



# IT'S YOUR HEALTH

*This article was produced in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada.*

## Mental Health - Coping With Stress

### The Issue

Stress is a fact of daily life and is the result of both the good and bad things that happen. Too much stress can cause serious health concerns, but there are many ways of dealing with stress that can reduce your risk.

### Background

Stress can come from major events in life such as getting married or changing jobs, or from minor daily incidents, such as job pressures or holiday planning. The things that cause you stress may not be a problem for someone else. If you did not feel stress of some sort, you would not be alive. Good stress, such as winning a game or going on vacation, can make you feel more involved and energized. But the negative effects of too much stress associated with being under pressure can affect your health.

When you find an event stressful, your body undergoes a series of responses. These come in three stages:

#### **Mobilizing Energy**

Your body releases adrenaline, your heart beats faster and you start to breathe more quickly. Both good and bad events can trigger this reaction.

#### **Consuming Energy Stores**

If you remain in the mobilizing energy stage for a period of time, your body begins to release stored sugars and fats. You will then feel driven, pressured and tired. You may drink more coffee, smoke more and drink more alcohol. You may also experience anxiety, negative thinking or memory loss, catch a cold or get the flu more often than normal.

#### **Draining Energy Stores**

If you do not resolve your stress problem, your body's need for energy will become greater than its ability to provide it. At this stage, you may experience insomnia, errors in judgement and personality changes. You may also develop a serious illness such as heart disease or be at risk of mental illness.

### Symptoms of Stress

Signs that you are over-stressed may include:

- Feelings of irritability, sadness or guilt
- Change in sleep patterns
- Change in weight or appetite
- Difficulty in concentrating or making decisions

- Negative thinking
- Loss of interest, enjoyment or energy in something you used to enjoy
- Restlessness

## Health Effects of Stress

While some people may appear to thrive on it, stress is considered to be a risk factor in a great many diseases, including:

- heart disease
- some types of bowel disease
- herpes
- mental illness

Stress also makes it hard for people with diabetes to control their blood sugar.

Stress is also a risk factor in alcohol and substance abuse, as well as weight loss and gain. Stress has even been identified as a possible risk factor in Alzheimer's Disease.

Severe stress can cause biochemical changes in the body, affecting the immune system, leaving your body vulnerable to disease.

## Minimizing Your Risk

Here are several strategies to help you deal with stress.

### Understanding stress

Notice and remember when you experience the signs of stress. This will help you figure out what triggers stress in you. It may be:

- Major events such as getting married, changing jobs, moving your home, getting divorced or coping with the death of a loved one
- Long term worries such as financial problems, your children's

future, your job or an ongoing illness

- Daily hassles such as traffic jams, rude people or machines that don't work.

### Coping with stress

Because everyone is different, there is no single way to cope with stress. However, there are a number of approaches you can try to deal with short and long term stress.

- Identify your problems. What is causing your stress? It can be your job, a relationship or another source altogether. Is an unimportant surface problem masking a deeper one? Once you know what the problem is, you can do something about it.
- Work on solutions. Start thinking about what you can do to relieve the problem. Take control over the issues you can manage. This might mean looking for another job, talking with a health professional about personal problems or a financial counsellor. Also ask yourself what will happen if you do nothing. Once you make some changes to deal with the issue, you will take pressure off yourself.
- Talk about your problems. Friends, work colleagues and family members may not know you are having a hard time. If you talk to them about it, it may help in two ways. First of all, just by venting your feelings, you will relieve some stress. Secondly, they may suggest solutions to your problems. If you need to talk to someone outside your circle of family and friends, speak to your family physician or contact a mental health professional.

- Learn about stress management. In addition to health professionals who specialize in stress, there are many helpful books, films, videos, courses and workshops available to help you learn stress management techniques.

- Reduce tension. Physical activity is a great stress reducer. Walk, do some exercises or garden to relieve your stress. There are also relaxation exercises you can learn that will take the pressure off, such as deep breathing and stretching your whole body. Tension meditation and progressive relaxation are techniques that work for many people.

- Take your mind off your problems. By reading, taking up a hobby or becoming involved in sports, you can give yourself a 'mental holiday' from stress. It will also give you distance from your problems, so that they become easier to solve.

- Try not to be too hard on yourself. Stress can cause lots of negative thinking. You may notice yourself saying things like "I can't, won't, should, must". Be realistic. Find realistic solutions you can achieve in steps that will bring success.

### Stress prevention

Once you have lowered your stress level, there are techniques that will help prevent it from building up again.

- Make decisions. Worrying about making a decision causes stress.
- Avoid putting things off. Make up a weekly schedule that includes leisure activities as well as things you must do.



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- Delegate to others. Let others take on some of the tasks you have set yourself so that you are not trying to do everything yourself.
- Keep your thinking positive and realistic.

## Government of Canada's Role

The Government of Canada works to help Canadians maintain and improve their mental health, including coping with stress. Within its jurisdiction, the Government of Canada works to:

- generate and disseminate knowledge, and support both knowledge generation and dissemination activities undertaken by other organizations
- strengthen the capacity of the primary health care, home care and acute care sectors to effectively deliver mental health programs and services
- provide leadership and governance
- develop social marketing campaigns
- conduct surveillance on health trends in the population
- In 2007, the federal government provided funding to establish and support a Mental Health Commission to lead the development of a national mental health strategy.

## Need More Info?

For more information on stress, contact the following.

The Mental Health Promotion Unit, Public Health Agency of Canada at: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/mh-sm/mhp-psm/index.html>

Health Canada's Mental Health section at: [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/mental/index\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/mental/index_e.html)

The Canadian Health Network at: <http://www.canadianhealthnetwork.ca/> and click on "MentalHealth"

The Canadian Mental Health Association at: [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

Or contact the local Canadian Mental Health Association in your community, listed in the phonebook

Canadian Psychiatric Association [www.cpa-apc.org/](http://www.cpa-apc.org/)

The National Network for Mental Health at: [www.nnmh.ca](http://www.nnmh.ca)

The Canadian Psychological Association at: [www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca)

The Mood Disorders Society of Canada at: [www.mooodisorderscanada.ca](http://www.mooodisorderscanada.ca)

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:

[www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh](http://www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh)  
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245\*