



# Stress management

## Eating to Ease Stress

What does each of these scenarios have in common?

- Alex's project proposal has been accepted. He celebrates by eating his favorite lunch and having dessert too.
- Sue has an argument with her significant other. She munches brownies directly from the pan until the anxiety subsides.
- Pam nibbles while stuck in rush-hour traffic to calm her nerves.
- Ron's boss expresses displeasure with his progress on an important project. As soon as he leaves his boss' office, he buys a candy bar.

In each scenario eating is a way to manage stress. Do you see similar situations in your life? It could be that your weight management struggle has as much to do with what is "eating you" as it does what you are eating. This module will help you to explore the role between stress and overeating, and teach you techniques to identify and manage sources of stress in your life. Take the Test Your Stress IQ quiz included in this module to see how you currently view stress.

## Defining Stress

The popular phrase, "It's not what happens to you in life, it's how you handle it that counts" is a good introduction to the topic of stress. While all of us recognize certain situations are stressful, such as the loss of a job or a loved one, there is considerable variation in the way we respond to more routine events. Some of us feel panicky if we have a packed calendar; others thrive on it.

## tools for success

- Understand the true cause of stress and the body's stress response.
- Identify your personal sources and symptoms of stress.
- Learn the three A's of stress management: Avoid, Alter or Adapt.
- Recognize stress-related eating.
- Develop a stress management plan.
- Learn to trigger the relaxation response with deep breathing and physical activity.

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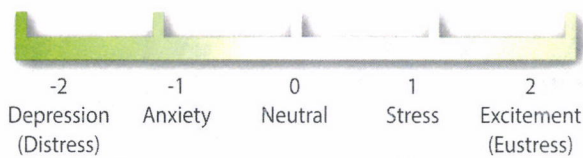
Stress is not an event or a situation; it is the way we respond to an event.

The stress response occurs when you encounter a stressor (a perceived demand on your time or resources). Common stressors include lack of time or money, health problems, and emotional turmoil.

Although we tend to think of stress in negative terms, stress is a necessary and normal part of life. Without it, we become bored and lose interest in life. Too much stress however creates a state of distress. It can lead to anxiety, depression, and a feeling that life is spinning out of control.

Stress exists along a continuum from eustress or positive stresses (graduation, job promotion, falling in love), to every day garden variety stress (heavy traffic, excess work, time pressures) and finally to distress or negative stresses (overdue bills or chronic illness). Recently, researchers recognized that prolonged, unmitigated exposure to everyday stressors eventually leads to many of the same health problems associated with acute distress. In other words, you don't need to suffer a tragedy or major life setback to develop stress-related health problems. A constant supply of everyday stressors is just as harmful.

Stress Occurs on a Continuum of Feelings



**Excitement** or Eustress

Excitement, a mostly positive state, may help to think of excitement as another way of responding to a challenge. When you are confronted with a situation for which you are well prepared, you get excited as you anticipate a good experience. Often the feelings of excitement can alternate with feelings of stress, so you find yourself going back and forth between feeling thrilled about how wonderful an upcoming event is going to be and tense that it might not work out as well as you hope.

**Stress**

Stress can also be the product of being overwhelmed; having too much to do and too little time to do it. When faced with a challenge, you may have the confidence to handle the situation if only you had more time to prepare yourself. As a result, you may believe you will fail or disappoint someone—maybe yourself. You may begin to feel pressured to work harder, do better, and be perfect. You feel tense and irritable as your head hurts and your stomach ties up in knots. Prevention is the best approach. At the earliest signs of excitement or stress, take steps to minimize distress.

**Anxiety**

Anxiety is the point at which you perceive something negative or bad is about to happen and you believe you can't do anything about it. The anxiety trigger could be anything from a perceived physical attack to fear of feeling embarrassed in front of friends or other important people. You begin to worry about it over and over until you can't get the upcoming event out of your mind.

**Depression** or Distress

Depression is at the end of the continuum. It is a state in which a person constantly perceives life as threatening or dangerous. People who experience depression begin to lose all hope about controlling these threats and may become lethargic and feel they will never be able to change anything. They give up trying to cope and they feel worthless. **WARNING:** Seek professional help if depression lasts for two weeks or more.

In the space below, list your current perceived stressors.

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## The Stress Response

The human body is hard-wired to respond to all stressors in the same way, whether positive or negative, real or imaginary. Our bodies can't distinguish between imminent danger and long-term, non-life threatening annoyances. Our bodies can't even tell that the distress we may feel, over hearing a terrible tragedy reported by the news media or reading a heart wrenching novel, won't impact our well being.

When you perceive a stressor, either positive or negative, your body cooperates by activating the sympathetic nervous system. You may have heard it referred to as the "fight or flight" response. It prepares you to fight an enemy or flee danger, whichever option is appropriate. We have all felt it. Think of the pounding heart and rapid breathing you experience when you are startled or experience an exhilarating event.

NOTE: the human body responds to positive and negative stressors in the same way—only the intensity may vary.

Immediate physiological responses to stress include:

- Increased heart rate
- Rapid breathing
- Increased blood pressure
- Sweating
- Muscle constriction
- Pupil dilation
- Adrenaline (which increases fats in the bloodstream)
- Rapid blood-clotting (increases risk for stroke)

Symptoms of prolonged stress or acute distress include:

- Physical (hypertension, insomnia)
- Emotional (depression, irritability)
- Cognitive (difficulty concentrating)
- Behavioral (overeating, procrastinating)

Review your list of stressors and think about the ways you experience negative symptoms from perceived stress.

List your current symptoms:

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How do you typically experience and attempt to cope with stress?

Many people who struggle with weight control are in the habit of eating to relieve stress. It is an easy trap to fall into. Food temporarily eases our sense of stress because it stimulates the release of "feel good" chemicals in the brain, including serotonin. The effect is short lived however, lasting only 20-30 minutes before we need another dose. Consuming favorite foods can also boost our morale because we feel like we did "something nice" for ourselves. There is nothing nice about gaining unwanted weight. The next time you want to be "nice to yourself" take a walk or try relaxation breathing. If you routinely eat to ease stress, it is essential you develop more healthful stress management strategies.

To evaluate how stress affects your eating habits complete the Stress Record worksheet. Review your Stress Record over the next week noting times when you felt the urge to eat in response to stress. What coping skills, other than eating, can help you respond to the stressors you encounter in daily life?

## 3-A's of Stress Management

Stresses in our lives cannot be entirely eliminated. In fact, some stresses are positive and allow for personal growth. However, it is important to limit stress when possible. There are three main ways to cope with stressful situations: avoid, alter, or adapt.

**Avoid** needless stress. Think about your lifestyle and the situations you find stressful. Which stressors can you avoid? For example, try to avoid:

- Someone who constantly irritates you.
- Heavy traffic by leaving for work/home earlier.
- Taking on additional projects.
- Discussions of a controversial topic.

List below some stressors you can avoid:

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**Alter.** You may be able to alter some situations you can't avoid.

Alter your environment by:

- Asking someone to change his/her behavior.
- Communicating your feelings clearly.
- Changing the environment.
- Managing time better.

Another way to alter a stressful situation is to rehearse it before it occurs. Anticipate what might happen and mentally imagine what you would like to say or do. Being prepared can reduce stress. You may find it helps to practice with someone. List below ways to reduce your current stressors by altering the situation:

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**Adapt** to stressful situations you can't avoid or alter by changing your thinking, actions, or feelings.

Adapt your thinking by:

- Looking at stress as an opportunity.
- Focusing on the positives in your life.
- Putting the situation in perspective. Ask yourself, "How much will this matter in a year?" or "Is this worth getting upset over?"

Adapt your actions by:

- Slowing down.
- Talking to someone about how you feel.
- Avoiding smoking, drinking, or overeating.
- Seeking information and advice.
- Making time to pursue enjoyable activities.

Adapt your feelings by:

- Practicing relaxation techniques.
- Exercising.
- Picturing yourself in a pleasant environment.

By anticipating stressors and making plans to adapt, you can reduce the intensity of your typical stress reactions thereby reducing feelings of tension and anxiety.

Use the Stress Management Contract format on page 8 to plan ways to avoid, alter, and adapt to stressful situations. Involve a partner or program staff in developing your contracts.

## The Relaxation Response

Health professionals have found physical activity and relaxation breathing techniques disrupt the stress response by inducing the relaxation response. Here is how they work.

### Activity Relieves Stress

Experts agree, engaging in physical activity is the best way to destress. It makes sense when you consider that what we call stress is actually our old "fight or flight" reflex. In ancient times, we responded by fighting or fleeing, whichever was appropriate, and we burned off our stress hormones in the process. Fighting or fleeing aren't acceptable options for dealing with most of the stressors we encounter in our life. Left untreated, constant everyday stress leads to continuously elevated levels of stress hormones. This can, in turn, lead to elevated blood pressure, impaired immune function, muscle tension, tension headaches, and a host of other symptoms. A good way to manage modern stress is through physical activity. Aerobic activities like walking, jogging, or cycling will all do the trick. Stuck at your desk? Squeezing rubbery items like old tennis balls, specially designed stress-reducing handgrips, or even a balloon filled with sand or birdseed can help you release stress until you can actively exercise.

When using physical activity as a stress management tool, consider your fitness level.

Be aware of how the activity affects your body, and don't overexert yourself. Activities such as swimming, brisk walking, dancing, and biking condition and enhance the performance of vital organs (the heart, lungs, and circulatory system) and reduce muscle tension. After a vigorous workout, the muscles are tired of tensing; therefore, they relax and you feel relaxed. For example physical activity can relieve a tension headache because it relaxes shoulder and neck muscles. For example, physical activity also makes you feel more energetic.

During exercise, strong and natural painkillers called endorphins are released during exercise and may remain in the bloodstream for hours. This discovery accounts, in part, for the tranquil, relaxed feeling of well-being that so many regular exercisers enjoy.

### Relaxation Breathing

Can't exercise? Relaxation breathing exercises are a practical option. Fortunately, health professionals have developed other techniques to help people relax their minds and bodies. Most of these techniques focus on deep breathing exercises which help withdraw attention from the external world and concentrate it on a more tranquil, inner world. These breathing exercises (and the feelings they evoke) are similar to those associated with yoga, meditation, and deep muscle relaxation. To master this technique, follow the instructions below.

#### Relaxation Breathing Technique

1. Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. Each time you breathe out, say the word "one" or "relax" to yourself or use a special word of your own choice.
4. Deeply relax all of your muscles, beginning at your forehead and progressing down to your feet. Keep them deeply relaxed.
5. Don't worry about achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace.
6. Expect distracting thoughts and images to occur, but when they do, ignore them and continue concentrating on the word "one" or the word of your choice.
7. When you are relaxed, visualize yourself in a pleasant setting, perhaps at the beach, in the mountains, or in a cool forest. Involve all your senses in the images you create. Memorize this setting and recall it at other times when you want to relax.
8. Continue relaxing for 20 minutes.

#### Practice Tips

The relaxation response quiets your mind as it quiets your body. You can use the relaxation technique to control stress in your daily life. The more you practice, the more relaxed you will feel. Here are some guidelines to follow while you are practicing at home:

- Practice the technique at least every other day for 20 minutes. Practice for at least two weeks before you judge its value as a means of controlling stress.
- Select an appropriate time and place to practice.
- Explain the technique to family members and others as necessary so that they will support your routine.
- Keep a record of your relaxation efforts on paper.
- Avoid practicing the relaxation response immediately after eating. Digestive processes prevent full relaxation.

Once you become proficient, you can use the relaxation technique as a substitute for impulsive or emotional eating. Whenever you have cravings that lead you to the refrigerator, practice the relaxation response instead.

## Test Your Stress I.Q.

### Instructions

Below are descriptions of various behavior styles. In each box, write the feelings and beliefs associated with these behaviors from both the sender's and receiver's point of view.

True	False	
		People react to psychosocial stressors.
		Constant arousal due to stress can cause a person's blood pressure to remain at a low level.
		Stress due to overload can result from demands that occur at home.
		A person who is adjusting to many life changes in a short period of time is less likely than usual to become ill.
		Thinking about an unpleasant event is never as stressful as actually experiencing the event.
		Thinking of oneself as useless and powerless can increase one's stress level.
		The most stressful situations are usually those over which people feel they have a great deal of control.
		Stress may decrease the body's ability to defend itself against disease.
		Severe stress may cause people to have accidents.
		One of the most common traits of the Type A personality is doing only one thing at a time.
		Excessive stress probably decreases the rate at which one's body uses up Vitamin C.
		A person under stress may feel confused.
		Overload occurs when people are able to meet the demands placed on them.
		A person under stress is usually able to perform tasks better than usual.
		Some degree of stress is necessary for life.
		Stress can lead to the failure of organ systems in the body.
		Too much stimulation is always more stressful than too little.
		High blood pressure can injure the heart even though there are no obvious symptoms.
		The stress produced by a situation depends more on the situation itself than on the person's perception of the situation.
		The Type A personality is associated with heart disease.

Answers: 1. T, 2. F, 3. T, 4. F, 5. F, 6. T, 7. F, 8. T, 9. T, 10. F, 11. F, 12. T, 13. F, 14. F, 15. T, 16. T, 17. F, 18. T, 19. F, 20. T

# Stress Record

## Instructions

Record events or situations that are stressful to you, and the circumstances surrounding them.

Type of day – Special occasions or unusual events can be stressful. Was today a typical day? Was the stressful situation typical? Was it a special occasion?

Duration – Stress reactions vary in duration. Stress can be fleeting, lasting only a matter of seconds before it dissipates or it may linger for extended periods of time before you feel calm again.

Setting– Identify the setting in which your stress reaction occurred. Where you at work, driving during rush hour, or sitting in your living room watching television? Briefly describe the setting by noting the location, the circumstances, and the people involved.

Trigger – Determine what specific event seemed to cause your stress reaction. The triggering event can be the actions of another person, a personal thought, a new situation, or anything immediately preceding your heightened feelings of stress.

Your reaction – Feelings of stress differ greatly from person to person. Select any descriptive word(s) that best describe your physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions to stress.

Intensity of stress – Rate the intensity of this episode from 1—7, where 1 is very little stress, 4 is neutral, 7 is very much stress.

Identify an alternative, better method of coping with this situation – After recording your source of stress and how you reacted, evaluate your response(s). List ways you might better deal with the situation in the future.

Before writing on this copy, make additional copies.

Date	
Type of day	
Time	
Duration	
Setting	
Trigger	
Reaction	Physical Emoional Behavioral
Intensity	
Alternative	