

Stress Awareness

Health Education Program

Learning to relax

What are some of the most common causes of stress?

Stress can arise for a variety of reasons. Stress can be brought about by a traumatic accident, death, or emergency situation. Stress can also be a side effect of a serious illness or disease.

Stress is also associated with daily life, the workplace, and family responsibilities. It's hard to stay calm and relaxed in our hectic lives. Women have many roles: spouse, mother, caregiver, friend, and worker. With all that women have going on, it seems almost impossible to find ways to de-stress. But it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

What are some early signs of stress?

Stress can take on many different forms and can contribute to symptoms of illness. Common symptoms include:

- headache
- short temper
- low morale
- sleep disorders
- upset stomach
- depression
- difficulty concentrating
- job dissatisfaction
- anxiety

How do women react to stress?

We all deal with stressful things like traffic, arguments with spouses, and job problems. Some researchers think that women handle stress in a unique way: they tend and befriend.

- *Tend.* Women protect and care for their children.
- *Befriend.* Women seek out and receive social support.

During times of stress, women tend to care for their children and find support from their female friends. Women's bodies make chemicals that are believed to promote these responses. One of these chemicals is oxytocin, which has a calming effect during times of stress. This is the same chemical released during childbirth and found at higher levels in breastfeeding mothers, who are believed to be calmer and more social than women who don't breastfeed. Women also have the hormone estrogen, which boosts the effects of oxytocin. Men, however, have high levels of testosterone during stress, which blocks the calming effects of oxytocin and causes hostility, withdrawal, and anger.

What are some of the most stressful life events?

Any change in our lives can be stressful — even some of the happiest ones, like having a baby or taking a new job. Here are some of life's most stressful events:*

- death of a spouse
- divorce
- marital separation
- marriage
- pregnancy
- personal illness or injury
- death of a close family member
- retirement

What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be a debilitating condition that can occur after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that

* From the Holmes and Rahe Scale of Life Events (1967)



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can trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, such as rape or mugging; natural or human-caused disasters; accidents; or military combat.

Many people with PTSD repeatedly reexperience the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares, or frightening thoughts, especially when they are exposed to events or objects that remind them of the trauma. Anniversaries of the event can also trigger symptoms. People with PTSD also can have emotional numbness, sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, irritability, or outbursts of anger. Feelings of intense guilt (called survivor guilt) are also common, particularly if others did not survive the traumatic event.

Most people who are exposed to a traumatic, stressful event have some symptoms of PTSD in the days and weeks following the event, but the symptoms generally disappear. However, about 8% of men and 20% of women go on to develop PTSD, and roughly 30% of these people develop a chronic, or long-lasting, form that persists throughout their lives.

How can I help handle my stress?

Don't let stress make you sick. Women tend to carry a higher burden of stress than they should. Often they aren't even aware of stress levels. Women should listen to their bodies so that they know when stress is affecting their health. Here are ways to help women handle their stress:

- **Relax.** It's important to unwind. Each woman has her own way to relax. Some ways include deep breathing, yoga, meditation, and massage therapy. If you can't do these things, take a few minutes to sit, listen to soothing music, or read a book.
- **Make time for yourself.** It's important to care for yourself. Think of this as an order from your doctor, so you don't feel guilty. No matter how busy you are, you can try to set aside at least 15 minutes each day in your schedule to do something for yourself, like taking a bubble bath, going for a walk, or calling a friend.
- **Sleep.** Sleeping is a great way to help both your body and mind. Your stress could get worse if you don't get enough sleep. Also, your body can't fight off illness as well when you are sleep-deprived. With enough sleep, you can tackle your problems better and lower your risk for illness. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep every night.
- **Eat right.** Try to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, and proteins. Good sources of protein can be peanut butter, chicken, or fish. Eat whole grains, such as wheat breads and wheat crackers. Don't be fooled by the jolt you get from caffeine or sugar. That type of energy will wear off.
- **Get moving.** Believe it or not, getting physical activity not only helps relieve your tense muscles, but also helps your mood. Your body makes certain chemicals, called endorphins, before and after you work out. Endorphins relieve stress and improve your mood.



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- *Talk to friends.* Talk to your friends to help you work through your stress. Friends can be good listeners. Finding someone who will let you talk freely about your problems and feelings without judging you does a world of good. It also helps to hear a different point of view. Friends will remind you that you're not alone.
- *Get help from a professional if you need it.* Talk to a therapist. A therapist can help you work through stress and find better ways to deal with problems. For more serious stress-related disorders, like PTSD, therapy can be helpful. There also are medications that can help ease symptoms of depression and anxiety and help promote sleep.
- *Compromise.* Sometimes, it's not always worth the stress to argue. Give in once in awhile.
- *Write down your thoughts.* Have you ever typed an email to a friend about your lousy day and felt better afterward? Why not grab a pen and paper and write down what's going on in your life. Keeping a journal can be a great way to get things off your chest and work through issues. Later, you can read through your journal and see how you've made progress.
- *Help others.* Helping someone else can help you. Offer to help a neighbor or volunteer in your community.
- *Get a hobby.* Find something you enjoy. Make sure to give yourself time to explore your interests.
- *Set limits.* When it comes to things like work and family, figure out what you can really do. There are only so many hours in the day. Set limits with yourself and others. Don't be afraid to say "no" to requests for your time and energy.
- *Plan your time.* Think ahead about how you're going to spend your time. Write a to-do list. Figure out what's most important to do now and what can wait until later.
- *Don't deal with stress in unhealthy ways.* This includes drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, smoking, or overeating.

