

## STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is responsible for a range of physical, mental, and behavioral impacts: sleep disorders (and their myriad effects), headaches, backaches, chest pain, fatigue, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, forgetfulness, and substance abuse, to name a few.

In fact, although a direct correlation between stress and risk of cardiac events is still being studied, it is believed that the elevation of hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, along with the lifestyle risks that often accompany stress, take their toll on blood pressure and overall heart health.

Much of our daily frustration comes from things that we can control. You can't find the keys, so you're running late for work and you skip breakfast. You weave in and out of traffic to make up time, and by the time you get to work, you feel as though you've already run a marathon and your productivity is shot. Sound familiar?

The American Heart Association (AHA) describes the impact of stress as the start of a chain reaction that puts our bodies into a fight-or-flight response—useful when we face down predators outside our caves but not sustainable long-term without negative repercussions on our overall health.

Several emergency stress stoppers are recommended by the AHA to use alone or in combination when stressful situations escalate, among them:

- Break larger tasks or problems into smaller, more manageable parts
- Set your watch early to avoid the stress of being late
- Take three to five deep breaths before responding to a situation
- Walk away from the stressful situation, or just go for a walk
- Stop negative self-talk or the “why me?” that contributes to feelings of helplessness
- Don't be afraid to say “no”—it's perfectly okay to set limits for yourself (but it may take some practice!)



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING A STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

- **Take care of yourself.** Good health always seems to come down to eating right, exercising, and getting enough sleep. Even moderate activity lowers tension and the risk of depression in adults. Lessening both stress and depression with exercise helps to sideline some of the other lifestyle habits—drinking, smoking, and high consumption of caffeine and sugar—that tend to exacerbate the problem of stress while lowering our means of dealing with it.
- **Get organized.** Take one segment of your life at a time and think about how you can literally (or figuratively) clean it up. Break big projects into smaller steps so they are less daunting—or assign pieces to members of your family, if you have one. (It's okay to ask for help.) Lastly, do yourself a favor: stash a couple of protein bars or a healthy snack in your desk or locker so that when your morning does spiral out of control, you're not running on a caffeine-only diet until lunch.
- **Stay engaged.** It's tempting to shut down completely after stressful events, but it's important to stay connected with family and friends to laugh, talk about your feelings and theirs, and remind yourself that you are not alone. Make time for activities that bring you pleasure, no matter how simple, whether it's starting a new art project, meeting friends for lunch, or just doing projects around the house.
- **Relax.** While a night on the couch in front of a favorite movie is a great way to unwind, that's not the kind of relaxation we're talking about. Take time every day to practice mindfulness—in whatever form feels comfortable for you. Whether it's religious practice, meditation, yoga, or just long, quiet walks in nature, slowing down, breathing deeply, and focusing are skills everyone can learn that can have a dramatic impact on your ability to manage stress.