

# Health tip: Soothing Stress

Stress is defined as the body's response to the demands of everyday living and is the underlying cause of 60% of all human illness and disease.<sup>1</sup> 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 ways

### Stress can affect:

- The digestive system – stress may cause issues such as heart burn, acid reflux, nausea, diarrhea and constipation.
- Heart health – increased blood pressure may increase risk for stroke and heart attack.
- The Immune System – stress may weaken the immune system which increases susceptibility to viral illness and infection.
- Weight Gain – the stress hormone cortisol may increase the craving fats and carbohydrates, which may cause weight gain, particularly in the abdominal area. This raises the risk for heart disease and diabetes.
- Mental Health – chronic stress is a factor in behaviors such as overeating or not eating enough, alcohol or drug abuse, and social withdrawal.<sup>2</sup>

## The 3 stages of stress

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

- 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:<sup>4</sup>

- 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 life<sup>5</sup>

# What is resilience?

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

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.

A few characteristics of people who manage stress well include:

- Being committed toward a greater or long-term objectives or goal
- Believing they are in control of their environment
- Welcoming new challenges and seeing them as positive opportunities
- Manage their time:
  - Make a list of everything to do during the day
  - Prioritize responsibilities. List the most important things at the top of the list and work down
  - Use down time effectively
  - Take care of routine tasks first
  - Delegate work – don’t be afraid to ask for help
- Practice breathing techniques – just five minutes of deep breathing may be enough to ease stress
- Practice yoga
- Get a massage
- Seek support from a friend or a professional if they have trouble managing stress on their own

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<sup>1</sup> American Institute of Stress, [www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org), accessed June 2020

<sup>2</sup> Healthline, <http://healthline.com/health/stress/>, on body, accessed June 2020

<sup>3</sup> Selye, Hans. The Stress of Life, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/learned-optimism/>, accessed June 2020

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>, accessed June 2020

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