



# Managing Life's Challenges

Mental health is an essential part of each person's overall health and wellness. At times, we all face challenges that test us and put our mental health at risk. When our mental health is poor, it can affect our entire body and play a role in the development of other health issues. For example, when stress doesn't let up and isn't managed, it can harm your health and well-being.

## About Stress

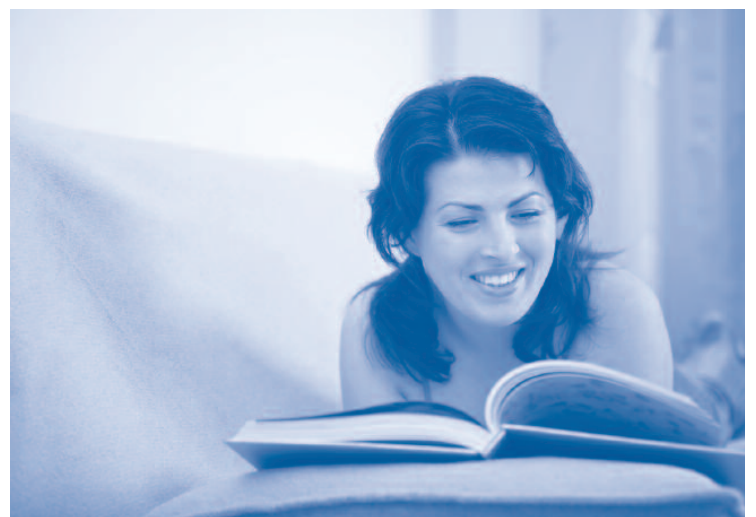
Everyone feels stress. In small doses, stress may be good for you when it gives you a burst of energy. But too much stress or stress that lasts for a long time can take its toll on your body. Stress can make you feel run down, sad, nervous, angry or irritable. It can cause headaches, muscle tension, upset stomach, nausea, dizziness or feelings of despair, and may cause you to eat more or eat less than normal.

In the long-term, stress can raise your risk of high cholesterol, heart disease, diabetes and reproductive problems and weaken your body's ability to fight disease. It can also raise your risk of depression, which may in turn contribute to heart disease and diabetes. In addition, stress can make it harder for you to recover from a heart attack or keep your diabetes in check. So managing your stress is very important. Take a look at the ideas below for healthy suggestions on reducing your stress.

## Healthy Ideas to Manage Life's Challenges

When we're trying to manage life's stressors, how we deal with these challenges can positively or negatively impact our mental health and our overall health and well-being. Finding healthy ways to manage life's challenges can lower the risk of mental health and other health problems and help you feel better overall. Here are some ideas to think about.

- **Exercise.** Exercising relieves your tense muscles, improves your mood and sleep, and increases your energy and strength. In fact, researchers say that exercise eases symptoms of anxiety and depression. You may not even need to exercise intensely to get the benefits of activity. Try taking a brisk walk or use a stationary bike. See what it takes for you to feel better.
  - **Connect with others.** You don't have to cope with stress or other issues on your own. Talking to a trusted friend, family member, support group or counselor can make you feel better. Spending time with positive, loving people you care about and trust can ease stress and improve your mood.
  - **Get enough rest.** Getting enough sleep helps you recover from the stresses of the day. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep every night. Visit the Sleep Foundation at [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org) for tips on getting a better night's sleep.
  - **Help others.** Helping others builds social networks, improves self-esteem and can give you a sense of purpose and achievement.
  - **Know your limits.** Let others know them, too. If you're overwhelmed at home or work, or with friends,
- **Relax your mind.** Each person has his or her own ways to relax. You can relax by listening to soothing music, reading a book or doing a quiet activity. Also think about deep breathing, yoga, meditation or massage therapy.



learn how to say “no.” It may feel uncomfortable at first, so practice saying “no” with the people you trust most.



**Remember, it’s OK to ask for help.** If you feel overwhelmed or unable to cope, consider contacting a mental health professional.

*For a referral to local services, contact your local Mental Health America affiliate or the Mental Health America national office at 1-800-969-6642. You can also visit [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net). If you’re in a crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).*

■ **Keep a journal.**

Writing down your thoughts can be a great way to work through issues. Some researchers have reported that writing about painful events can reduce stress and improve health. You can also track your sleep to help you identify any triggers that make you feel more anxious.

■ **Watch your negative self-talk.** Try not to put yourself down. For example, if you don’t make it to the gym this week, don’t call yourself lazy. Instead think about the specific factor that may have kept you from going to the gym. “I wasn’t able to work out because I had to work late hours this week, but next week, I’ll make it a priority to go.” The problem is temporary and can be overcome.

■ **Get involved in spiritual activities.** Studies have shown that religious involvement and spirituality are associated with better health outcomes, such as greater coping skills, less anxiety and a lower risk of depression. Spirituality may provide a sense of hope, meaning and purpose in life, a way to understand suffering and illness, and a connection with others. Religious and spiritual practices, such as prayer and meditation, can evoke positive emotions that can lead to better health.

■ **Write down three good things that happen to you each day for a week.** Also write down why each good thing happened. Thinking about the good things in your life and expressing gratitude may actually help you feel happier.

**De-Stress Through Deep Breathing**

Deep breathing is a great way to de-stress. It actually changes your brain’s chemical balance to calm you down. Here’s how to do it:

1. Lie down or sit on the floor or in a chair.
2. Rest your hands on your stomach.
3. Slowly count to four and inhale through your nose. Feel your stomach rise. Hold it for a second.
4. Slowly count to four while you exhale through your mouth. To control how fast you exhale, purse your lips like you’re going to whistle. Your stomach will slowly fall.
5. Do this a few times.