

Stress in Women

Today, more than ever before, women assume multiple roles – as career professionals, mothers, wives, parental caretakers, volunteers – and manage overlapping responsibilities; it's no wonder that stress inevitably takes up residence.

Stress Symptoms

Showing signs of stress does not mean you are a weak individual who cannot cope. It means you are human like everyone else. While mild stress can actually be beneficial – it can spur you into action, motivate and energize you – the buildup of little things can result in persistent stress or adverse health.

Common symptoms of stress include:

- Physical symptoms – headache, fatigue, skin problems, muscle tension, back pain, changes in sleep and eating patterns
- Mental symptoms – poor concentration, poor memory
- Emotional symptoms – mood swings, low self esteem, irritability, anxiety, depression
- Social symptoms – isolation, resentment

Coping with Stress

First, be aware of your own warning signs – perhaps a sudden feeling of anxiety, extreme tiredness, feeling very emotional, catching every cough and cold, or feeling run down. If you do not know your own warning signs, identify what triggers stress for you by **keeping a journal for a week**. Note the events and situations that cause a negative physical, mental or emotional response. Briefly describe each situation, what seemed to cause the stress and your reactions. Rate the intensity of your stress on a scale of 1 (not very intense) to 5 (very intense). Also make a list of weekly your demands. Note what occupies your time and energy – your job, the kids, or an elderly parent. Then, on a similar scale, rate the intensity of stress that each demand causes. Finally, review what is really causing your stress. You might be surprised. Think about what you could change to lower your stress.

Tips for Coping:

- **Eat a balanced diet.** Eat complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, which can help with those mood swings. Eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables and keep sugar and salt to a minimum. Healthy eating strengthens the immune system to combat colds and the flu when you do get run down. Drink plenty of water, keep caffeine to a minimum and only drink alcohol in moderation.
- **Exercise.** Choose a type of exercise you enjoy so you'll maintain a regular, active schedule. Exercise at the same time each day and if possible, partner with a friend for motivation, accountability and even shared goals.
- **Create an outlet and relax.** People with no outside interests, hobbies or a way to relax may be unable to handle stressful situations because they have no outlet for stress. Read, enjoy a hobby, exercise or get involved in some other activity that is relaxing and refreshing.
- **Attend a stress management seminar.** It's far better to know fully what to do prior to experiencing stress than during a stressful time.
- **Improve time management.** Effective time management skills can help you identify goals, set priorities and minimize the stress in your life. Create realistic expectations and reward yourself when you meet a goal.

- **Overcome burnout.** If you dread going to work or feel burned out or stressed over a period of weeks, your situation could affect your professional and personal life. Consider an alternate work schedule, a change in responsibilities or a job change.
- **Get adequate sleep.**
- **Create a support system.** Everyone needs someone with whom they can rely on and share, especially during a stressful time. Without a support system, a stressful situation seems more difficult. Avoid negative people who only reinforce bad feelings.
- **Take time off.** Take a vacation or a long weekend. During the workday, take short breaks.
- **Set limits.** When necessary, learn to say no in a friendly but firm manner.
- **Choose battles wisely.** Don't rush to argue every time someone disagrees with you. Keep a cool head, and save your argument for things that really matter.
- **Seek help.** If none of these things relieves your feelings of stress or burnout, ask a health care professional for advice.

When to seek help

Seek professional help if you:

- Are unable to cope with demands of daily life
- Notice a marked decline in your performance
- Experience excessive anxiety
- Have irrational fears
- Have a sustained withdrawn mood or behavior
- Experience significant change in sleeping or eating habits
- Are preoccupied with food
- Fear becoming obese with no relationship to actual body weight
- Have persistent physical ailments and complaints
- Misuse alcohol or drugs
- Have suicidal thoughts or the urge to hurt others

How to get help

Make an appointment with your primary care physician to determine if your stress is due to an anxiety disorder, a medical condition or both. Your physician can help refer you to a mental health professional if appropriate. If you feel your situation is an emergency, call a crisis hotline, or go to your nearest emergency room