

# 7 steps to manage stress and build resilience



As recent months have demonstrated, stress is unavoidable. Now more than ever, it's important to understand stress and how we can manage it. While stress can be beneficial, too much of it can be harmful. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Research on Women's Health explains a bit about the science behind stress, provides several simple steps that might help reduce it and has a webpage, <https://go.usa.gov/xvydm>, with some resources available to help.

When the body senses a threat (or stressor), it goes on high alert, and once the threat passes, the body quickly recovers. At least that's the way it's supposed to work. Stressors can include health matters, work, money, family issues, racism or gender inequality, and regular daily hassles. With unrelenting or too many stressors, your body might be on a constant state of high alert, leading to poor concentration, bad moods, professional burnout, and mental and physical health problems. When stress becomes chronic, the body cannot return to normal functioning.

Chronic stress can be linked with health conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression and anxiety.

Stress affects women and men differently. Many conditions associated with stress — such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety — are more common in women than men.

Beyond sex and gender differences, there are individual differences, too. Some people are more resilient than others. Stress affects them less or more temporarily, and they might even perform better under stress. “There’s a saying, ‘It’s not how far you fall; it’s how high you bounce.’ For those of us who don’t bounce back so easily, there’s good news. Resilience, to some extent, can be learned and there are some simple, practical things that people can do that may make a noticeable difference,” says Dr. Janine Austin Clayton, Director of the NIH Office of Research on Women’s Health. Clayton explains that some resilient people might also develop a greater appreciation for their lives, family, friends or other matters after stress. Stress management and resilience building are particularly important to the health of women. Here are several tips to help women as well as men:

1. **Recognize and counter signs of stress.** Your body sends signals that it’s stressed, including difficulty concentrating, headaches, cold hands, tight muscles, a nervous stomach, clenched teeth, feeling on edge, fidgety, irritable or withdrawn. Knowing how your body communicates can help you deal with stressful moments. Learn to not only recognize but also to name these feelings, either to oneself or to a friend. Then, take action to counter their effects. For example, deep breathing, stretching, going for a walk, writing down your thoughts and taking quiet time to focus can help induce relaxation and reduce tension.
2. **Take time for yourself.** Make taking care of yourself a daily routine. It’s not selfish or self-indulgent — and it might require saying “no” to requests or prioritizing yourself along with your responsibilities. Start with small changes in your routine to help build resilience to stressful circumstances. Work in time to exercise, eat healthy foods, participate in relaxing activities and sleep. In fact, including a regimen of exercise, which for some may include yoga or meditation, can be very important when feeling stressed. Also, take time to notice the “good minutes” in each day or to do something that you enjoy, such as reading a book or listening to music, which can be a way to shift your attention and focus on the positive rather than the negative.
3. **Try new routines.** From scheduling bath and bedtimes to blocking off time to plan and prioritize tasks, additional structure can provide a daily framework that allows you to

attune to your body's signals. Then, you can take steps to potentially manage stress earlier than you once did.

4. **Stay connected and make new friends.** Stay in touch with family, friends and groups in your life — technology makes this easier than ever. Having or being a person to talk with can be reassuring and calming. Using video features can enhance the connection in telecommunication or online communications for some people.
5. **See problems through a different lens.** Experts call changing the way we think about and respond to stress “reframing.” View sitting in traffic or around the house as an opportunity to enjoy music, podcasts or pleasant views. Reduce anger in response to rude or aggressive behavior by imagining what might be happening in that person's life. Keeping situations in perspective is an important way to boost stress resilience. Other steps include positive thinking and creating plans before you begin to resolve problems. You can practice reframing and get better at it over time.
6. **Seek help with problems.** Many people experience the same day-to-day strains related to caregiving, relationships, health, work and money. Look to friends and family, as appropriate, or other trusted individuals or resources for tips and information.
7. **Talk to a health professional if stress is affecting your well-being, you feel you cannot manage the stress you're experiencing, or stress has caused you to engage in or increase substance use.** Seek appropriate care if stress is harming your relationships or ability to work. If you have suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). Lifeline chat is a service available to everyone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In addition, if you need help locating a mental health provider, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers a site that can assist you at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>. People who have experienced traumatic stress (directly or indirectly experiencing life-threatening and dangerous events) should find a treatment provider who practices trauma informed care — see <https://go.usa.gov/xvydm> for details. Additionally, in times of disasters and other sorts of emergencies, the National Disaster Distress Helpline (Call 1-800-985-5990 or text “TALKWITHUS” to 66746) can provide crisis counseling, emotional support and referrals to care related to disasters and public health emergencies.

Recognizing individual signals of a body's stress responses and learning to respond to those signals in new ways can help build the emotional, intellectual and physical strength that comprise resilience, which can help you tackle future stressors.

The NIH supports research to understand how stress affects health — and why some are resilient to stress while others have difficulties, as well as how different therapies and

resilience-boosting techniques work and have a positive effect on health and well-being. The NIH Office of Research on Women's Health offers links to information about stress (including anxiety about the coronavirus), wellness, tips on managing common sources of stress, and opportunities to join research projects on stress or other health matters at <https://go.usa.gov/xvydm>.