

Stressed out? Tips for taking control

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While part of everyday life, stress seems to intensify around the holidays and into the new year.

Resolutions lead to reflection, which often causes added [stress](#) to our thinking:

- "I spent too much."
- "I couldn't afford what my children wanted."
- "I didn't get to see my family."
- "I didn't have time to travel."
- "I was supposed to get in shape and lose weight."

Dr. Alan Gelenberg, chair of the Department of Psychiatry, Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, says the added pressure can take a physical, mental and emotional toll.

Outward signs of stress may include an increase in coping habits like picking skin, pulling hair, cracking knuckles, or chewing your lip.

Physical symptoms also are common including lower back or [shoulder pain](#) due to tension, fatigue, heartburn, constipation, abdominal cramps, [diarrhea](#), or [heart palpitations](#). Some people may be unable to sleep or sleep well.

"Different people will experience tension and stress in different parts of their body or mind," Gelenberg said. The mental and emotional side effects can be a concern as well if usual [coping strategies](#) like exercise,

talking to a friend, or taking the time to think things through are not working. If a person isn't getting out of bed, meeting daily responsibilities, going to or performing regular duties while at work, sustaining important relationships, or is considering [self harm](#), it's time to seek professional help starting with a [primary care](#) physician.

Gelenberg offered some practical advice for not allowing stress to get beyond your control:

- **Prioritize.** Take some time to reflect and decide what's important. Create reasonable goals and work on one at a time so you don't overwhelm yourself.
- **Don't deny it.** Some people prefer to over-schedule themselves or prefer to remain as busy as possible rather than face the problems in their marriage or mounting [credit card debt](#). The longer you avoid it, the worse it will be.
- **Ask for help, delegate.** If you have a problem that is beyond you, whether it be health related or economic, research your options and find out what kind of relief might be available. Seek help from a social worker, a counselor, your family, or your church. "When people take huge burdens on themselves alone, their knees will buckle at some point," Gelenberg said. "We're fragile. We're flesh and blood, and we can't just keep sustaining body blows."
- **Say no.** Some of us add stress when we pile on tasks and say 'yes' to too many others' requests. It's important to have reasonable expectations for yourself and practice saying 'no' to keep those expectations in check.
- **Exercise self-discipline.** Don't create a long to-do list for yourself and then sit on Facebook for hours at a time and get nothing done.
- **Sleep.** Taking care of yourself seems to drop to the bottom of the

list when stressed. When the stress mounts, people will shortchange themselves on sleep. Avoid high-intensity activities before going to bed. Practice good sleep hygiene and add time before bed to calm down to insure good quality sleep time.

- **Listen.** If a friend or family member expresses concern about your health or behavior, pay attention. They are trying to help.
- **Find what works for you.** Everyone has some level of anxiety and some of us are more anxious than others. If you have an anxious or depressive temperament, it's especially important to find ways to deal with stress. There are behavioral techniques, breathing exercises and muscle relaxation methods you can learn to reduce stress. In addition, learn what amount of sleep, alone time, exercise, etc. you require in order to lessen your anxiety.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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