





Canadian Mental
Health Association
Mental health for all

What is Stress?

We all talk about stress, but we're not always clear about what it is. Stress comes from both the good and the bad things that happen to us. If we didn't feel any stress, we wouldn't be alive! Stress may feel overwhelming at times, but there are many strategies to help you take control.

Stress is the body's response to a real or perceived threat. That response is meant to get people ready for some kind of action to get them out of danger. But most of the threats people face today aren't something that they can fight or run away from. These threats are usually problems that people have to work through.

Some stress can be a good thing. It can motivate us to focus on a task or take action and solve a problem. In this situation, stress is manageable and even helpful.

When stress is unhelpful, people may feel overwhelmed or feel like they can't possibly fix the problem. In these cases, some people avoid dealing with the original problem altogether, which may make the problem—and stress—worse. It can be very hard to concentrate, make decisions, and feel confident when a person experiences a lot of stress. Many people experience physical sensations like sweating, a racing heart, or tense muscles. Over time, stress can also have a big impact on physical health. Sleep difficulties and headaches are common problems related to stress. People are also more likely to get sick when they're experiencing a lot of stress.

Stress is a reaction to a situation—it isn't about the actual situation. We usually feel stressed when we think that the demands of the situation are greater than our resources to deal with that situ-

ation. For example, someone who feels comfortable speaking in public may not worry about giving a presentation, while someone who isn't confident in their skills may feel a lot of stress about an upcoming presentation. Common sources of stress may include major life events, like moving or changing jobs. Long-term worries, like a long-term illness or parenting, can also feel stressful. Even daily hassles like dealing with traffic can be a source of stress.

What Can I do About it?

Taking action is the first step. Ignoring the effects of stress can lead to other mental health problems. There is no one right way to deal with stress. The tips below are common strategies that are helpful for many people. Try them out and see what works best for you. Remember to look at both short-term

and long-term solutions when you're dealing with stress.

- Identify the problem. Is your job, school, a relationship with someone, or worries about money causing stress? Are unimportant, surface problems hiding deeper problems? Once you know what the real problem is, you can do something about it.

- Solve problems as they come up. What can you do, and what are the possible outcomes? Would that be better or worse than doing nothing? Remember, sometimes solving a problem means doing the best you can—even if it isn't perfect—or asking for help. Once you've decided on a solution, divide the steps into manageable pieces and work on one piece at a time. Improving your problem-solving skills is a long-term strategy that can help you feel like you're in control again.

- Talk about your problems. You may find it helpful to talk about your stress. Loved ones may not realize that you're having a hard time. Once they understand, they may be able to help in two different ways. First, they can just listen—simply expressing your feelings can help a lot. Second, they may have ideas to help you solve or deal with your problems. If you need to talk with someone outside your own circle of loved ones, your family doctor may be able to refer you to a counsellor, or you may have access to one through your school, workplace, or faith community.

- Simplify your life. Stress can come up when there are too many things going on. Learning to say no is a real skill that takes practice. Try to look for ways to make your to-do list more manageable.

- Learn helpful thinking strategies. The way you think about situations affects the way you respond to them. Unhelpful thoughts, such as believing that everything must be perfect or expecting the worst possible outcome, can make problems seem bigger than they really are.

- Learn about stress management. There are many useful books, websites, and courses to help you cope with stress. There are also counsellors who specialize in stress. There may be stress management courses and workshops available through your community centre, workplace, or school.

- Start on the inside. Practices like yoga, meditation, mindfulness, prayer,

or breathing exercises can help you quiet your mind and look at problems from a calmer, more balanced point of view. With time, these practices can help you manage your response to stressful situations as they come up.

- Get active. Physical activity can be a great way to reduce stress and improve your mood. Activity could be anything from taking up a new sport to walking. The most important part is that it gets you moving and you enjoy it—it shouldn't feel like a chore. If you experience barriers to physical activity, try talking to your doctor or care team for ideas.

- Do something you enjoy. Making time for hobbies, sports, or activities that you find fun or make you laugh can temporarily give you a break from problems. Listen to music, read, go for a walk, see a friend, watch your favourite movie, or do whatever makes you feel good. This can give you a little mental distance from problems when you can't deal with them right away

Can I Prevent Stress?

Stress is part of being human—no one can eliminate all stress from

their life or prevent stress from ever happening in the future. The goal of stress management is to bounce back from problems or challenges and maintain wellness. All of the above strategies can help you take control of stress so it doesn't control you in the future.

Remember to practice them often, even when you're not feeling stressed. That way, you'll know exactly what works for you. It's also much easier to deal with difficulties when you're in control and know that you can deal with whatever comes up. ■

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), founded in 1918, is a national charity that helps maintain and improve mental health for all Canadians. As the nationwide leader and champion for mental health, CMHA helps people access the community resources they need to build resilience and support recovery from mental illness. Visit the CMHA website at www.cmha.ca.

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