitary you feel — even when you're alone. This can lead to a valuable inner peace during difficult times.
- **Release control.** When you feel part of a greater whole, you realize that you aren't responsible for everything that happens in life. You can share the burden of tough times as well as the joys of life's blessings with those around you.
- **Expand your support network.** Whether you find spirituality in a church, mosque or synagogue, in your family, or in walks with a friend through nature, this sharing of spiritual expression can help build relationships.
- **Lead a healthier life.** People who consider themselves spiritual may be better able to cope with stress and heal from illness or addiction faster.
How can you define your spirituality?

The best way to uncover your spirituality is to engage in self-discovery. Here are some questions to ask yourself to discover what experiences and values define you:

- What are your important relationships?
- Where have you found comfort?
- What gives you hope?
- What brings you joy?
- What are your three most memorable experiences?
- If you have survived losses in your life, how have you done so?
- What do you believe will happen to you when your physical life ends, and how do you feel about that?
- Describe a time when you felt comfortable and all was right with the world.
- Describe a time when your life was filled with a sense of meaning or you were filled with a sense of awe.

The answers to such questions help you identify the most important people and experiences in your life. With this information, you can focus your search for spirituality on the relationships and activities in life that have helped define you as a person and those that continue to inspire your personal growth.

Cultivating your spirituality

Spirituality begins with your relationship with yourself, is nurtured by your relationships with others and culminates in a sense of purpose in life. Realizing this, two of the best ways to cultivate your spirituality are to improve your self-esteem and to foster relationships with those who are important to you. This can lead to a deepened sense of your place in life and in the greater good.

Looking inward

- Try prayer, meditation and relaxation techniques to access your inner wisdom and help focus your thoughts.
- Keep a journal to help you express your feelings and record your progress.
- Seek out a trusted adviser or friend — preferably someone who has had similar life experiences — who can help you discover what's important to you in life. Sometimes others may have insights that you haven't been able to discover on your own.
- Read inspirational stories or essays to help you evaluate different philosophies of life.
- Talk to others whose spiritual lives you admire. Ask questions to learn how they found their way to a fulfilling spiritual life.
- Be open to new experiences. If you're exploring organized religion, remember to consider a variety of different faith traditions. If your spirituality is more secular, you might consider expanding your horizons with new experiences in the arts.

Nurturing relationships with others

- Develop effective listening and communication skills.
- Make relationships with friends and family a priority and stay in touch.
- Share your spiritual journey with loved ones and let them know what's important to you.
- Seek out others with similar spiritual beliefs and engage in conversation to learn from each other.
- Volunteer within your community.
- See the good in people and in yourself.

Pursuing a spiritual life

Staying connected to your inner spirit and the lives of those around you can enhance your quality of life, both mentally and physically. Remember that spirituality is a dynamic process and a constantly evolving internal journey. Your personal concept of spirituality may change with your age and life experiences, but it always forms the basis of your well-being, helps you maintain a reasonable stress level and affirms your purpose in life.