

Health tip: Soothing Stress

The current stress level experienced by Americans is 20% higher than the global average.¹ While there is no magic pill to reduce or eliminate stress, there are several ways we can learn to manage the stress in our lives.

Stress may affect health in multiple negative ways²

Chronic stress can:

- Increase your risk for a variety of physical health problems including digestive issues, headaches, muscle tension, heart disease, heart attack, high blood pressure, stroke, and weight gain.
- Increase your risk for a variety of mental health problems including anxiety, depression, sleep problems, memory and concentration impairment.
- Cause a disease either due to changes in your body or behaviors such as smoking, consuming alcohol, or any other poor habit that people use to cope with stress.
- Suppress the body's immune system, making it more difficult to recover from illnesses.

The 3 stages of stress

Dr. Hans Selye broke the stress response into three stages, which he called the General Adaptation Syndrome:³

- 1 Alarm Stage** – also known as “fight or flight”, this stage occurs when you are frightened or under threat. Your heart rate speeds up and the body releases stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. If prolonged it can take a toll on your body.
- 2 Resistance Stage** – occurs after the initial extreme reaction. Your body tries to adapt to the continued stress. If the stress passes, you can start to rebuild your defenses. If it becomes long-term, you move to the third stage.
- 3 Exhaustion Stage** – is the “burnout” or overload phase. Continued pounding by stress depletes your body's reserves, which puts you at risk for disease. Facing multiple long-term stressors piles extra strain on your system and may quickly lead to exhaustion.



The power of positive thinking

Whether we see the glass as half empty or half full is an indication of how we perceive things in life. Research suggests negative thinking not only affects health, but also our stress level. Individuals with an optimistic attitude:⁴

- May be better able to cope with stress
- Have a better immune system
- Are less likely to get depressed
- Catch few infectious diseases
- Have better health habits
- Often live a longer, healthier life⁵

What is resilience?

Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity. It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences.⁵

Resilience is not a trait that people either have or do not have. It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that may be learned and developed in anyone. Resilience won't make your problems go away, but it may give you the ability to see past them and better handle stress.

If you'd like to become more resilient, consider these tips:

- 1. Get connected.** Building strong, positive relationships with loved ones may provide you with needed support, guidance and acceptance during good and bad times.
- 2. Make every day meaningful.** Do something that gives you a sense of accomplishment and purpose each day—big or small.
- 3. Learn from experience.** Think of how you've coped with hardships in the past and make adjustments where needed to guide future behavior.
- 4. Remain hopeful.** You can't change the past, but you can look toward the future. Accepting and anticipating change may make it easier to adapt to new challenges with less anxiety.
- 5. Take care of yourself.** Tend to your own needs and feelings, participate in activities and hobbies that you enjoy, get plenty of sleep, eat a healthier diet, and practice stress management skills.
- 6. Be proactive.** Don't ignore your problems. Figure out what needs to be done, make a plan and take action.

United
Healthcare

¹ American Institute of Stress. www.stress.org. 2023. Accessed October 2023.

² American Psychological Association, How stress affects your health. <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/health#:~:text=Faced%20with%20danger%2C%20the%20body,the%20threat%20of%20being%20eaten.> October 2022. Accessed October 2023.

³ NASM, General Adaptation Syndrome in Fitness Explained. <https://openwa.pressbooks.pub/cchlth140/chapter/general-adaptation-syndrome/>. 2022. Accessed October 2023.

⁴ Mayo Clinic, Positive Thinking: Stop negative self-talk to reduce stress. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/positive-thinking/art-20043950>. February 2022. Accessed October 2023.

⁵ Mayo Clinic, Resilience: Build skills to endure hardship. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/resilience-training/in-depth/resilience/art-20046311>. July 2022. Accessed October 2023.

The information in this educational tool does not substitute for the medical advice, diagnosis or treatment of your physician. Always seek the help of your physician or qualified health provider for any questions you may have regarding your medical condition.

All trademarks and logos are property of their respective owners in the U.S. and other jurisdictions.

11/23 © 2023 United HealthCare Services, Inc. All Rights Reserved. M57233-X