

# **ASSESS AND ADDRESS YOUR STRESS**

## **SUNY Cortland**

### **Conley Counseling & Wellness Services**



## **What you can learn from this module:**

- **What is stress?**
- **How do I know if I have too much stress?**
- **How vulnerable am I to stress?**
- **What can I do to better manage my stress?**

### **1. What is stress?**

Stress is a normal part of life—and something that we experience on a daily basis. Stress is not the problem in and of itself. Instead, it is our response to stress that can become problematic.

Stress is a natural physical and mental reaction to life experiences. Everyone experiences stress from time to time. Anything from everyday responsibilities like work and family to serious life events such as a new diagnosis, war, or the death of a loved one can trigger stress. For immediate, short-term situations, stress can be beneficial to your health. It can help you cope with potentially serious situations. Your body responds to stress by releasing hormones that increase your heart and breathing rates and ready your muscles to respond.

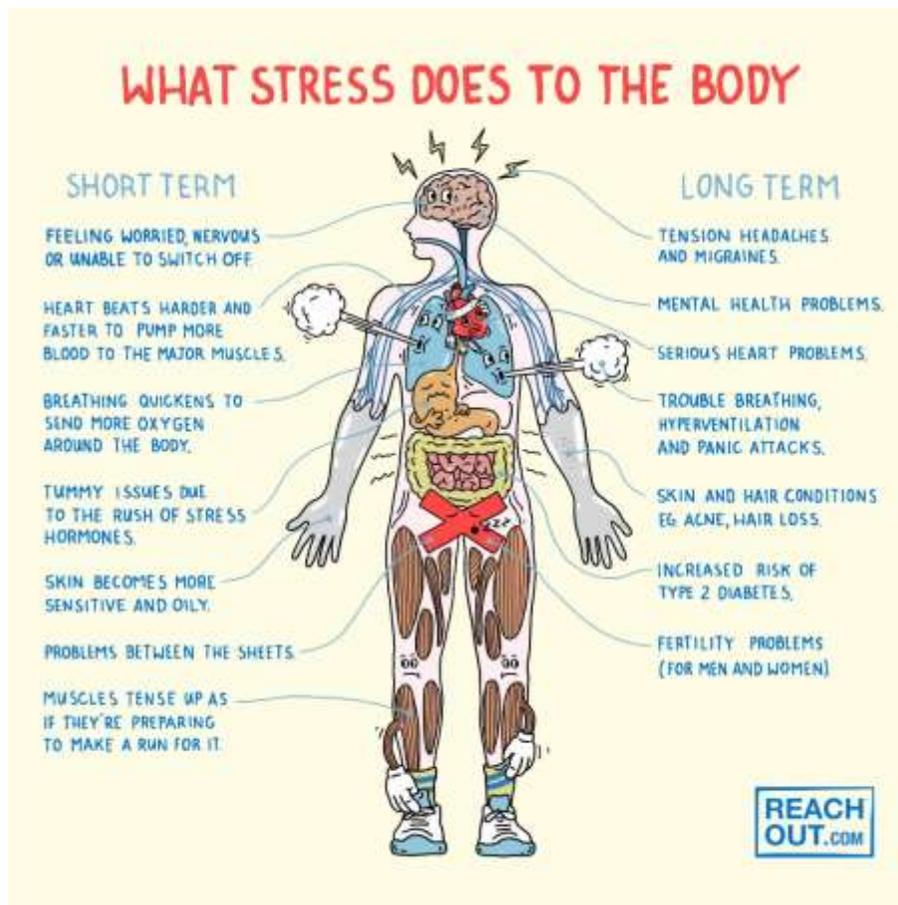
A stressful situation can lead to a physical reaction known as **stress response**. Imagine you're in the drive-thru, waiting for your order, almost late for an important meeting, watching the minutes tick away. Your hypothalamus, a tiny control tower in your brain, decides to send out the order: Send in the stress hormones!

These stress hormones are the same ones that trigger your body's "fight or flight" response. Your heart races, your breath quickens, and your muscles ready for action. This response was designed to protect your body in an emergency by preparing you to react quickly. But when the stress response keeps firing, day after day, it could put your health at serious risk.

If you tend to get stressed out frequently, like many of us in today's demanding world, your body may exist in a heightened state of stress most of the time. And that can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can suppress your immune system, upset your digestive and reproductive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and speed up the aging process. It can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.

**Health problems caused or exacerbated by stress may include:**

- Depression and anxiety
- Pain of any kind
- Sleep problems
- Autoimmune diseases
- Digestive problems
- Skin conditions, such as eczema
- Heart disease
- Weight problems
- Reproductive issues
- Thinking and memory problems



Your nervous system isn't good at distinguishing between emotional and physical threats. If you're super stressed over an argument with a friend, a work deadline, or a mountain of bills, your body can react just as strongly as if you're facing a true life-or-death situation. And the more your emergency stress system is activated, the easier it becomes to trigger, making it harder to shut off.

Watch this [LifeShop](#) video if you want [to learn more about Stress](#)

## 2. How do I know if I have too much stress?

Symptoms vary from one person to another, some of them can be physical, experiencing back pain, headaches, indigestion or heart palpitations. But others can involve our mental and emotional sphere. In this second group we find symptoms such as irritability, being constantly crying, impatience, anger, dysfunctional sleep or communication problems. It is important to be able to identify these symptoms to start feeling better.

### Signs and symptoms of stress overload

The most dangerous thing about stress is how easily it can creep up on you. You get used to it. It starts to feel familiar, even normal. You don't notice how much it's affecting you, even as it takes a heavy toll. That's why it's important to be aware of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress overload—and to understand your individual signs of too much stress.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b><i>Cognitive symptoms:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Memory problems</li><li>• Inability to concentrate</li><li>• Poor judgment</li><li>• Seeing only the negative</li><li>• Anxious or racing thoughts</li><li>• Constant worrying</li></ul>   | <p><b><i>Emotional symptoms:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Depression or general unhappiness</li><li>• Anxiety and agitation</li><li>• Moodiness, irritability, or anger</li><li>• Feeling overwhelmed</li><li>• Loneliness and isolation</li><li>• Other mental or emotional health problems</li></ul>                                   |
| <p><b><i>Physical symptoms:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aches and pains</li><li>• Diarrhea or constipation</li><li>• Nausea, dizziness</li><li>• Chest pain, rapid heart rate</li><li>• Loss of sex drive</li><li>• Frequent colds or flu</li></ul> | <p><b><i>Behavioral symptoms:</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Eating more or less</li><li>• Sleeping too much or too little</li><li>• Withdrawing from others</li><li>• Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities</li><li>• Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax</li><li>• Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)</li></ul> |

Stress affects each of us uniquely, and we all express our stress as individuals. Watch these LifeShop Videos to learn more about the potential [Psychological](#), [Emotional](#), and [Behavioral](#) effects of stress on our functioning. These videos can help you identify how stress may affect you and how you can identify when you are experiencing stress. Identifying your stress can then help you intervene and better manage your stress.

### 3. How vulnerable am I to stress?

Once you have identified the ways you may experience stress as an individual (emotional, psychological, or behavioral, etc.), it can be helpful to assess your vulnerability to stress. This assessment process should help you better understand the areas of life in which you experience stress as well as the ways you can improve your self-care to enhance your ability to tolerate and manage the stressors you experience.

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#### Causes of stress

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be internal or self-generated, such as when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life. What causes stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. While some of us are terrified of getting up in front of people to perform or speak, for example, others live for the spotlight. Where one person thrives under pressure and performs best in the face of a tight deadline, another will shut down when work demands escalate. And while you may enjoy helping to care for your parents, your siblings may find the demands of caretaking overwhelming and stressful.

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| <p>Common <b>external</b> causes of stress include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Major life changes</li><li>• Work or school</li><li>• Relationship difficulties</li><li>• Financial problems</li><li>• Being too busy</li><li>• Family</li></ul> | <p>Common <b>internal</b> causes of stress include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pessimism</li><li>• Inability to accept uncertainty</li><li>• Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility</li><li>• Negative self-talk</li><li>• Unrealistic expectations / perfectionism</li><li>• All-or-nothing attitude</li></ul> |
|--|---|

To better understand potential sources of stress and ways you might manage your stress, take the assessment on the next page. While your score helps you understand the potential level of your stress, pay attention to each question and each answer to learn where you can improve your self-care and overall well-being.



## HOW VULNERABLE ARE YOU TO STRESS?

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Mark from 1 (almost always) to 5 (never), according to how much of the time each statement applies to you.

- \_\_\_ 1. I eat at least one hot, balanced meal a day.
- \_\_\_ 2. I get 7 to 8 hours of sleep most nights.
- \_\_\_ 3. I give and receive affection regularly.
- \_\_\_ 4. I have at least one relative within 50 miles on whom I can rely.
- \_\_\_ 5. I exercise to the point of perspiration at least twice a week.
- \_\_\_ 6. I do not use tobacco daily.
- \_\_\_ 7. I drink fewer than five alcoholic drinks a week.
- \_\_\_ 8. I am comfortable with my weight.
- \_\_\_ 9. I have an income adequate to meet my basic expenses.
- \_\_\_ 10. I get strength from my religious beliefs.
- \_\_\_ 11. I regularly attend club or social activities.
- \_\_\_ 12. I have a network of friends and acquaintances.
- \_\_\_ 13. I have one or more friends to confide in about personal matters.
- \_\_\_ 14. I am in good health (including eyesight, hearing, teeth).
- \_\_\_ 15. I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried.
- \_\_\_ 16. I talk openly with the people I live with about daily issues, e.g., chores or money.
- \_\_\_ 17. I do something for fun at least once a week.
- \_\_\_ 18. I am able to organize my time effectively.
- \_\_\_ 19. I drink fewer than three cups of coffee (caffeinated drinks) a day.
- \_\_\_ 20. I take quiet time for myself during the day.
- \_\_\_ SUBTOTAL - 20 = \_\_\_ TOTAL

**To get your score, add up the figures. Then, subtract 20. Any number over 5 indicates a mild vulnerability to stress. You are moderately vulnerable if your score is between 25 and 55, and extremely vulnerable if your score is over 55.**

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#### 4. What can I do to address my stress?

Feeling emotional and nervous or having trouble sleeping and eating can all be normal reactions to stress. The following pages provide various ways to address your stress as well as a form in which you can set up your own personal stress management plan.

Here are some healthy ways you can deal with stress:

- **Take care of yourself.** Eat healthy, exercise, get plenty of sleep, and give yourself a break if you feel stressed out.
- **Talk to others.** Share your problems and how you are feeling and coping with a parent, friend, counselor, doctor, or pastor.
- **Avoid drugs and alcohol.** These may seem to help, but they can create additional problems and increase the stress you are already feeling.
- **Take a break.** If news events are causing your stress, take a break from listening or watching the news.
- **Recognize when you need more help.** If problems continue or you are thinking about suicide, talk to a psychologist, social worker, or professional counselor.

See the pages below for specific examples of how to address your stress, from relaxation to learning to better manage your time. These items are mere starting points, and not prescriptive. Each of us has our own way to relieve stress, to decompress, and to better manage stress—and these can vary according to the time of year, the nature of the stressor, our particular circumstances at that time, etc. The list that follows is meant to encourage brainstorming around ways for you to better manage your stress.



|  |   |
|--|---|
| <h3>Diversions/Distractions</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write, draw, paint, photography;</li> <li>• Play an instrument, sing, dance, act;</li> <li>• Take a shower or a bath;</li> <li>• Garden;</li> <li>• Take a walk, or go for a drive;</li> <li>• Watch television or a movie;</li> <li>• Watch cute kitten videos on YouTube;</li> <li>• Play a game;</li> <li>• Go shopping;</li> <li>• Clean or organize your environment;</li> <li>• Read;</li> <li>• Take a break or vacation.</li> </ul>  | <h3>Social/Interpersonal Coping</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk to someone you trust;</li> <li>• Set boundaries and say “no”;</li> <li>• Write a note to someone you care about;</li> <li>• Be assertive;</li> <li>• Use humor;</li> <li>• Spend time with friends and/or family;</li> <li>• Serve someone in need;</li> <li>• Care for or play with a pet;</li> <li>• Role-play challenging situations with others;</li> <li>• Encourage others.</li> </ul>   |
| <h3>Cognitive Coping</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make a gratitude list;</li> <li>• Brainstorm solutions;</li> <li>• Lower your expectations of the situation;</li> <li>• Keep an inspirational quote with you;</li> <li>• Be flexible;</li> <li>• Write a list of goals;</li> <li>• Take a class;</li> <li>• Act opposite of negative feelings;</li> <li>• Write a list of pros and cons for decisions;</li> <li>• Reward or pamper yourself when successful;</li> <li>• Write a list of strengths;</li> <li>• Accept a challenge with a positive attitude.</li> </ul> | <h3>Good Coping Skills</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practicing <u>meditation and relaxation techniques</u>;</li> <li>• Having time to yourself;</li> <li>• Engaging in physical activity or exercise;</li> <li>• Reading;</li> <li>• Spending time with friends;</li> <li>• Finding humor;</li> <li>• Spending time on your hobbies;</li> <li>• Engaging in <u>spirituality</u>;</li> <li>• Spending quality time with your pets;</li> <li>• Getting a good night’s sleep;</li> <li>• Eating healthy.</li> </ul> |
| <h3>Physical</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get enough sleep;</li> <li>• Eat healthy foods;</li> <li>• Get into a good routine;</li> <li>• Eat a little chocolate;</li> <li>• Limit caffeine;</li> <li>• Practice deep/slow breathing.</li> </ul>   | <h3>Tension Releasers</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exercise or play sports;</li> <li>• Engage in catharsis (yelling in the bathroom, punching a punching bag);</li> <li>• Cry;</li> <li>• Laugh.</li> </ul>  |
| <h3>Spiritual</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pray or meditate;</li> <li>• Enjoy nature;</li> <li>• Get involved in a worthy cause.</li> </ul>   | <h3>Limit-Setting</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drop some involvement;</li> <li>• Prioritize important tasks;</li> <li>• Use assertive communication;</li> <li>• Schedule time for yourself.</li> </ul>   |



## Ways of Handling Your Stress

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### 1. Pleasurable Activities

- A. By yourself (listen to music, take a walk, read a novel, TV)
- B. With others (do things with people you enjoy being with)

### 2. Take Care of Your Body

- A. Nutrition- avoid too much caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, drugs - eat healthy food: fruits, veggies
- B. Get adequate sleep
- C. Exercise (ideally 3+ times/week, 20-30 minutes)

### 3. Time Management

- A. Check off tasks--make lists & have fun checking off as you get things done
- B. Prioritize
- C. Don't take too much on; know your limits

### 4. Maintain "Perspective"

- A. "It's all how you look at it"; examine your thoughts for unhelpful/ untrue thoughts--argue to yourself why they are incorrect/unhelpful; then substitute more accurate/helpful ones

### 5. Communication Skills: Getting Along with Others

- A. Listen lots
- B. Don't be passive; Don't be aggressive; Be assertive

### 6. Laugh (watch funny movies, TV, look for the lighter side of life)

### 7. Relaxation

- A. slow & deep breathing; imagine pleasant scenes; tense & relax muscles; music; reading; church/prayer/meditation/spiritual practice

### 8. Talk to Others about Being Stressed (everyone is or has been!)

- A. friends, family
- B. counselors

### 9. Read more on the subject:

- \* The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook (Martha Davis & others)
- \* The Anxiety & Phobia Workbook (Edmund J. Bourne)
- \* Dying of Embarrassment (Barbara G. Markway & others)
- \* When Anger Hurts (Matthew McKay & others)
- \* Mind Over Mood (Greenberger & Padesky)

# My Personal Stress Plan

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## Part 1: Tackling the Problem

### ***Point 1: Identify and address the problem.***

When I have too many problems, I will work on just one at a time. For example, I am going to pick one huge problem and break it into smaller pieces.

- I will seek advice from family members and learn from their experience how to better handle problems.
- I will take big assignments and learn to make lists or timelines
- I will work in teams so that I will learn that when people work well together they can do much more than if they each work alone.

### ***Point 2: Avoid stress when possible.***

I know that everyone has stress, but there are things that I could stay away from that really stress me out. I will

- Avoid certain people, like \_\_\_\_\_
- Avoid certain places, like \_\_\_\_\_
- Avoid certain things, like \_\_\_\_\_
- Avoid certain memories that create pain for me, like \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Point 3: Let some things go; so I can focus on others.***

I realize that I waste some of my energy worrying about things I can't fix. Here are some things that I will try to let go, so I can focus on the problems I can change.

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

I know I waste some of my energy when I take things personally that really have nothing to do with me. I am going to learn this lesson by remembering a time I did this and by choosing not to repeat that mistake.

## Part 2: Taking Care of My Body

### ***Point 4: The Power of Exercise.***

I will do something that makes my body work hard for at least 20 minutes every other day – more is better. I know that strong bodies help people better deal with stress, and this will keep me in shape. The kinds of things I like to do include

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

I can commit to \_\_\_\_\_ minutes of exercise a day. If I have trouble focusing in school, I will try exercising before school for \_\_\_\_\_ minutes (recommended minimum 20) to see if it helps me concentrate better.

I know that a really hard physical workout will help me calm down when I am feeling most worried, stressed, or fearful. This is especially true when I can't concentrate on my homework because it feels like too much. The kinds of things I might do include

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Point 5: Active Relaxation.**

I will try to teach my body to relax by using

- Exercise that controls the body and releases tension like Tai Chi or boxing
- Deep breathing
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Warm, long baths or showers
- Imagine I am someplace peaceful and relaxing. The place I could imagine myself being is \_\_\_\_\_

**Point 6: Eat well.**

I know that having a healthy body helps people deal with stress better. I have already agreed to exercise more. I understand that good nutrition also makes a difference in my health and how well I deal with stress. The changes I am ready to make include

- Eating a good breakfast
- Skipping fewer meals
- Drinking fewer sodas and sugary drinks
- Drinking more water
- Eating smaller portions
- Eating less greasy meals or snacks
- Eating more fruits, vegetables, and whole grain foods
- I will go to [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov) to learn more
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Point 7: Sleep well.**

I know that people who get a good night's sleep do a better job of dealing with stress and do better in school. For me to get the sleep I need, I will try to go to bed at \_\_\_\_:\_\_\_\_.

I will consider the following plan to help me get the best night's rest.

- Avoid caffeine at least 6 hours before bed.
- Exercise 5-6 hours before bed.
- Finish homework after exercise because I will be my calmest, clearest and most focused.
- Take some time to relax or hang out after homework.
- Shower or bathe 1 hour before bed.
- Begin to dim the lights 30 minutes before bed
- Let go of my emotional tension before bed in a place other than bed (see point 9). If I am really troubled, I will do this earlier in the evening.

I will use my bed only for sleeping. I will use another place to do some of the things I do in bed now. I will

- Stop reading in bed.
- Stop doing homework in bed.
- Stop watching television in bed.
- Stop talking to my friends or instant messaging in bed.
- Stop worrying in bed.
- Dock my cell phone in a charger that is not in my bedroom
- Deal with the things that stress me out by having a time to let go of my thoughts and feelings in a place other than my bed.

### **Part 3: Managing My Emotions**

#### ***Point 8: Take instant vacations.***

Everyone needs to be able to escape problems for a while by taking an *instant vacation*. I will

- Read a book.
- Take a mini vacation to a local park or recreation center
- Imagine I am someplace peaceful and relaxing. The place I could imagine myself being is \_\_\_\_\_
- Watch television.
- Listen to music.
- Play video games that are not violent or stressful.
- Take a warm bath.
- \_\_\_\_\_

#### ***Point 9: Release emotional tension.***

I will try to let my worries go, rather than letting them build up inside.

- I will talk to a friend I have chosen wisely because I know he or she will give good advice.
- I will talk to my:
  - Parent/guardian
  - Friend/co-worker
  - Teacher
  - or \_\_\_\_\_
- I will ask my parents or a teacher to help me find a counselor to help me work out my problems.
- I will pray to gain strength.
- I will meditate.
- I will write out my thoughts in a diary, journal, or blog.
- I will let myself laugh more.
- I will let myself cry more.
- I will make lists to get organized.

When it seems that I have too many problems and they seem like more than I can handle, I will work on one at a time.

- I will express myself through art.
- I will express myself through music.
- I will express myself through creative writing.

- I will express myself through poetry.
- I will express myself through rap.
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Part 4: Helping a little can make your world better . . . and may help you feel better**

##### ***Point 10: Contribute.***

People who realize they are needed and have a purpose in life feel better about themselves, because they can make a difference in other people's lives. I plan to

- Help a member of my family by \_\_\_\_\_
- Volunteer in my community by \_\_\_\_\_
- Help the environment (or animals) by \_\_\_\_\_

*Remember that one of the best ways to be happy and successful is to manage stress well.*

From Ginsburg KR, Jablow MM. *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings*. 2nd ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2011

# 50 Ways to Take a Break

Take a Bath



Listen to Music



Take a Nap



Go to a body of water



Watch the clouds



Light a candle



REST your legs up on a wall



Let out a sigh



Fly a Kite



Watch the stars



Write a Letter



Learn something NEW



Listen to a guided relaxation



Read a Book



sit in NATURE



2x Move twice as slowly

Take Deep Belly Breaths



MEDITATE



Call a Friend



Meander around Town

WRITE in a journal



Notice your Body



Buy some Flowers



Find a relaxing scent



WALK Outside



Go for a run



Take a bike ride



pet a furry creature

Create your own coffee break



View some ART



Eat a meal in SILENCE

Examine an everyday object with Fresh Eyes



Turn off all electronics



Go to a park



Drive somewhere NEW



Go to a Farmer's Market



Forgive someone



COLOR with Crayons



Make some MUSIC



Climb a Tree



Let go of something



Engage in small acts of KINDNESS



Do some gentle stretches



Paint on a surface other than paper



Write a quick poem



Read poetry

Put on some music and DANCE



Give Thanks

