



## Take time to unwind...

It's healthy to relax, renew, and rejuvenate

### Combat your stress

If you suffer from chronic stress and can't influence or change the situation, then you'll need to change your approach. Be willing to be flexible. Remember, you have the ability to choose your response to stressors, and you may have to try various options.

- Recognize when you don't have control, and let it go. Don't get anxious about situations that you cannot change.
- Take control of your own reactions and focus on what makes you feel calm and in control. This may take some practice, but it pays off in terms of your peace of mind.
- Develop a vision for healthy living, wellness, and personal/professional growth. Then, set realistic goals to help you realize your vision.

### Relax and recharge

Be sure to make time for fun and relaxation so you'll be better able to handle life's stressors. Carve some time out of your day—even if it's just 10 to 15 minutes—to take care of yourself. Also, remember that exercise is an excellent stress reliever.

Everyone has different ways of relaxing and unwinding. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Go for a walk or run
- Read a book
- Take a bike ride
- Visit a natural setting, like a park or nature preserve
- Have a cup of tea
- Play a sport
- Spend time with a friend or loved one
- Do some simple stretching exercises
- Meditate (learn how at [VAWIN.foh.hhs.gov/stress](http://VAWIN.foh.hhs.gov/stress))
- Do yoga

While you can't avoid stress, you can minimize it by changing how you choose to respond to it. The ultimate reward for your efforts is a healthy, balanced life with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun.

**Stress happens. Sometimes it's unavoidable—at times it's unbearable—and that's why taking time for yourself is indispensable.**

### Feeling overwhelmed?

If you're feeling overwhelmed by the stress in your life, you can contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for support. The EAP offers short-term counseling that can help you and your family members deal with many of life's challenges, including work, family, personal matters, and legal and financial issues. Check your agency's intranet or speak to someone in your HR department for your EAP's contact information.

Learn about some signs that stress may be getting out of control on page two.



# Stress Awareness

Being aware of your stress is the first step to overcoming it

Stress does not merely trouble your mind; it can also affect you on a cellular level. In fact, long-term stress can lead to a wide range of illnesses—from headaches, to stomach disorders, to depression—and can even increase the risk of serious conditions, including stroke and heart disease.

## The fight or flight response

Understanding the connection between the mind, stress, and the body can help you better manage stress and improve your health and well-being. The sympathetic stress response is a survival mechanism that's "hard wired" into our nervous systems. This automatic response is necessary for mobilizing quick reflexes when there is imminent danger—such as swerving to avoid a collision with another car.

When you perceive a threat, stress hormones rush into your bloodstream—increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and glucose levels. Other hormones triggered by stress can suppress functions such as digestion and the immune response, which is one of the reasons why chronic stress can leave you more vulnerable to illness.

Danger triggers the stress reaction—unfortunately, so can work conflicts, concern over debt, bad memories, or anxiety. Although one bad day at work won't compromise your health, weeks or months of stress can dampen your immune response and raise your risk for illness.

## When to seek professional help

If you continue to suffer from the effects of stress and feel overwhelmed by it, you should contact a professional. Here are some red flags to look out for:

- Inability to sleep
- Frequently feeling down, hopeless, or helpless
- Problems with your ability to concentrate that interfere with work or home life
- Using alcohol, drugs, food, or other tactics to cope with stress or difficult emotions
- Negative or self-destructive thoughts or fears that you can't control\*
- Thoughts of death or suicide\*

*\*Having self-destructive behavior or thoughts, especially suicidal ones, is a symptom that needs immediate attention. If you experience such feelings and feel that you need help, call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's toll-free number, which is available 24/7: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You may call for yourself or for someone you care about. All calls are confidential.*

Learn some great tips and remedies for combatting stress on page one of this publication.



# Set Your Course for Success

Making a change in your life takes determination and consistent effort; it doesn't happen overnight. Personal change is often like a voyage and—like a sailor—you need to decide on your destination and set your course.



Like any journey, you must then keep yourself oriented and make adjustments along the way to get to your destination as directly as possible.

## BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR DESTINATION

Think about your goal, and about what it would mean to meet it. Having a clear mental picture of what success looks like can help you recognize that a goal is achievable. This is highly motivating.

You can write your thoughts down, you can make a drawing of your completed goal, or you can use photos or illustrations from magazines to construct a visual reminder of how success will look. A reminder can help keep you inspired.

## SET YOUR COURSE

Break down your main goal into the logical steps it will take to get there. For example, if the goal is to be

more physically active, you might take these steps:

1. I will check with my doctor to see if there are any restrictions or cautions I should be aware of in order to begin a daily combined cardio and strength training regimen.
2. I will begin with 2 sessions of brisk walking for at least 10 minutes (for a total of at least 20 minutes each day) for the first two weeks.
3. I will walk briskly for 30 minutes every morning and do 15 minutes of strength training every other day for the next three weeks.
4. I will jog or cycle or do some other cardio workout for 30 minutes every morning and add 10 more minutes to my strength training routine.

By setting short-term goals, those many “**little victories**” can help spur you on to reaching your ultimate goal. Remember to celebrate these victories.

## TRACK YOUR PROGRESS

Keep a chart of what you've accomplished. Think of ways that you can measure your success; for example, record the number of times you've finished your reports early or chart how much weight you've lifted at the gym. Tracking your progress is highly motivating and reinforces positive new habits.

## ADJUST YOUR COURSE AS NEEDED

Sailors need to reorient themselves as they travel and then replot their courses accordingly. This ensures that they stay on course despite changes in wind direction, currents, or foul weather. You need to do this when you're changing a habit, too. Check on your goals from time to time, and figure out where you are actually headed. If you find that you've veered off course, just make the necessary adjustments without judging yourself harshly. Even the best sailors make many adjustments as they sail to their destinations; why shouldn't you?

# De-Stress at Your Desk

We often cannot control the amount of external stress we experience. What we can control is our internal reaction to it. Being able to minimize your reaction can help keep your mind and body healthy.

Most people can benefit from “down-time”—those times when you are able to recharge and renew. Even something as simple as a few moments of silence and some deep breathing can help revitalize you and give you a more positive outlook. Here are some ways to refresh yourself at your desk during break time.

## Deep breathing

This technique helps you relax and rejuvenate by unplugging you from the “flight or fight” stress response.

- Consciously slow your breathing.
  - Focus on slowly taking deep, regular breaths that get progressively longer and fuller.
  - Visualize each breath filling your body with positive energy.
- You can continue this exercise for five to ten minutes.

## Progressive relaxation

For this relaxation method, focus on tightening each muscle group and then allow it to relax.

- Start at your toes and progress up your body—don't forget your face muscles.
- Tighten, then release each muscle group as you work your way up your body. (Tightening and releasing the muscles allows the blood to rush in when the muscles are in the relaxed state.)
- Once you've finished relaxing the muscles, stay in this calm and comfortable state for three to five minutes—or longer, if you have the time.

## Visualization

This technique helps you relax and focus on pleasant images to replace negative or stressful feelings.

- Relax as much as possible. (You can use either of the two techniques above to help you.)

- In your mind, clearly picture a place that brings you peace—an ocean, a river, a rainforest, etc.—and take a mental vacation to this getaway spot.

## Positive affirmations

Positive affirmations are statements that reprogram negative thinking patterns. Repeat a positive statement internally to counteract a negative thought:

- If you're feeling tired, you may want to affirm “I am healthy and strong.”
- If you're worried about a hectic work schedule, a good affirmation is “I accomplish things easily and effortlessly” or “I can handle anything that comes my way.”

## Taking Care

Deep relaxation is an important part of the health puzzle. Both your body and your mind need it to repair and renew.

