

Florida Blue

BetterYou

# Healthy Words of Wisdom

## What is Stress?

Stress is a natural part of life, but it is hard to define because it means different things to different people. Generally, stress is your body's adaptation response to changes in your environment.



## Acute Stress

Acute stress occurs as a result of a stressor in your recent past or an upcoming event. Situational stressors are those where the initial impact generally lasts less than one month. Signs of acute stress include, but are not limited to, increased heart rate, sweaty palms, cold hands and feet, irritability and/or headaches.

## Chronic Stress

Circumstances that contribute to chronic stress are those that are ongoing or happen on a recurring basis. When you experience chronic stress you do not feel energized. This type of stress actually wears you down both physically and mentally. Chronic stress is usually the result of improperly handling or coping with stressors.

## Stress Affects Your Health

Stress can cause physical, emotional and mental disorders, which can affect your health, vitality, peace-of-mind, as well as personal and professional relationships.

You may feel physical stress, which is the result of too much to do, not enough sleep, a poor diet or the effects of an illness. Over time, stress weakens our immune system and makes us susceptible to a variety of ailments from colds, to backaches, to heart disease. The newest research shows that chronic stress can actually double our risk of having a heart attack.

Stress can also affect your mental health when you worry about money, a loved one's illness, retirement, or experience an emotionally devastating event, such as the death of a spouse or challenges at work.

Much of our stress comes from everyday responsibilities. Obligations and pressures, which are both physical and mental, are not always obvious to us. In response to these daily stressors your body automatically increases

blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, metabolism and blood flow to your muscles. This response is intended to help your body react quickly and effectively to a high-pressure situation.

However, when you are constantly reacting to stressful situations without making adjustments to counter the effects, you will feel stress, which can threaten your health and well-being.

## How do I know if I am suffering from stress?

Remember, each person handles stress differently. A major life decision, such as changing careers or buying a house, might be overwhelming for some people, while others may welcome the change. Some find sitting in traffic too much to tolerate, while others take it in stride. The key is determining your personal tolerance level for stressful situations. **Your stress level is determined by how you react to your stressors.**

# Finding Your Balance

For a lot of people, the pursuit of balancing home and work seems like an impossible goal.



With so many of us torn between juggling heavy workloads, managing relationships and family responsibilities, and squeezing in outside interests, it's no surprise that more than one in four Americans describe themselves as "super stressed." Too many life events occurring at one time can increase our stress level.

In our rush to "get it all done" at the office and at home, it's easy to forget that as our stress levels spike, our productivity plummets. Stress can zap our concentration, make us irritable or depressed and harm our personal and professional relationships.

While we all need a certain amount of stress to spur us on and help us perform at our best, the key to handling stress is **balance**. Not only is achieving a healthy home/work balance an attainable goal, but workers and businesses alike see the rewards when workers are balanced and happy. They are more productive, take fewer sick days and are more likely to stay in their jobs.

## Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Many employers offer employee assistance programs to employees and their household members. EAPs are intended to help employees deal with personal problems that might

adversely impact their performance at home and work. EAPs generally include short-term counseling and referral services. The issues for which EAPs provide support vary, but some examples include:

- Major life events, including births, accidents and deaths
- Family/personal relationship issues
- Work relationship issues
- Concerns about aging parents
- Substance abuse
- Health care concerns
- Financial or legal concerns

## Ways to Achieve Balance at Home

**Set healthy boundaries with technology.** The same technology that makes it easy for workers to do their jobs from any location can also burn us out if we use it 24/7. It is important to remain available, but it's also important to recognize the need for personal time. When you are enjoying social time with family and friends, you may want to consider putting your cell phone or smartphone on "silent" or "vibrate" to minimize interruptions and maximize quality time with the special people in your life.

**Divide and conquer.** Make sure responsibilities at home are evenly

distributed and clearly outlined to avoid confusion and problems later.

**Don't over commit.** An over-scheduled personal or family life can create extra stress and make it hard to find time for activities that reduce stress. Closely examine your calendar and to-do lists and consider removing any commitments that do not support your most important values.

**Get support.** Talking with friends and family can provide support for challenges at home, and can even improve your health. People with a strong support system have more effective immune responses to illnesses than those who lack such support.

**Stay active.** Aside from its well known physical benefits, regular exercise reduces stress, depression and anxiety. It enables people to better cope with adversity and boosts the immune system. Make time for 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week.

**Get help if you need it.** Don't let stress stand in the way of your health and happiness. If you are persistently overwhelmed at home, it may be time to seek help from a mental health professional. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. Taking care of yourself is a sign of strength.



## Ways to Achieve Balance at Work

### Set manageable goals each day.

Being able to meet priorities helps us feel a sense of accomplishment and control. The latest research shows that the more control we have over our work, the less stressed we get. Be realistic about workloads and deadlines. Make a "to do" list, and take care of important tasks first and eliminate unessential ones. Ask for help when necessary.

### Be efficient with time at work.

When we procrastinate, the task often grows in our minds until it seems insurmountable. When you face a big project at work or home, start by dividing it into smaller tasks. Complete the first one before moving on to the next. Give yourself small rewards upon each completion, whether it's a five-minute break or a walk to the coffee shop. If you feel overwhelmed by routines that seem unnecessary, tell your boss. The less time you spend doing busy work or procrastinating, the more time you can spend productively.

### Ask for flexibility.

Flextime and telecommuting are quickly becoming established as necessities in today's business world. If you ask, your employer might allow you to work flexible hours or work from home one day a week. Research shows that employees who work flexible schedules are more productive and loyal to their employers.

### Tune in.

Listening to music at work may foster concentration, reduce stress and anxiety, and stimulate creativity. Studies dating back more than 30 years show the benefits of music in everyday life, including lowered blood pressure. If you choose to listen to music at work, you may want to wear headphones so you won't disturb others around you.

### Communicate effectively.

Be candid with your boss and colleagues when you are feeling overwhelmed. Look for practical solutions and discuss alternatives. Considering a situation from someone

else's viewpoint can also reduce your stress. Make allowances for other's opinions. Retreat before you lose control and allow yourself time to cool off. You'll be better equipped to handle the problem constructively later.

### Take five.

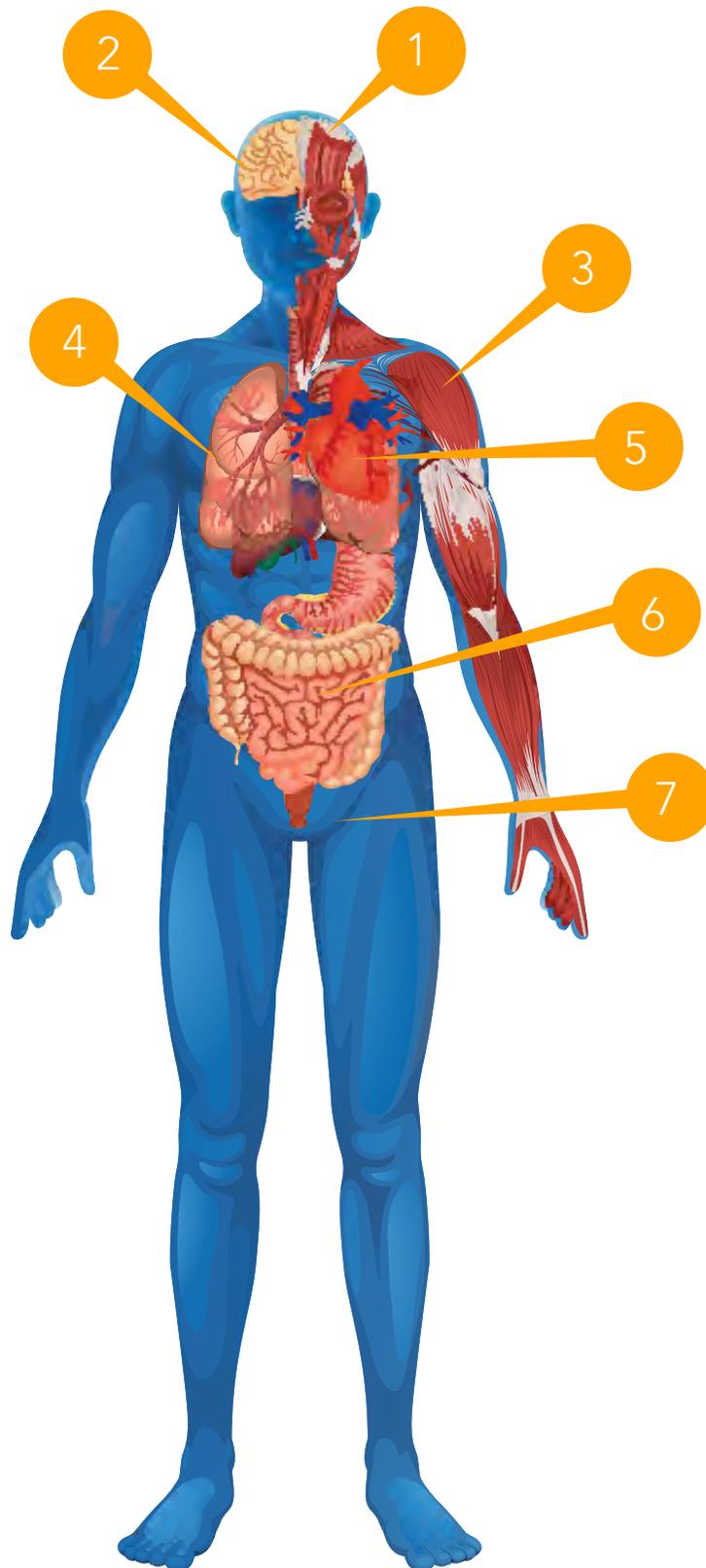
Taking a break at work isn't only acceptable, it's often encouraged by many employers. Small breaks at work will help clear your head and improve your ability to deal with stress.

### Treat your body right.

Eating healthy and getting adequate rest increases your tolerance to stress and reduces sick days.

### Give yourself a break.

No one's perfect! Allow yourself to be human and just do the best you can.



## Stress Affects the Entire Body

1. **The Nervous System** reacts to sudden stressors in several ways. Stress can cause your heart rate to increase, raise your blood pressure, change your digestive process and even increase your blood glucose level.
2. **Hormones** can be affected. The brain sends signals to the hypothalamus that cause "stress hormones" to be released.
3. **Muscles** will tense up which can cause headaches, migraines and various muscle conditions.
4. **Breathing** can become more rapid which can lead to hyperventilation.
5. **The Heart** reacts to sudden stress by increasing the heart rate. If you have repeated stress, heart disease can occur. This could lead to a heart attack.
6. **The Digestive System:** Stress can cause you to eat more or less which may lead to heartburn (acid reflux). Your stomach can react with "butterflies," nausea and pain, which can lead to vomiting. Food can move through your body quickly causing diarrhea or slowly causing constipation.
7. **Reproduction: Men** - Normal functioning can be affected when under stress. If stress is on-going, there can be impairment with testosterone and sperm production as well as impotence. **Women** - Stress can cause absent or irregular menstrual cycles and can reduce sexual desire.

**Resources:** [www.webmd.com](http://www.webmd.com); [www.stress.org](http://www.stress.org); [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org); [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)