Taking Care of Yourself

How you deal with everyday stress as well as the stress and anxiety related to significant events affects how you feel emotionally and physically. But if you pay attention to your health and learn ways to handle stress you’ll be better prepared to handle whatever challenges and changes come your way. If you make time to exercise, eat right, get enough sleep, and do the things that make you feel good, you’ll have more energy to tackle all of the other things you have to do.

Eat a healthy diet
There is no question that the foods we eat affect how we feel and look. You don’t have to follow a strict diet, but it is important to follow a healthy diet. A nutritious, well-balanced diet gives you energy, protects against disease, and helps you maintain a healthy weight.

One easy rule to follow is what some experts refer to as the “80/20 rule”: If 80 percent of what you eat is healthy -- with a nutritious mix of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains -- then you can let yourself eat what you want for the other 20 percent. Here are more ways to improve nutrition:

- Try to fit in two to three nutritious snacks throughout the day in addition to well-balanced, but not overly large main meals. This will give you energy throughout the day, even during an afternoon slump. For example, you may find that eating healthy snacks -- like whole-grain crackers with low-fat cheese or yogurt, hummus, peanut or almond butter, or fruits and vegetables -- gives you energy throughout the day so that you don’t overeat at main meals.

- Drink water throughout the day. Cut down on the amount of soda and coffee you drink, as well as sports drinks, which are often high in sugar. Sugar and caffeine may make you feel great for a little while, but when they wear off, you may feel even worse. Try to keep a bottle or large glass of water at your workstation and fill up throughout the day. Flavor with a little lemon or lime if you don’t like the taste of plain water.

- Avoid too much alcohol. Although some people say that a glass of wine once a day may be good for you, the calories in alcohol add up quickly. Limit yourself to one small drink, if you drink any alcohol at all.

- Replace high-fat foods with low-fat versions. Buying low-fat salad dressings, mayonnaise, milk, ice cream, and other items you eat a lot of helps reduce calories.

Overview
Ways to take care of yourself and reduce stress.
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get exercise
- Get a good night’s sleep
- Reduce stress
and weight gain. Try to reduce your saturated fat intake to less than 7 percent of your daily calories.

- **Eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and fish.** Vegetables like broccoli and tomatoes are full of antioxidants that can fight cancer, and some fish like salmon have Omega-3 acids that are great for your heart. Try to build fruits and vegetables into your diet everyday. Snack on apples, oranges, berries, dried fruit, carrot sticks, and other fruits and vegetables. Try to eat fish at least once a week.

- **Look at portion sizes when you indulge.** A little of some “junk food” won’t hurt you occasionally, but eating from the bag definitely will. Even using a smaller plate for meals will help to curb your food intake.

- **Avoid multitasking at meal times.** If you always watch television at meals or eat on the run a lot, you may not realize how much you are eating. If you’re on the go a lot, keep healthy snacks in the car and eat a little while you’re out, then a little more once you get home. Avoid eating big meals just before going to bed.

- **If junk food is your downfall, don’t buy it.** Shop with a list to avoid impulsive buys. The healthiest foods are usually around the outer perimeter of the grocery store, so stay away from the aisles where the processed foods tend to be.

- **Stay away from places where there are munchies.** If someone brings in donuts to share in the lunchroom, just don’t go near the food table. Likewise with social gatherings. Even though you may only grab a handful or two of the snacks that are out, every bite, lick and taste will add up.

**Get exercise**

People who exercise even moderately have much lower rates of heart disease and other medical problems, and regular exercise helps to reduce stress. But exercise is often the first thing to go when schedules get busy or during difficult times. Experts recommend that adults get a minimum of 30 minutes of exercise that makes you breathe harder on all or most days of the week.

If the thought of joining a gym or reserving half an hour everyday for exercise seems impossible, try starting with small steps and building up over time. Instead of worrying about fitting in 30 minutes of exercise into your daily routine, focus on what you can do whenever you have five or 10 minutes -- it will add up. Or track your steps with a pedometer or a wearable wireless activity-tracker such as the Fitbit Flex band. Just knowing how many steps you take each day may motivate you to try to take a few more.

Here are some easy ways to build exercise into your life:

- **Take a short walk during breaks at work.** Walking just 15 minutes a day can make a big difference in how you feel. If you have trouble breaking away from work, pair up with a co-worker to make sure neither of you misses a planned walk. Even parking
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farther away from your workplace will add some exercise and give you more time to clear your head before starting to work or the drive home. Park at the opposite end of the grocery lot when you have a little time -- combined with pushing the full cart, this will help both strength and endurance.

• **Get exercise while you’re watching television.** Buy a set of hand weights and exercise during commercials or do sit-ups while you’re watching TV. Get up during breaks to put in loads of laundry or take out the garbage. This will help you with exercise and get your chores done more efficiently.

• **Turn family time into exercise time.** Try exploring a local park, going for a hike or bike ride, or just walking around the block with your family instead of going to the movies or shopping. If you go to a house of worship that’s within a mile or two, walk instead of driving to services. Use a backpack to carry groceries, and walk to the nearby market when you just need a few items.

• **Stretch for just a minute or two when you wake up each day.** In addition to helping you ease into your day, a brief stretching routine can restore or build flexibility and energize your body.

**Get a good night’s sleep**

When you’re well rested, everything in your life is easier. You think more clearly, feel better, look better, and have more stamina and energy. But many people don’t get the 7 to 8 hours of sleep that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends for good physical and emotional health. And during times of stress, even people who usually sleep soundly may have trouble getting enough sleep. A lack of sleep -- even for just a few days -- can leave you feeling irritable, frustrated, and forgetful, and can also make you more susceptible to illness. Here are some tips for getting a good night’s sleep:

• **Establish a bedtime routine.** Even adults need a bedtime routine. By adopting a routine and then sticking with it, you can train your mind and body to feel relaxed and ready to fall asleep when you start the routine. A bedtime routine can be as simple as listening to soft music, drinking a cup of herbal tea, or taking a bath and then turning out the lights at the same time every night. If you watch TV before bed, try not to watch programs that are violent or make you think too much, as it may then be difficult to turn off your brain.

• **Avoid or limit caffeine and alcohol after five o’clock.** The effects of caffeine can last for three to four hours and for some people, even longer. And though it may seem like alcohol makes it easier to fall asleep, an alcoholic drink before bedtime may cause you to wake up later in the night.

• **Try to exercise during the day.** Many people find that regular exercise helps them sleep well at night. However, exercise too late in the afternoon or evening may actually interfere with sleep.
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- If you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, try not to lie in bed worrying about the fact that you can’t fall asleep. Get up and do something relaxing instead. You might try the following:
  - Read something light or listen to music in another room until you feel sleepy.
  - Do deep breathing or other relaxation exercises.
  - Drink a cup of hot milk -- research shows that the amino acids in milk may help you get to sleep.
  - Have a pad by your bed to write down what you are thinking about when you wake up. Sometimes just putting it on paper will get it out of your head so that you can sleep better.
  - Try “white noise” in the room – a fan or sound machine may help you to relax and be able to fall asleep better.

- If your sleep problems persist, you may want to talk with your health care provider. Some sleep problems can be related to depression, anxiety, or chronic pain, all of which can be treated with professional help. For more tips on getting a good night’s sleep, visit the site for the National Sleep Foundation at www.sleepfoundation.org.

Reduce stress
Stress is a normal part of life for most people. But stress can affect your health, the way you feel, and your ability to perform well at work and at home. That’s why it’s so important to learn ways to deal with stress.

In some cases, the best way to deal with stress is to go straight to the source. If you’ve been worrying about tackling your to-do list, you can take a minute to prioritize it. If you’re anxious about what your manager thinks of your job performance, you can ask and find out.

But some stresses can’t be dealt with directly, and you will have to learn to live with them. The first step in managing stress is becoming aware of how you react to it. Once you learn how you react to stress and how it’s affects you, you can start treating it. Here are some common symptoms of stress:

- fatigue
- depression
- anger or irritability, particularly with respect to some of life’s little annoyances
- headaches or neck or back pain
- stomach pain
- changes in appetite (eating too much or too little)
- drug or alcohol abuse or increase in use
• increase in smoking

Different techniques for dealing with stress work for different people. You may need to try several different approaches before you find something that works for you. Here are some ideas:

• *Learn some relaxation techniques.* Deep breathing and meditation are two of the most widely used relaxation techniques. To do deep breathing, try inhaling as you count to five slowly, and exhaling as you reverse the count. It may also help to relax each part of their body in succession, starting with the right foot, right leg, right shoulder, right hand, and so on, back down the left side.

• *Use exercise to relieve stress.* The next time you feel frustrated or overwhelmed at work or home, try taking a walk or bike ride. Many people find that physical activity relieves stress.

• *Express your emotions.* Talking with a trusted friend or writing in a journal can help you release strong feelings instead of keeping them bottled up, which can lead to more stress.

• *Do things that make you feel good.* Whether it’s going to a movie, spending time with a relative or friend, or going for a walk, it’s important that you schedule time to do things that you enjoy and make you feel good so that you can cope with the pressures that cause you stress.

• *Make a date with someone who supports you.* During times of stress, it helps to reach out to others who care about you. Don’t be afraid to ask friends and relatives for help and support, as they may not realize that you are under a lot of stress. They may be able to help you find solutions to some of your concerns.

• *Contact your health care provider, your employee assistance program (EAP), or the program that provided this publication for help with stress reduction.* Your health care provider, EAP, or the program that provided this publication can offer resources and support with reducing stress. If stress is interfering with your work, relationships, or sleep, consider talking with a counselor about how to handle the tension. A fresh perspective from someone not intimately involved in your life may help you to find other ways to cope or relieve some of the stress.
Taking care of yourself means paying attention to your physical and emotional needs. It means eating nutritious foods, getting exercise and sleep, and carving out time for pleasure and for being with people you care about. It also means learning ways to cope with feelings of stress so that you’re able to handle whatever challenges come your way with resilience and flexibility. These are all things you can start working on -- today.