

Q and A: Reducing stress in the new year

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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I am a working mom of two teenagers. I have a career that requires long hours, and I struggle with juggling work and home responsibilities. I don't get to the gym as often as I'd like. I'm having more episodes of headache and struggling with sleep. I also realized I am coping with stress by eating more than normal. With the

new year, I'd like to find ways to improve my health and better manage my stress. Do you have any tips?

ANSWER: Your body is hardwired to react to stress in ways meant to protect you against threats from predators and other aggressors. Such threats are rare today, but that doesn't mean that life is free of stress. As you noted, work and general everyday triggers can cause stress. You likely face many demands each day, such as taking on a huge workload, paying the bills and taking care of your family. Your body treats these so-called minor hassles as threats. As a result, you may feel as if you're constantly under attack.

Chronic stress can wreak havoc on your mind and body. It's great that you are already thinking about how to control your stress. First, though, it's helpful to understand your body's natural stress response.

When you encounter a perceived threat—such as a large dog barking at you during your morning walk—your hypothalamus, a tiny region at your brain's base, sets off an alarm system in your body. Through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals, this system prompts your [adrenal glands](#), located atop your kidneys, to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your [blood pressure](#) and boosts energy supplies. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, increases sugars (glucose) in the bloodstream, enhances your brain's use of glucose and increases the availability of substances that repair tissues.

Cortisol also curbs functions that would be non-essential or harmful in a fight-or-flight situation. It alters [immune system responses](#) and suppresses the digestive system, the reproductive system and growth processes. This complex natural [alarm system](#) also communicates with the brain regions that control mood, motivation and fear.

The body's stress response system is usually self-limiting. Once a perceived threat has passed, [hormone levels](#) return to normal. As adrenaline and [cortisol levels](#) drop, your [heart rate](#) and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.

But when stressors are always present and you constantly feel under attack, that fight-or-flight reaction stays turned on.

The long-term activation of the stress response system and the overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones that follows can disrupt almost all of your body's processes. This puts you at increased risk of many health problems, including:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Headaches
- Muscle tension and pain
- Heart disease, heart attack, [high blood pressure](#) and stroke
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain
- Memory and concentration impairment

You already have recognized that there are better ways to cope with your life stressors, so congratulations for being open-minded.

While you may not be able to change your current situation, such as your demanding job, you can take steps to manage the impact of stress and stressful events. First, learn to identify what causes you stress and then identify ways to take care of yourself physically and emotionally in the face of stressful situations.

Some stress management strategies include:

- Eating a healthy diet. You mentioned overeating. Keep healthier snacks at the ready, such as cut-up fruits and vegetables versus bags of chips or cookies.
- Getting active. Schedule time to go to the gym and make it a part of your day that you commit to not scheduling over. Or skip the gym and take a walk after dinner together as a family. This can help you find time to connect and provide much-needed relaxation.
- Practicing relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, deep breathing, massage and meditation all may reduce stress symptoms.
- Keeping a journal. Writing about your thoughts or what you're grateful for in your life can be relaxing.
- Taking time for hobbies. Reading; listening to music; or watching your favorite show or movie, whether with friends, family or by yourself, can reduce feelings of stress.
- Finding humor. Having a sense of humor and finding ways to include laughter in your life, such as watching funny movies or looking at joke websites, can be quite cathartic.
- Organizing and prioritizing. Try organizing and prioritizing what you need to accomplish at home and at work. Remove tasks that aren't necessary. Talk to your loved ones about how they can aid you in meeting your demands.

Avoid unhealthy ways of managing your stress, such as using alcohol, tobacco or drugs. If you feel that you need more assistance, seek professional counseling, which can help you develop specific coping strategies to manage stress.

The rewards for learning to manage stress can include peace of mind, less [stress](#) and anxiety, a better quality of life, improvement in conditions

such as high blood pressure, better self-control and focus, and better relationships. And it might even lead to a longer, healthier life.

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