

THE CENTER for CLINICAL MASSAGE

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How stressed are you?

Take the first step in coping with stress

Are you tense much of the time? Do you have frequent headaches, neck or back aches? Or do you have trouble sleeping?

While stress is a given in life and may motivate us to do our best, learning to recognize when it is a problem is vital to feeling well. The effects of stress can creep up on you and are often the result of events or life changes. These changes, both positive and negative, make demands on you. A serious illness or separation in the family will of course increase your stress level. But happy events like marriage or a new child can also tax your physical and emotional resources.

When stress builds

You can feel the effects of stress from one single large event, or as a series of small ones accumulate. Even small stressors in your life such as aches and pains, a daily commute or ever-present background noise, if sustained or combined with other stressors, can take their toll. Research shows that as stress builds, you may become more susceptible to physical illness, mental and emotional problems, and accidental injuries.



Meditation can help reduce tension and increase your ability to cope with life's challenges.

Awareness is the first step in coping with stress. Taking the test in the box on the right will give you a moment out of your busy life to tune in to your own stress signals. Although some of the listed symptoms could indicate a medical condition that warrants prompt attention, they are probably simply signs that too much stress may be affecting your sense of well-being.

How did you do?

If you answered yes to more than half of the questions in the box, you may want to take steps now to reduce your stress.

Now what?

Sometimes facing a problem on the job or in a relationship will help decrease tension and anxiety. Even if a problem isn't easily solved, talking about it with a trusted friend or counselor can bring relief from the symptoms of stress.

Making more time to relax may leave you more resilient and less prone to disease and injury. Go for walks in beautiful places and take breaks at work to stretch. Learn relaxation techniques like meditation, yoga or tai chi. Get an extra bodywork session or ask your practitioner to use part of your session to focus on breathing more efficiently, a proven method of reducing tension in the body.



The stress test

1. Do you have headaches or stomach aches?
2. Do you have pain in your shoulders or arms?
3. Have your eating habits changed? Are you eating more or less than usual?
4. Do you worry about bad things happening to your loved ones?
5. Is it hard to concentrate?
6. Do you wake up at night thinking about things you have no control over?
7. Do you lack energy to do the things you enjoy at the end of the day or on the weekend?
8. Do you often feel tired or apathetic?
9. Are you tense or irritable at work or at home?
10. Have you lost your sense of humor?
11. Are you increasingly forgetful?
12. Do you feel you have lost control over your life?
13. Do your relationships or friendships feel unsatisfying?
14. Has your drinking or smoking increased?
15. Do you find it hard to relax?

Relaxation — your birthright

Body, mind, and life in the fast lane

Remember the last time you were injured, afraid or in an emotional crisis? You probably experienced what's called the "fight-or-flight response." All your systems went on alert. Your emotions were charged, your pulse and blood pressure rose, your muscles tensed. Everything in your system shifted to help you face the emergency.

Stress and your life

Although we may not be in crisis very often, in our busy modern lives we often have too many deadlines, commitments and financial pressures. As pressure builds, you may experience chronic stress and anxiety. Your overstimulated protective fight-or-flight response becomes an internal emergency. If unrelieved, this can exhaust your glands and organs and drain your energy, which can lead to a general undermining of your health.

Relaxation and your body

Fortunately the body has a built-in way of dealing with the effects of stress through the autonomic nervous system. There are two parts of our autonomic nervous system.

The sympathetic branch is responsible for revving you up to "fight or flee." The parasympathetic calms you down, causing the heart rate and blood pressure to fall, the breath to slow, and the internal organs to function more efficiently. These changes are referred to as the "relaxation response," a mechanism we are born with. The relaxation response can be triggered by certain activities like meditation, biofeedback, yoga and bodywork.

Enjoying regular relaxation can slowly reverse the effects of chronic stress and bring you back to emotional, mental, and physical balance, the way you were meant to be.



What integrative medicine does is reduce your stress, and we know that 85 percent of all illnesses are stress-related.... Approaches such as biofeedback, chiropractic, acupuncture, aromatherapy, music, meditation, massage, yoga...enhance your overall well-being as well as decreasing all the cortisol and stressors.

—Singer Naomi Judd after healing from hepatitis C

