

BALANCED living



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HOW TO BEAT **SERIOUS STRESS**

Every day we face stressful events. Most of these events are minor or temporary. But others are significant sources of stress, which can greatly impact our quality of life.

When you're faced with a highly stressful event, these methods may help you cope:

DON'T MAKE UNNEEDED CHANGES IN YOUR LIFE.

Instead, save what energy you have for dealing with the major stressor at hand. If possible, try to make your work and home environments stable while working out the main problem.

QUIET YOUR MIND.

Use deep breathing and visualization methods to calm your mind and slow your breathing. When you're stressed, your mind can make things seem worse. It does this by creating endless versions of coming disaster. This affects your body, too. The body can't tell the difference between what's real and what's not, so it reacts with a greater physical response.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS.

You can calm both your mind and your body by keeping your mind in the present. The present is hardly ever as stressful as an imagined future or a past full of regrets. To stay in the present, center your attention on your breathing, a sound or visual pattern, a repetitive movement or meditation.

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BEATING SERIOUS STRESS

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BRAVELY AND AGGRESSIVELY FACE THE STRESSOR.

Don't just ignore whatever is causing you stress. Instead, carefully think about the seriousness of the problem without blowing it out of proportion. Ask yourself, "What's the worst thing that is realistically likely to happen?" Then remind yourself of all the good things that will still be a part of your life even if the worst happens. Talk with others to confirm your view of the stressor. Make a special effort to speak to family, friends, or co-workers who have had similar experiences.

REVIEW YOUR COPING RESPONSES.

Confidence is helpful in fighting stress. And it builds on memories of past successes. Think about successes you've had with other stressful life events. Recall some of the things you did to successfully cope. Write this information down.

TAKE ACTION.

Commit to a reasonable way to deal with what is causing you stress. Action is powerful in helping you to reduce stress. Studies show that your body lowers the amount of a powerful stress hormone (epinephrine) when you shift into action. There are many ways to successfully handle a stressful situation. If you are unsure where to start, Continuum EAP's counselors are available to help you plot your plan of action.

TAKE TIME OUT TO RELAX.

At least once or twice a day, take time to calm down by relaxing. Try listening to soothing music, going for a walk, gardening, reading or exercising. You could also choose to do more formal relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing or meditation.



Walking can work FOR EVERYONE

Fit people may think walking is "too easy" to keep them fit. Overweight people may wonder if they really can become trim by walking. Older people and those with medical conditions, such as osteoporosis or heart disease, may wonder if walking is safe.

In fact, walking works for people of all ages, fitness levels, weights and health conditions.

"Walking can keep you fit and help you lose and keep off weight," says Susan Yanovski, M.D., a medical officer at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. "With a doctor's supervision, even people recovering from surgery or who have chronic medical conditions can enjoy and benefit from walking. All you need to know is how to walk safely and how to plan your walking program."

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Appreciate the benefits. Walking is easy because you can do it almost anywhere and at any time. It also offers a range of health benefits.

According to Dr. Yanovski, walking:

- Gives you energy.
- Improves your mood and reduces stress.
- Helps you relax and sleep better.
- Reduces your risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes and several cancers.
- Tones your muscles (including your heart).
- Increases the number of calories you burn, helping you lose and keep off weight.

Get started. Get your doctor's go-ahead before you start to walk if you've been sedentary for some time, are a smoker, are overweight, or have heart disease, diabetes or another chronic condition.

Once you are ready to go, keep the following in mind:

- **Choose a safe place to walk. Find a partner or group to walk with. Your partner should be able to walk with you on the same schedule and at the same speed. If options are limited for an in-person walking companion, identify someone who can be your accountability partner to help keep your momentum going.**
- **Wear walking shoes with thick flexible soles.**
- **Wear clothes that are right for the season when walking outside. Cotton clothes for the**

summer help keep you cool by absorbing sweat and allowing it to evaporate. Layer your clothing in the winter, and as you warm up, take off some layers.

- **Do light stretching after you walk.**
- **Try to walk at least three times a week.**
- **To avoid stiff or sore muscles or joints, start slowly with a short walk of 10 minutes or so. Over several weeks, begin walking faster, going farther, and walking for longer periods of time.**
- **Begin your walk by warming up to increase your heart rate. Do this by walking at a normal pace for five minutes. After you've warmed up, walk briskly for 30 to 60 minutes. When your brisk walk is done, cool down by walking slowly for five minutes.**

Stick with a routine. Now that you've started walking, you'll want to get the most out of your exercise. Keeping a walking log can keep you motivated and also give you a way to track your improvement.

"No matter where or when you walk, play it safe: Be 'streetwise' and watch for signs of overexertion, which is your cue to slow down or stop," says Dr. Yanovski. "If you're injured while walking, feel out of breath, or are concerned about your health for any reason, call your doctor."

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FOR BEST RESULTS, use good walking form by following these guidelines:

- **Maintain good posture, with your chin up and your shoulders back.**
- **Relax your shoulders.**
- **Breathe deeply, at a steady rhythm.**
- **Keep your hips even.**
- **Point your knees and feet forward.**
- **Walk with a full stride, landing on your heel, then rolling your weight toward your toe.**
- **Swing your arms in pace with your legs. Be sure you're moving your arms and legs briskly.**
- **Stretch after your walk while your muscles are warm to prevent stiffness and increase flexibility.**

FRIENDS ARE GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH



Everybody needs friends, but not everybody knows how to make friends and keep them. Demands from work and family can leave many people with little energy for bringing new people into their lives or for nurturing the relationships they already have. But friends are important to your health.

“Research has shown that people who do not have strong support from friends and family live shorter lives and suffer more from stress,” says Cheryl A. Richey, Ph.D., professor of social work at the University of Washington. “Support from friends can give people the strength to make positive changes in their lives, such as staying away from drugs or leaving an abusive relationship.”

Some people may find it difficult to make friends because they lack the skills needed to interact effectively with other people and build supportive social contacts. People are not born with these skills; they need to learn them.

Where do you begin?

“Rather than setting a broad goal like ‘making new friends,’ break that goal down into small steps you can tackle,” Dr. Richey suggests.

The first step may be to vow to start one conversation each day with someone you don’t know well, such as the new person at work or a visitor to your church. It may help to rehearse ahead of time, by figuring out a topic and opening line, and even practicing with a supportive family member or trusted friend.

For some, meeting new people may be the easy part. The difficulty is knowing how to advance from being acquaintances to becoming friends. Disclosing information about yourself is one way to build trust in a friendship. Another is reciprocating — for example, by listening carefully when others disclose information about themselves, or more concretely, by trading babysitting for other favors

Cultivate Friendships

Some people find themselves without support, not because they can’t initiate social contacts, but because they’ve burned out their friends by asking for help too often and not returning it,



or by violating trust such as telling others a secret shared in confidence.

To reconnect with a strained social network, Dr. Richey recommends initiating contacts during times when you are not in need of support. This can begin with a simple, problem-free conversation.

“To rebuild relationships, it’s important to become more reliable, responsible, and reciprocal in your daily associations,” Dr. Richey says.

Even if your social network is supportive, having too many people around all the time may interfere with private time for you and your family. Part of social skill-building is setting limits in a relationship or keeping a relationship on an acquaintance level rather than pursuing close friendship.

And, in the end, the number of social relationships isn’t nearly as important as their quality. A person with a huge social network could be worse off than a loner if most of those social contacts are draining and negative. “It’s more than just a body count,” Dr. Richey said. “Look at the kinds of exchanges you have with the people in your network, and whether these people can provide the kind of assistance or support that will be helpful.”

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