

Tips for managing stress

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The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly disrupted everyone's lives, creating a lot of stress. You might not realize it, but that stress can affect your health. Frequent headaches, trouble sleeping, fatigue, muscle pains and an upset stomach are just a few of the symptoms that stress can cause in your life.

Everyone has a 'stressometer,' according to Dr. Craig Sawchuk, a Mayo Clinic psychologist. It's an indication from your body that stress is affecting your overall health.

"So one way that we think people experience stress is physically. So we may experience it in our stomach. Our sleep gets disrupted. We feel a lot more tense," says Dr. Sawchuk. "We can also see it emotionally, sometimes more of that irritability or sometimes even flattening of emotions. Sometimes we see it in terms of how we think, whether it be it's difficult to concentrate, we're worrying or ruminating more, or sometimes how we behave. Sometimes we tend to withdraw, or maybe our eating or drinking starts to pick up. So it's really important that we pay attention to our own stressometer."

If you're experiencing physical signs of stress, Dr. Sawchuk says relaxation techniques, such as meditation, focused breathing or massage, can help. Maintaining a good sleep routine and eating a healthy, balanced diet is important. Regular exercise also can be a stress reliever. And avoid tobacco use, excess caffeine and alcohol.

"If we're struggling with difficulties with our thinking, sometimes being able to journal the worries—writing them down in ways to challenge them to try to look at things more flexibly—can also be helpful, as well," says Dr. Sawchuk. "If we find that we're withdrawing more, then it's good, and it's important for us to pay attention to that and to set goals of reaching out to healthy others in our lives as well, too."

Recognizing how [stress](#) is affecting others and reaching out to them is important, too.

"So at least inviting in a conversation about that, making them aware of it, and not turning it into a fight or conflict. Just like: 'Hey, you know what, I've noticed that you've been acting this way. Have you been

noticing that, too?" says Dr. Sawchuk. "For many people, just even being aware of maybe acting in a particular kind of way or responding in a kind of way can actually help them start to make some adjustments and some changes on their own."

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