

Managing Stress, Creating Balance

Any change, good or bad, small or large, can trigger a stress-response. Stress can be short-lived, such as when you have an occasional busy day. Stress can become long-term if there are multiple stressors, or if a stressful situation is ongoing or not easily fixed.

What does stress do to your body? Any change in your life sets off a physical response such as an increased heart rate, constricted blood vessels, and tensed muscles. These are normal stress responses to help you physically deal with the life change. Once you've adjusted to the stress, your body relaxes again and returns to normal. Your heart rate goes down, your blood vessels return to normal, and your muscles relax.

Why is stress a problem? When many stressful things happen in a short time or if there is chronic stress, your body stays in a stress-response mode and can't relax. Ongoing stress can affect all areas of life, including your physical, emotional, and mental well-being. People who experience ongoing, chronic stress may be more likely to feel depressed or be anxious. Ongoing stress can make it difficult to manage physical conditions and may lead to increased symptoms. Irritability and angry outbursts are common responses.

You can't avoid everything that trigger your stress, but you can control how you respond to the stressful situation. It's important to develop a plan to manage your stress so that it doesn't negatively affect your life.

The Steps to Manage Stress

Step 1 - Become aware of the stressors in your life.

External stressors are those things that happen in the course of normal life. They can include people, places & things or major life events that are expected or unexpected. These are the things we normally associate with stress. Often, you have little control over external stressors and how or why they happen.

You do have control over how you treat yourself or how you interpret an external stressor. Often, people put more stress on themselves through negative thinking, ignoring physical health, and critical self-talk. This adds to the stress and can contribute to long-term chronic stress.

Step 2 - Manage negative thinking.

Stress response gets more intense if you interpret events in a way that is self-blaming. Negative thinking can create feelings of irritability, hopelessness, or helplessness. Negative thinking can also trigger the fight or flight response, making it difficult to concentrate.

Manage your negative thinking so you can handle a stressful situation without creating more stress. For example, acknowledging that a situation is bad or difficult may be realistic. Blaming yourself for

not being able to handle it or thinking you're a failure may not be accurate and can lead to negative feelings. Negative feelings may make it more difficult to take action toward a solution.

Provide yourself with positive and constructive self-talk. Remind yourself that you're doing the best you can in a difficult situation. Find constructive things to say to yourself. Problem-solve to find a solution (more information on this topic is available through the EAP). Take one small action toward changing the situation.

Step 3 - Identify your stress warning signs.

People experience stress in different ways. It's important to learn your own physical, emotional, and behavioral symptoms of stress. Be proactive and identify your 'stress signals' before your stress gets out of control. Awareness of your unique signs of stress is important so that you can 'catch' yourself and do something different.

Examples of stress signals are:

Body signals

- Headaches, muscle tension
- Upset stomach/heartburn
- Fatigue
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Weight gain

Behavior signals

- Nervous tic or habit
- More smoking, drinking, eating
- Irritability or short temper
- Crying

Mental/emotional signals

- Sense of loss of control
- Worry, anxiety
- Anger
- Difficulty concentrating

Identify your unique stress signals.

Rate each of your warning signs according to how soon they occur.

'1' for the earliest warning signs

'2' for the warning signs that come on in the middle of the stress

'3' for the latest warning signs

Step 4 - Make a stress management plan.

Once you understand your stress signals, make a plan to practice stress-busting strategies that work for you. Practice until they become a habit.

Circle any of the coping skills that you would like to develop (and feel free to add your own). For more information on any of the coping skills listed below, speak to your EAP counselor or coach. Then pick one coping skill and practice it for a week.

Dealing With Stressors	Calming Yourself	Doing the Basics	Creating and Living a Life of Meaning
Benefit	Benefit	Benefit	Benefit
-Brings a sense of control and mastery -Increases knowledge about stressors	-Brings a sense of self-control -Promotes relaxation -Can stop or decrease intensity of the stress reaction	-Brings structure and predictability to life	-Brings meaning and purpose to life -Brings increased balance to life -Offers opportunities to experience pleasurable activities and be creative.
Coping Skills	Coping Skills	Coping Skills	Coping Skills
-Spend time with supportive people -Ask for help and delegate -Learn about the stressor and its effects -Use problem-solving techniques -Avoid stressful people and situations when appropriate -Increase acceptance	-Use relaxation and breathing techniques -Move your body -Use music, nature, prayer -Practice positive constructive thinking -Practice self-compassion	-Eat well, sleep well, drink water -Manage any health conditions -Go to work and keep up with chores -Practice time management -Monitor your attitude -Schedule time for self-care and fun -Schedule social time	-Explore hobbies, travel, music -Do volunteer work, help others -Read, watch movies -Learn new things professionally and personally -Get involved with exercise and sports -Practice spirituality, religion ---Involve yourself with friends, children and relationships -Try anything creative

Step 5 – Create Balance in your Life.

Increase your stress-busting capacity with things like spending time with supportive people, delegating responsibilities to others, deep breathing exercises, moving your body, practicing self-care, using positive and constructive self-talk, and finding ways to be creative.

Step 6 – The 3 P's

Whenever attempting to make a change, it is important to utilize the “3 P's”.... practice, patience and persistence.

- **Practice** – Adding a new behavior or changing an attitude requires repetition. So, practice, practice, practice.
- **Patience** – Be patient. Making a change is not easy and it takes time. The most important thing is that you stick with it at a pace that works for you.
- **Persistence** – Sticking with it, refusing to give up, and committing to your well-being are all ways of being persistent in change. Even if you get knocked off track by life events, rework your plan and try again. Be persistent!

If you'd like more specific information or ideas on any of these topics, or for websites, short videos or other handouts, contact your Aurora EAP counselor or coach at 800-236-3231.