

Helping you live
well to learn well

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What is stress, exactly?

Stress is our automatic response to demands, pressures, and/or competing priorities in our life. And, not all stress is bad. A certain level of stress can motivate us and help us to get things done. But too much stress, or stress carried for too long, can activate our “fight or flight” response, which, if left unchecked, can leave us feeling exhausted, overwhelmed and even decrease our ability to function in one or more areas of life.

Because stress is a part of life, the goal isn’t to try to get rid of all stress. Rather, the goal is to learn to respond well to it. This means balancing your daily hassles and sporadic bigger stressors with regular health practices, stress management strategies and mental attitudes that replenish the physical, mental, and emotional energy naturally lost to stress. See “Tips” below.

Signs your stress is too high

Short-term stress is common for everyone. But when you can’t return to a relaxed, calm state, the sustained changes in your body – including increased heart rate, higher blood pressure, and muscle tension – can lead to mental and physical exhaustion, illness, and a decreased ability to function.

Emotional symptoms:

- Irritability
- Anxiety, fear, worry
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anger
- Sadness, crying
- Loss of pleasure in things once enjoyed
- Depression
- Hopelessness

Academic / cognitive symptoms:

- Difficulty retaining information read or heard
- Unwanted or repetitive thoughts
- Poor concentration
- Disorganization, forgetfulness
- Deterioration in quality or quantity of work

Physical symptoms:

- Muscle tension
- Stomach aches and digestive issues
- Sleep disturbances
- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Headaches
- Vague aches and pains
- Significant appetite or weight changes
- Heart palpitations
- Frequent illness

Stress Continuum



Moderate stress can motivate us to perform at our best. But too much stress can lead to burnout, exhaustion, and a decreased ability to function. (Cornell Health’s Stress Continuum is an adaptation of the Yerkes-Dodson law, a psychological principle describing the relationship between stress and performance.)

Tips for managing stress

No one can eliminate stress entirely, but we can learn to manage it better. How you think about and respond to daily situations along with regular inclusion of health-promoting practices determines whether you find stressful situations overwhelming or manageable. Here are a few tips to help keep stress in check:

Take care of yourself: Prioritize sleep. Eat nutritious food each day. Get some exercise. Improving these health habits alone can go a long way to mitigating your stress.

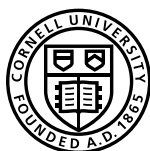
Connect with others: Those with strong social support networks (friends, family, teammates, etc.) report less stress and overall higher levels of mental health and well-being.

Improve your time management skills: Cornell’s Learning Strategies Center (lsc.cornell.edu) is an excellent resource for learning to be more organized and efficient with the time you have every week. Be sure to speak with your professors if you need extra help, or anticipate difficulty meeting deadlines.

Refuse to play the stress game: Sometimes Cornellians wear busyness like a badge of honor, and compete with each other about who’s more stressed. Remember that stress carried for too long diminishes your quality of life, so aspire to be organized and include breaks for fun and connection in your time management plan.

Let go of perfectionism: Cornell students have extremely high standards for themselves. But no one hits it out of the ballpark every time. Treat yourself with kindness and compassion, as you

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would with a friend. Remember: a mistake or failure can be your best teacher if you let it.

Cultivate resilience: Building resilience can help you bounce back from stress and challenges with minimal emotional upset. Engage in positive self-talk and expressions of gratitude daily; and ask for help when needed. Visit health.cornell.edu/resilience.

Keep things in perspective: Ask yourself – what’s the worst thing that could happen? And what is the *likelihood* of that happening? Remember, no matter how bad (or good) things are right now, they will change.

Reframe: Stop negative self-talk, and give yourself some credit for your abilities and accomplishments. See mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow. Overcoming the fear of failure is only accomplished by doing things you fear over and over again, resolving to bounce back, and learning throughout the process.

Learn to meditate: Meditation has numerous proven physical and mental health benefits, including reducing reactivity to stressors and helping to put things back in perspective. You can learn to meditate through Cornell’s free Let’s Mediate program or through our online resources: visit health.cornell.edu/meditate.

Get out in nature: Research shows that spending even short periods of time in nature can improve memory and ability to concentrate, as well as reduce overall stress and improve your sense of well-being.

5-minute stress busters

Deep breathing: Take slow, deep breaths through your nose – filling up your whole chest – and exhale slowly through your mouth. Try to make your exhale longer than your inhale.

Progressive muscle relaxation: Starting with your toes and working your way up to your head, slowly tighten ... hold ... and then relax your muscle groups (feet, legs, buttocks, abdomen, shoulders, arms, hands, face). This type of body scan exercise is also great for helping you fall asleep.

Mini-meditation: Even two-five minutes of meditation can calm your mind and help you feel more focused and relaxed. Learn how on our Meditation page: health.cornell.edu/meditate.

Visualization: Mentally rehearse a task you want to master. Imagine yourself acing the task (taking an exam, having an important conversation). Now, focus on how your success feels (excited, relieved, satisfied, smart). Re-visit this feeling often.

Change of scenery: Get up and take a short walk from your study spot. Mindfully notice the details of the environment you’re in. Or take the longer route to class to take in a few extra minutes of nature.

Let it out: Laugh with a friend. Do 20 jumping jacks. Choose a song from your favorite playlist and sing out loud or dance with abandon.

When to get help

If you’re having trouble managing your stress, and find that it’s impacting your quality of life and ability to function, we can help.

Schedule an appointment with a Cornell Health medical or mental health provider: health.cornell.edu/appointments.

Or stop by Let’s Talk – available Monday-Friday at various campus locations – to consult informally with a Cornell Health counselor either in-person or via Zoom: health.cornell.edu/LetsTalk.

More resources for support are available on our website (health.cornell.edu) and on the Mental Health at Cornell website (mentalhealth.cornell.edu).