

# Treatment

## Treatment of Stress

Stress is an example of how the mind and body works together. The World Health Organization has stated that stress has become a “World Wide Epidemic”. The 20th century American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr said “Grant me the courage to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept the things I can’t change, and the wisdom to know the difference.” The best medicine for stress is not having stress. Not possible, so lets continue.

**See a Physician.** First and most important, if you are stressed and need help, see your physician. Take him a list of things you’re thinking of doing and why you are so stresses. Going to a doctor can be very stressful in itself, but stress can cause a number of serious physical and mental conditions – you’ll only feel a little pressure.

Mild stress “symptoms” can be managed by over the counter drugs (like: aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen for tension headache and antacids and anti-diarrhea medications or laxatives for mild stomach distress). Managing symptoms is not managing stress, so if the symptoms persist or are out of the ordinary, particularly those which progress in severity or awaken (or keeps awake) you at night or cardiac symptoms, significant pain, anxiety, or depression see your physician.

**Good and Bad.** Stress can be positive as well as negative. Appropriate and controllable stress provides interest and excitement and motivates the individual to greater achievement, while a lack of stress may lead to boredom and depression.

**How to Treat.** No single method is uniformly successful: a combination of approaches is generally most effective. What works for one person does not necessarily work for someone else.

A major obstacle to reducing stress is the strong biologic urge for fight or flight itself. The very idea of relaxation can feel threatening, because it is perceived as letting down one’s guard.

Reducing or eliminating the things that cause stress, when possible, and changing how you react to it are the safest and most effective ways to treat stress. Treating any medical symptoms caused by stress is important.

**Identifying sources of stress.** You may want to keep a stress diary in which you record the occasions that were stressful to you, triggered anger or anxiety or caused a physical response like sour stomach or headache. Jot down the time of day and the circumstances that led to it, and then try to identify the types of events or activities that cause stress. See if you can alter or avoid these circumstances.

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**Keeping your perspective and looking for the positive.** Focus on positive outcomes in stressful situations. It helps by thinking of the worst possible outcomes and assessing the likelihood of those coming to bear (usually small). Then, envision a positive outcome and develop a plan to achieve that outcome. Also helpful: remembering past situations that initially seemed negative but ended well.

**Use humor.** Keeping a sense of humor during difficult situations is a common recommendation from stress management experts. Laughing releases the tension of pent-up feelings and helps keep perspective. Research has shown that humor is a very effective mechanism for coping with acute stress.

**Deep breathing.** During stress, breathing becomes shallow and rapid. Taking a deep breath is an effective technique for winding down. Inhale through your nose slowly and deeply to the count of ten, making sure your stomach and abdomen expand but your chest does not rise. Exhale through your nose also to the count of ten. Concentrate fully on the breathing and counting. Repeat five to ten times. The goal is to take six deep breaths per minute.

**Relaxing your muscles.** Sitting anywhere, even at your desk, relax your shoulders, let your arms drop to your side, rest your hands on top of your thighs, relax your legs, and don't forget your jaw muscles, which often tense with stress. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. You can also do this lying in bed: beginning with the top of the head and progressing downward, focus on tensing then relaxing all the muscles in the body one by one while maintaining a slow, deep breathing pattern.

**Passive stretches.** Allow gravity to help you relax and stretch your muscles. Relax your neck and let your head fall forward to the right. Then let it drop even more as you breathe slowly. Do the same with your shoulders, arms and back.

**Active Stretches.** Yoga or Pilates can greatly reduce your stress. Buy a DVD or take a local class.

**Meditation.** The goal of meditation is to quiet the mind and to relax thought. Meditation can reduce your heart rate, blood pressure, adrenaline levels and skin temperature. It involves concentrating on a simple image or sound while in a comfortable place away from distractions. See our article on how to meditate or there are a number of organizations that teach meditation.

**Massage.** Appears to slow down the heart and relax the body. Rather than causing drowsiness, however, massage actually increases alertness.