

Healthy Choices to Relieve Stress

For many people, chronic stress is a part of their daily lives. Carrying around this ongoing stress is not healthy, and it can impact your daily life.

“That stress can build up in you and then come out unexpectedly. Next thing you know you could be taking it out on people that haven’t really done anything wrong. You overreact because you have those feelings inside of you. And then they just come out, and they kind of erupt when you don’t intend.”

Exercise is something firefighter Zach Zimmer uses to relieve stress. He leads the department’s peer fitness team and organizes weekly workouts to help his colleagues stay healthy.

“Sometimes I don’t want to talk about things, but I still need to blow off the steam. For me, I choose exercise. I just, I enjoy it. And when I am feeling stressed out, feeling frustrated, and I usually have a bit more energy and it’s a great opportunity for me to get rid of that in a constructive way.”

“Also, engaging in exercise is something that the individual has control of. They choose to exercise. It’s not like an external pressure or obligation that’s acting on them.”

Creating healthy habits in your life can help you cope more effectively when stressful situations arise and reduce the symptoms of chronic stress.

“If we practice healthy strategies to identify and cope with our responses to stress, we will be more efficient and effective in coping with future stressors. For example, if we don’t get enough sleep, the simple answer is we will be worn down. We’re not going to have the resources to be able to cope effectively with continued stressors.”

On average, adults need 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night. Not getting enough sleep can make you more vulnerable to stress. Prolonged stress can wear down your body, putting you at a higher risk of becoming sick or developing other stress-related health problems. Eating healthier, in addition to exercise and getting enough sleep, can also help lower this risk.

“I think it’s important for us to eat well and exercise to help take care of our bodies so that we can not only enjoy life now, but we can enjoy life long into retirement.”

Not following a healthy diet can contribute to weight gain, health issues, and can make stress worse. Your body will function better and be more resistant to the effects of stress if you get good nutrition. Along with making healthy lifestyle choices, it’s important to take time for yourself. Hobbies are a good way to do that. For Christopher Wojnar, it’s playing the guitar.

“I like to play music. I like to play guitar. I think music has been a great, a great tool for handling. So that is something that helps me kind of stay balanced.”

“Engage in something that you enjoy doing whether it’s playing a musical instrument, doing a crossword puzzle or a jigsaw puzzle, sewing a quilt. People who are researching a form of psychology called positive psychology call this ‘being in the flow.’ You are absorbed in something that you enjoy, and you’re not worrying about the external stressors in your life.”

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“You know, what I love to do the most at home for stress is just sit there and play with my daughter. Kick the soccer ball around. She loves doing that and when she’s laughing, then it makes me feel really good inside and then that stress about, you know, whatever at work or the stress of all the bills, you know, that all goes away for a while.”

In addition to adding healthy habits and taking time for yourself, it’s important to look for and eliminate any unhealthy coping habits you may have.

“There are effective coping strategies for response to stress and there are ineffective, damaging coping strategies such as drinking, smoking, using drugs, overeating, gambling. These are not going to address the real cause of the problem. They may prove to be a distraction for a while, a negative distraction, but ultimately, they compound the problem and make things more difficult. And also bring in negative factors of their own.”

It may also help to cut back on things that can aggravate stress or cause other health problems, such as excessive caffeine and smoking. Caffeine is a mild stimulant that can aggravate stress, and smoking carries serious health risks, so it’s not a healthy way to cope with stress. In general, using any substance to reduce stress is not the best approach and may increase risk for other problems.

Stress is a chronic problem in today’s fast-paced world, but if you take active steps to live a healthy, balanced life, it can improve your mental and physical health.