

## Monthly Health Challenge™

# Lower Your Stress



**CHALLENGE**  
Do at least one stress-relieving activity every day.

## Requirements to Complete this HEALTH CHALLENGE™

1. Read "High Stress, High Risks" and "Easy Ways to Reduce Your Stress Load."
2. To complete the Challenge, you must do at least one stress-relieving activity every day.
3. Keep records of your completed Challenge in case your organization requires documentation.

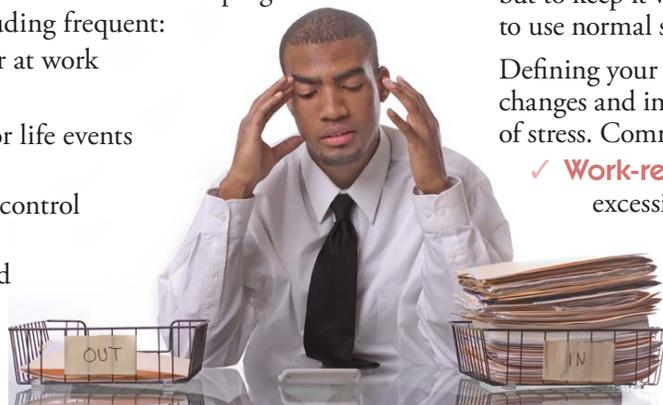
## High Stress, High Risks

For most people, life is a daily routine of making a living, raising a family, solving problems, paying bills, taking care of physical needs, and being productive. Some stress can be beneficial. It motivates and helps you adapt and perform your best. Life is generally positive, active, and rewarding, most of the time.

But if stress becomes excessive and chronic, it can erode both physical and mental health. Frequent high levels of stress contribute to common health problems such as depression, high blood pressure, headaches, poor sleep, decreased immunity, and increased susceptibility to health problems including heart attacks.

In the large INTERHEALTH study, which included nearly 25,000 people, researchers studied the effect of stress on heart health. They found several sources of stress associated with increased risk of developing a heart attack, including frequent:

- Stress at home or at work
- Financial stress
- Stress from major life events (e.g., divorce)
- Feeling a loss of control over one's life
- Feeling depressed



Stress is hard to define because it means different things to different people. However, stress is generally a negative feeling rather than a positive feeling.

In the INTERHEALTH study, stress was defined as feeling irritable, being filled with anxiety, or having sleeping difficulties as a result of conditions in work life, home life, etc. The researchers estimated that stress significantly contributed to one-third of all heart attacks in the study.

Many people watch television, listen to music, or read to escape from high stress levels. Others don't cope as well and develop poor health behaviors such as smoking, overeating, drinking, using drugs, skipping meals, and not sleeping. These stress-related behaviors exert a negative outcome on health and longevity.

### Signs of Distress

Stress becomes harmful when it is continual, overwhelming, and affects your ability to function normally, such as when:

- You have sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, or want to eat all the time.
- You can't quit thinking about your problems.
- You become nonproductive and just give up.
- Your health is negatively affected, resulting in frequent headaches, backaches, digestive disturbances, fatigue, nervousness and anxiety, high blood pressure, or depression.
- You have problems with your relationships.

## Identify Your Stressor

Anything can make you feel stressed, even something that could be considered "good." It's your reaction that matters. Because of this, your goal should not be to eliminate stress, but to keep it within manageable limits – and even to learn to use normal stressors to your advantage.

Defining your problem is the first step toward making changes and improvements. Identify your major source(s) of stress. Common sources of stress include:

- ✓ **Work-related events:** coworker/boss conflicts, excessive work load, work surroundings, noise, deadlines, lack of knowledge or skills to do your job



- ✓ **Home life:** home duties, small children, teens, caring for an aging parent, major family conflict
- ✓ **Major life events:** loss of a loved one, change in marital status, birth of a child, moving, loss of a job, going to court, abuse
- ✓ **Personal/emotional issues:** loneliness, depression, worries, anger, low self-esteem, weight gain, other frustrations
- ✓ **Financial stress:** money issues (a major source of conflict), divorce, and other stressors.
- ✓ **A serious health problem:** asthma, allergies, arthritis, heart problem, cancer, diabetes
- ✓ **Addiction:** using drugs, drinking, gambling, and more
- ✓ **Other problems or situations:** anything that causes you distress

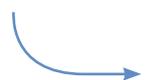
It's good to write down what is bothering you. Review your list and identify the stressor you want to eliminate first. Then explore possible solutions. List as many solutions as you can think of (and get help in finding solutions if needed), evaluate the list of solutions, and choose the one you think will work the best for you.

Next, put the solution into action. Give it time to work. You may need to fine-tune some of the details as you go. If the solution you tried doesn't work, pick another solution and try again. Get help if needed from caring and understanding friends, your employer, a mental health professional, health coach, minister, or doctor.

## Easy Ways to Reduce Your Stress Load

When you start feeling stressed out, you need to take action to break the stress cycle. Take a break, get away from the problem long enough to figure out what to do, and calm yourself by practicing a relaxation technique. Here are some proven stress reducers:

- **Breathe deeply.** Take 10 breaths of fresh outdoor air.
- **Be physically active daily.** Exercise moderately if you are just starting an exercise program – more vigorously if you are accustomed to exercising. Regular physical activity not only helps relieve stress but it also builds your physical and mental health so stress doesn't harm you as much. Research also shows that fit people tend to be happier.
- **Have a change of pace.** If you've been resting, do something active. If you've been working hard physically, do something restful.
- **Learn to communicate better with your family and coworkers.** Listen to what others say. Consider all the alternatives. Give clear, assertive (but not aggressive) statements about what you need to accomplish your job or improve working relationships. Avoid blaming people or name calling. It hinders communication. Be realistic and willing to compromise if necessary to solve a conflict or problem.
- **Do something you enjoy.** Read a book, take a bath, listen to relaxing music, watch a funny movie, do a crossword puzzle (only if you enjoy it, not if it drives you nuts), garden, go fishing, go to a concert, get a massage, play with your children or grandkids, volunteer to help someone, sing, paint a picture, or simply take a nap. Remind yourself that it's OK to relax and enjoy life.
- **Be positive and optimistic.** Expect the best, not the worst. If you stay positive and hopeful, you're more likely to persist and achieve your goal.
- **Loosen your jaw.** A lot of stressed people clench their teeth. So relax your jaw.
- **Lighten up.** It's easy to get into the habit of being overly critical and putting yourself down. But when you do, it makes you feel bad and increases your stress load. If you make a mistake, learn from it and move on. Congratulate yourself when you do something right. Accept that you are not perfect but that you are working to improve.
- **Take care of yourself.** You won't be able to cope well if you are tired and worn out all the time. Get adequate sleep – at least 7-8 hours every day. Don't skip meals. Most people cope poorly when they are hungry. Take time for at least one good, warm, sit-down meal every day.



- **Limit caffeine intake.** Caffeine raises the stress hormones and makes it difficult to relax and sleep. Also watch out for alcohol and drugs. They never solve a stress problem, but they certainly add to your stress load when you become dependant on them.
- **Take a mental vacation.** Picture yourself at your favorite place or doing your favorite activity.
- **Talk over a problem or concern** with a friend, your supervisor, or pastor. Just sharing a problem often brings relief, support, and courage to carry on.
- **Join a caring and supportive group.** If going through a crisis, look for a specific support group that can help, such as divorce recovery, alcohol recovery, bereavement, cancer support, or other specific need. Research shows that people who belong to supportive groups cope better with anxiety, stress, depression, and serious illnesses and crises in their lives.



- **Do neck exercises.** Turn your head left and right, forward and backward, and side to side – holding each for 6-7 seconds. Do not do neck rolls.
- **Limit demands.** Learn to say “no” if you need to, and to delegate and get help from family members and coworkers when needed. Set priorities. Divide large, difficult tasks into more easily completed sub-tasks. Don’t plan too many tasks for one day.
- **Live within a budget.** Over-spending, debt, and quarrels about money are common stressors that can be eased by careful budgeting, and living within your means.

- **Develop faith and trust.** When facing difficulty and problems, spiritual resources can be an important coping strategy. People tend to live longer and cope better if they participate regularly in faith groups that provide strength, comfort, and direction. Plan for a quiet time each day to read and meditate.
- **Get professional help if needed.** Whether it is a financial counselor for financial problems in your life, a family counselor to help with family problems, a dietitian to help with a weight problem, a fitness coach, a spiritual advisor, or a mental health professional – getting help is a healthy thing to do. It is not a sign of weakness.



Discover your stress level based on the Life Events Scale:  
[www.roadtowellbeing.ca/questionnaires/life-stressors.html](http://www.roadtowellbeing.ca/questionnaires/life-stressors.html)

*Sources:*

- Axmaker L and Hall DR. *WellAssured Guide to Stress Management and Emotional WellBeing.* Wellsource Press. 2008.
- Seaward BL. *Managing Stress, 4th Edition.* Jones and Bartlett Publishers: Boston. 2004.
- *National Institutes of Health.* 2008.
- *Mental Health America.* 2008.





[www.BlueHealthAdvantageNE.com](http://www.BlueHealthAdvantageNE.com)

