

Stress Reduction

Stress occurs when a demand that exceeds your coping abilities is placed on your body and mind. A demand can range from physical danger to the excitement of buying a home. Even day-to-day living can lead to stressful situations, such as family disagreements or traffic.

How you respond to a stressful situation determines the effect stress will have on your life. If you adapt to stress in your life, your physical and mental health may improve. A positive response can also improve how you learn and may help you reach goals.

At times, we struggle to adapt to stress. It may exceed our ability to cope. Our bodies respond with anxiety, depression and other ways that are bad for your health. The key is to learn how to cope with situations that cause stress. Stress is a response which includes both physical and mental components.

Stress affects Health

Stress can cause health problems or make them worse.

Possible effects of stress include:

1. Anxiety, depression, or irritability
2. Back pain or stiff neck
3. Constipation, diarrhea, or upset stomach
4. Fatigue
5. Headache
6. High blood pressure and increased heart rate
7. Problems sleeping
8. Problems concentrating
9. Relationship problems
10. Shortness of breath
11. Weakened immune system
12. Weight gain or loss

In times of high stress, some people may look for ways to “forget” about their problems. This can lead to habits like smoking, drinking, overeating, or drug abuse.

Benefits of Stress Reduction

Less stress in your life will help you feel better. It may improve some of your health problems. It can even decrease your need for certain medicines. Less stress can also improve your relationships with others. You will be less irritable, more rested and better able to concentrate.

How to Reduce Stress in Your Life

It is not always possible to keep a stressful change or event from happening. Many are out of your control (like a job lay off) and others are part of life (such as planning a wedding). You can control how you react to this change emotionally and psychologically.

The first step is to recognize when you are feeling stressed. Tight muscles in your shoulders and neck or clenching your hands into fists, may be early signs that you are stressed. Other signs and symptoms of stress are listed above. Once you know you are stressed, the next step is to find a way to reduce your stress.

Tips for Reducing Stress

Accept things you cannot change. The act of worrying about things you cannot change does not tend to improve the situation, and it may make you feel worse. You can tell yourself, "This is the situation, now what? What action can I take to help me feel better?"

- **Be realistic.** You cannot do everything. If you are feeling overwhelmed with activities (either yours or your family's), learn to say "No." You may take on more than you can or should handle.
- **Add humor to your life.** Humor and laughter can give you a sense of perspective on problems in life and can help take your mind off discomforts and stress.
- **Meditate.** Set aside 15 to 20 minutes a day for quiet reflection. Use the time to think of pleasant things or think of nothing at all. Listening to music may help.
- **Exercise.** Regular exercise can relieve stress and improve your health. Do what you enjoy – walk, swim, ride a bike, jog or practice yoga, tai chi or qigong to get your heart beating.
- **Find a hobby.** Take your mind off your worries by doing something you enjoy. Try reading, gardening, painting or scrap booking.
- **Get a massage.** Many people enjoy massage as a way to relieve stress. To find a massage therapist in your area, visit the American Massage Therapy Association (www.amtamassage.org) or call the Baptist Health Rehabilitation department at 904-202-9700 to schedule an appointment.
- **Intimacy.** Interpersonal connection and orgasm are powerful ways to reduce stress. The benefits include release of endorphins and other hormones that elevate mood. It's also great exercise, which itself is an effective stress reliever.
- **Think ahead.** If you know something will upset you, try to avoid it if possible. For example, rearrange your schedule so you do not have to drive during rush hour traffic.
- **Share your feelings.** Open up to your friends and family about any problems you have. Let them provide support and guidance.