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## 9 Ways to Cope with Stressful Situations

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Giving a presentation, going through a breakup, losing a loved one—everybody experiences a stressful life event at one point or another. “You know the saying that only two things in life are universal: death and taxes? Well, it’s actually *stress*, death, and taxes,” says Josh Briley, Ph.D., a Texas-based licensed clinical psychologist and fellow of the American Institute of Stress.

In some cases, the source of that stress can be positive—like a graduation party, wedding, or job promotion. “But your body still responds in a stressful manner,” Briley says. “There’s still a lot to do, and it feels like there’s not enough time to do it.”

The good news? Acknowledging what you’re feeling is the first step toward coping with stress.

“Some people just keep plowing through, and that might present itself as a physical ailment. They might be suffering more headaches, or have pain somewhere, or they might be getting sick more often,” says [Allison Young, M.D.](#), a board-certified psychiatrist based in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, and adjunct professor of psychiatry at the NYU Grossman School of Medicine. “So, I think it’s a win for people when they’re able to say to themselves, ‘I’m feeling stressed.’”

From there, you can take steps to help you manage stress. Start with these strategies.

### 1. Take Things One Step at a Time

“One of the things stress does is make you feel like everything on your to-do list has to be done right this second. And really, it just doesn’t,” Briley says. It can help to break bigger problems into smaller tasks that are more easily accomplished.

“Ask yourself, ‘What can I control in this moment?’ and focus on that,” Briley says. “When you finish that, then go to the next thing.”

### 2. Press Pause

When it’s possible, taking a step back from what’s stressing you out can have a big impact. “Take a break, go get some water, or go to the bathroom and wash your hands, and then take a few slow, deep breaths to get some more oxygen into your body,” recommends Briley. “That will give you a very rapid relaxation experience and just help reduce the stress level a little. And sometimes that’s all you need to keep from feeling completely overwhelmed.”

### 3. Go for a Walk Outdoors

[Many studies](#) show that exercise can be an effective way to manage stress. It doesn’t have to be vigorous; research suggests that even a 30-minute walk can have lasting calming effects.

And it’s a good idea to head for your favorite park or other outdoor space. [Research also suggests](#) that exercising while spending time in nature can have extra mood-boosting benefits.

“Take a nice relaxing walk. Look at the trees, look at the clouds, and give yourself 30 minutes to decompress,” Briley says.

### 4. Prioritize Sleep

When we’re feeling stressed, sleep is one of the first things to go by the wayside, Briley says. [Researchers say](#) that stress can make it harder to fall asleep and stay asleep.

Incorporating relaxation techniques like deep breathing and meditation into your nighttime routine can help you wind down. Practicing good sleep hygiene is also key:

- Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day—even on weekends.
- Establish a consistent bedtime routine to signal to your body that it’s time to sleep.
- Create a restful environment by keeping the bedroom cool, dark, quiet, and free of electronic devices.

### 5. Consider Your Eating Habits

Stress eaters, you’re not alone. For many, tough times can lead to poorer eating habits and dietary choices.

However, [research suggests](#) that what you eat can have an impact on your mood and affect how you cope with stress: A diet high in saturated and monounsaturated fats, for example, has been connected with mood disorders, such as depression. Aim to eat a healthful diet focused on fruit, vegetables, whole grains, healthy proteins, and unsaturated fats—similar to a [Mediterranean diet](#).

And while some people find that their appetites suffer when they're stressed, it's important not to skip meals. Skipping meals has been associated with **feeling sluggish, stressed, and cranky** and with **poor mental health**.

"You don't have to make a home-cooked meal," Briley says. "Just reach for something healthy that feeds your body and gives you energy."

## 6. Meditate

Meditation is well established as an effective stress management technique. And it's easier than you may think, notes Briley. The **American Psychological Association** recommends this approach:

- Set aside five minutes to sit in a quiet place and breathe. (You can set a timer if that helps prevent you from the distraction of looking at the clock.)
- Focus on the present moment.
- If your mind wanders, acknowledge the stray thoughts, let them go, and bring yourself back to the present.

You can also try one of our **guided audio meditations**.

## 7. Practice Self-Care

As you're going through a stressful life event, ask yourself what you might find soothing. Here are some suggestions that have worked for others:

- Spending time in nature
- Drinking a cup of tea
- Getting a massage
- Watching a movie
- Meeting up with friends

It's important to prioritize self-care. "Setting aside time to do things that feel restorative to you will definitely be helpful when you're going through stress," Young says.

## 8. Open Up to Loved Ones

Find a trusted friend or family member you can talk to when you're feeling overwhelmed. "As you're talking and trying to organize your thoughts enough to communicate what you're going through to somebody, it helps you make sense of it," explains Briley. "And all of a sudden, a way to deal with it, or that answer you've been trying to figure out, may suddenly reveal itself."

In fact, research suggests that social support can boost resilience to stress.

If there's no one you can talk to when you need to, try writing down your feelings. "Setting aside time to journal can help you process what you're going through," Young says.

## 9. Seek Professional Help

If stress is impeding your ability to function day to day, it might be time to turn to a professional. We often think we need an significant problem, like depression or anxiety, to justify seeing a therapist, explains Young. "But it's better not to let it get to that point."

If you feel like you're having a hard time managing a stressful situation, and if you're physically and financially able to access professional help, talking to someone about managing your stress can prevent it from becoming a larger problem.

And help might be more attainable than you think. Some health insurance plans cover therapy, and some providers offer sessions at reduced rates on a sliding scale.

If office appointments don't work with your schedule, you might consider teletherapy, which is more common than ever.

## How to Add Stress Management to Your Day

When life feels overwhelming, it's easy to allow self-care to take a back seat. But taking even just a few minutes a day to actively manage stress can help you through a tough or stressful time.

"It doesn't matter how busy you are; you can stop for 30 seconds and just focus on your breathing—and that is a much more powerful tool than we realize," Briley says.

While this might seem daunting at first, stress management can become a habit with lasting effects.

According to Young, it's about prioritization. "We don't have time to do everything we want to in a day, and we prioritize the things that we think are most important," she says. "And so, sometimes it's just reframing how important that self-care is."

One good way to initiate and foster stress management skills is to start practicing them *before* a big stressful life event occurs. "It's hard to start new habits when you're going through a stressor," Young says. "Start healthy habits when you're not in a stressor, because those things will carry over and help you so much when you are."

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