

# Managing Stress

## Can Reducing Stress Improve My Cardiac Health?

Evidence suggests that the answer is yes. In one study, people with heart disease who went through a stress-reduction program significantly lowered their risk of further heart problems compared with those who did not participate. Participants in the stress-reduction program had lower stress levels and reported feeling less angry and better able to function. They even had fewer episodes of chest pain.

## How Can I Control My Body's Reactions to Stress?

Practice getting in touch with your emotional and physical reactions. To start, become aware of how your body feels when you're angry or stressed out. You'll notice that your heart beats faster and harder, your muscles tense up and your breathing quickens.

Consider joining a biofeedback program. Biofeedback teaches you to become aware of your heart rate, skin temperature, blood pressure and muscle tension. Then biofeedback training shows you how to control these functions. For instance, when your muscles tense up, the biofeedback device detects electrical signals, which then activate a flashing light. To relax your muscles, you must try to slow down the flashing light. With training, you can control your body's reaction to stress even when you're not hooked up to a biofeedback device.

## What Are The Best Ways To Manage Stress?

For most people, exercise and relaxation work best. Exercise helps you become physically fit — and the fitter you are, the better you'll be able to handle stress. Once you have the OK from your doctor, try to exercise 15 to 30 minutes every day. Choose an activity you enjoy. Work with your doctor to find out which activities and exercise level are right for you.

Relaxation takes your mind off stress and eases your body's response to stress. Types of relaxation include meditation, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, listening to relaxing music and picturing pleasant scenes. For best results, use one of these activities for 15 to 20 minutes once or twice a day.

## How Can I Better Deal With Anger?

Whenever you feel yourself becoming angry, take a few deep breaths and slowly tell yourself to stay calm. If someone says or does something that angers you, count to 10 before responding.

If you get angry often, try to find a release. Do something physical, but not strenuous, such as taking a relaxing walk. Whenever possible, avoid situations and people that anger you. If you hate rush-hour traffic, for instance, change your schedule or find a different route.

Expressing your emotions can help, too. If you keep things to yourself, you carry an unnecessary burden. Talk to your friends and family and ask for support. If you don't have an adequate support system, work to develop one so you'll

have someone to talk to when you're upset.

Consider joining a support group. There are groups for heart patients, men, women, retired persons, single parents, and other many other types of people.

Also, consider keeping a journal to record your thoughts and feelings. If you have a lot of pent-up feelings, but have trouble expressing them, consider seeing a therapist.

#### I Never Seem To Have Enough Time. What Can I Do?

Establish realistic goals and priorities. Eliminate low-priority activities, especially if they cause stress. When you feel overwhelmed, focus on one task at a time and give yourself enough time to do each task.

#### Can Changing My Lifestyle Help Me Reduce Stress?

Yes. Diet, exercise, sleep and rest are great stress busters. Exercise helps you work off "stress energy." Try to exercise every day.

Eating a balanced diet gives you the physical stamina to handle stress better. Don't turn to drinking, smoking, drugs or overeating to cope with stress. These responses can mask your stress, making it worse.

Be sure to get adequate sleep and rest. When you're tired, you can't cope well with stress. Pace yourself during the day. Get away from the things that bother you by taking frequent breaks and engaging in fun activities. Although getting away won't fix the situation, it will decrease your stress level. When you return to deal with the situation, you'll feel rested and in a better frame of mind.

#### Can Changing My Thinking Help Me Reduce Stress?

Certain styles of thinking — perfectionism, all-or-nothing thinking and negative thinking — can lead to feeling stressed out. If you're a perfectionist, try to lower your expectations of yourself and others and learn to accept things you can't change.

If you see things in all-or-nothing terms, you may take things personally and react in an exaggerated way to normal, everyday events. For instance, if a colleague doesn't say hello when you pass by her at work, you may think she doesn't like you. You can challenge such thoughts by examining whether they are rational. Usually, you'll see that the other person's actions aren't about you at all; this colleague, for example, is probably wrapped up in her own concerns.

If you're a pessimist, try to focus on the good, not the bad, and try to look at problems as opportunities. Instead of saying to yourself, "Things are going badly," tell yourself, "I can cope with this situation." Above all, keep a sense of humor.

A technique called reframing can help many people. Reframing helps change the way you view things so you can feel better about them. It centers on the idea that the same situation can be seen in many different ways. (A glass half empty is also a glass half full.) Reframing won't change reality, but it helps you find less stressful ways of looking at a situation.

What Should I Do If I'm At The End of My Rope?

If you can't cope with stress on your own, get professional help. Ask your doctor, clergyperson, family or friends to recommend a therapist. In a crisis, call your doctor's office or a "Hotline" immediately.