

EFFECTIVE METHODS TO REDUCE STRESS

Counseling

Counseling can help you recognize and release stress that may be greatly affecting your pain and the management of your pain.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Tighten one specific muscle for a couple of seconds and then release it. Start with your feet and move up the rest of your body until your whole body is relaxed.

Meditation

Sitting or lying down you can allow your mind to think of a relaxing event or place. Try to not allow yourself to use this time to think about the day's stress. Meditation can also include quiet humming or small stretches.

Biofeedback

This technique helps you learn stress reduction skills. You are provided with information about muscle tension, your heart rate and other vital signs as you attempt to relax.

Relaxation to music

Listening to quiet and relaxing music can do wonders for helping you unwind from a stressful day.

Deep breathing exercises

Lie down or sit in a chair. Place your hands on your stomach and slowly count to five inhaling through your nose. Feel your stomach rise and holding it for a couple of seconds. Then slowly release the air. Repeat this several times.

LIVING HEALTHY WITH CHRONIC PAIN



STRESS
managing stress
before it manages you



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STRESS

IMPROVING PAIN MANAGEMENT BY COPING WITH STRESS

By Christa Jensen, CNP

Stress is how your body responds to a change or challenge. People often report stress relating to their family, jobs, money, relationships and health. Stress affects each person differently. A stressful situation can cause a great deal of stress in one person, yet that same situation may not even bother another person. Tolerance of stress varies from person to person. Stress effects people physically (our bodies), mentally (our minds), and emotionally (our feelings). Often stress causes the body to feel as if it needs to defend itself. Stress in small or moderate amounts is not always considered bad. Limited stress can help you be more alert and think better, which can be helpful in many situations. Stress becomes harmful if it goes on too long. Lengthy periods of stress can have negative effects on the body.

How is stress related to pain?

Both short-term and long-term stress can have effects on your body and health. Stress can make health problems change or even worsen. Diabetes, high blood pressure, stomach problems, migraine headaches, bowel problems, depression, heart disease, and pain are only a few health conditions that can be changed by stress. Just like sleep, stress levels can directly affect pain and the management of pain. On the flip side, pain can also affect a person's level of stress. Many patients will report increased pain during stressful periods in their life. Management of pain often is a day to day event. Daily stress can limit or restrict the success of pain management. Coping with stress is a life long skill that requires practice and when put to use daily, can be quite successful. Stress management and good coping skills will in turn lessen pain levels and aid in pain management.

Taking the first steps to manage stress

The key to coping with stress and managing it is, to first recognize what may be causing stress and identify when these feelings occur. Sometimes life gets so busy that it is difficult to stop and ask why we are feeling "stressed out." After acknowledging the stress, we need to choose ways to deal with the stress. This is not an easy task and not all ways of coping will be for everyone. Taking the time to figure out what you can control and what you cannot control will help. One example is the weather. We cannot control the weather but it can often cause much stress to our lives.

Stress effects both mind and body

Stress has many negative effects on a person's body. It can cause high blood pressure, shortness of breath, muscle and stomach aches, pounding heart, grinding of teeth, fatigue, tight, dry throat, weight changes and increased feelings of pain. Stress also affects a person's thoughts and feelings. When under stress, worrying increases as well as sadness, anger, irritability, confusion and feelings of fear. There is a tendency to lash out and blame others for negative feelings when under stress. It is also common to see only the negative side of people and situations. Lastly, stress affects behavior. Decreased productivity is common in people who are feeling stress. Eating patterns can be affected, overeating or a drastic loss of appetite can occur. It is often easy for people to lose their temper, have crying spells and withdraw or isolate themselves from people with whom they have had close relationships. It is also common for people to increase their use of alcohol, drugs and cigarettes in order to cope with the stress they feel.

Ways to improve your pain and health

1. **Accept things that you cannot change:** This is often a very difficult step.
2. **Increase physical activity:** Your body makes chemicals called endorphins, which are released while you exercise. These chemicals relieve stress and can improve your mood.
3. **Limit habit forming activities:** Do not overeat, limit alcohol, and do not smoke. Each of these habits has negative effects on your health.
4. **Prepare:** Becoming prepared before a stressful event will limit the stress on the day of the event.
5. **View:** Try to view your life changes as a positive challenge, not as a threat.
6. **Work with others:** Often voicing stress with family and friends can help solve a difficult situation. You are not the only person with stress and others may be able to tell you how they handled a stressful situation. Ask for help from family, friends and your health care provider when your stress is getting out of hand.
7. **Set goals:** Try to set realistic goals for yourself, family and at work.
8. **Eat well:** Well-balanced meals are important for everyone- whether you are stressed or not.
9. **Socialize:** Plan fun events, such as social events, family time and hobbies. This allows time in your busy, stressful life for relaxation. Taking time for you each day is essential to getting refocused and managing the stress of the day.
10. **Sleep:** Stress and pain worsens if you do not get enough sleep. Lack of sleep makes a stressful day harder to deal with.
11. **Write:** Keeping a journal of daily events can be refreshing. Allowing the frustration and stress to come out on paper can be helpful.
12. **Set limits:** Setting limits is always needed in our busy, stressful lives. We are not capable of doing and handling everything, every day. Being organized and planning ahead can help you set limits. This will also help with your management of pain.

