

## Stress Is Gonna Get You If You Don't Watch Out

Is stress getting to you? Here are some clues research gives us about stress and the characteristics of good stress managers.

**What is Stress?** It's real. Stress is a reaction in our bodies that can be measured.

When we're under stress, many changes occur. Some of the most important are:

- a rise in our blood pressure
- our hearts beat faster
- we breathe faster
- adrenalin is produced
- blood and blood sugar are pumped
- out to our fingers and toes

Our body's response to stress is always the same. Whenever we feel threatened, our body does its very best to prepare us to fight or run away from something dangerous. Our ancestors survived because the stress reaction helped them escape from tigers and other grisly beasts.

**Stress can be good.** The right amount of stress helps us get revved up to meet deadlines. We can feel ourselves working at our peak performance level. Stress is gonna get you if you don't watch out!

**Stress is harmful when our body gets "clogged up" with "stress toxins."** Unless those "toxins" that stress produces are drained from our body through either exercise — as would be the case if we were escaping from some grisly beast — or through deep relaxation, we will end up with that leftover "junk" in our body, and that can make us vulnerable to a host of stress-related illnesses — including high blood pressure, ulcers, heart attack, and diabetes.

Prolonged, unmanaged stress can cause serious health problems, but an equal concern is the way stress affects our minds.

**Too much stress muddles our minds.** It literally "messes up our minds" to the place that we get tunnel vision. Historically, that was very useful when we needed to make a quick escape. It allowed us to focus on our escape route without being bothered by a lot of clutter in the environment.

**But today, too much stress robs us of the ability to explore alternatives and seek options that we need in order to solve complex problems.** When we're under stress, we're less able to provide the love and support our families need from us. We become paranoid — and think people are acting difficult just to spite us.



**What causes our stress?** We do! Our perceptions of events cause us to become stressed. If you're waiting in line at the grocery store, and someone comes up and rams you with his/her cart, you're likely to get irritated and stressed. But, if you turn around and discover that the person who rammed you is your exuberant 3-year-old niece, who is rushing to surprise you, you'll probably perceive that as fun and pleasant.



**Our perceptions cause our stress.** It's our perception of the event, and not the event itself that causes our stress. What causes you stress may not even faze me — and vice versa.

**Fairly minor things** — like having the washing machine break down the same day Mom gets the flu — can pile up to become significant family stressors. The higher the number of stressful events or pileups a family has, the lower its level of coping resources.

**One of the greatest problems for families with many pileups is their inability to deal with anger.** When stress mounts, members lose the tolerance that helped them deal with problems when their stress pile was lower.

This is where your kitchen timer can come in handy. When you realize your family is getting involved in a heated argument, ask for a “time out.” Set the timer for ten minutes.

Have everyone agree not to talk with any people involved in the argument for the next ten minutes. Run around the block several times, and then come back and continue your discussion. Two precautions:

1. Try to suggest this idea before you become angry — maybe talk about it at the dinner table some evening.
2. Initially, try the technique on some unimportant argument where there really isn't a lot at stake.

### **What are the most important ways to manage stress?**

1. **Exercise vigorously.** It's important to get the kind of regular, vigorous exercise that your doctor approves of. Every once in awhile, you'll hear someone say that we have such a high rate of stress-related illness in our society today because we have so much more stress to deal with, but there are researchers who believe that we aren't dealing with any more stress than our ancestors did. They believe that the high rates of stress-related illness happen because our lifestyle doesn't include the vigorous exercise that earlier generations automatically had. Exercise basically cancels out the effects of the stress reaction on our body by draining off the “stress toxins.”



2. **Relax regularly.** Another effective stress management technique is to use deep relaxation, which neutralizes the negative effects of stress. Practice the relaxation response for about 20 minutes a day in a comfortable position. Chant a one syllable word like “one” or “peace” to yourself.

3. **Realize that your attitudes and perceptions play a key role in managing stress.** People most resistant to the negative effects of long-term stress:

- (1) view the necessity of change as a challenge rather than a threat,
- (2) feel they have control over their lives, and
- (3) like their work.



How we view what has happened apparently has a great deal to do with whether or not we can cope positively with a crisis. Do your best to focus on the silver lining — the good things that are happening and the good things that will come when you make it through your current challenge.



**4. Have realistic expectations.** One of the most helpful things we can do is figure out what is realistic for us to accomplish each day. Many of us create our own stress by setting our expectations way too high. Then, sooner or later that old stress monster will start creeping over us, whispering, “You’re not going to be able to meet that deadline” . . . “You can’t do it” . . . “You’re never going to get this job done.”

**5. Arrange your life so you feel in control.** You don’t have to be in control, you just need to feel in control of your schedule and your lifestyle.

**6. Build and maintain a working support network.** This is the system that supports you in times of need and makes you aware that you’re part of a bigger whole toward which you, too, have a responsibility. Support networks are particularly important when you’re under stress.

Remember that one of the problems caused by stress is tunnel vision — an inability to look at alternatives and options. Stress also makes you feel paranoid — that people are trying to get you or that they’re purposely being difficult just to aggravate you.

Share your perceptions with the important people in your life to see if you’re seeing things clearly. Ask them if they saw the situation the same way you did. Do they have ideas about what you can do about it?

**7. Spend time with your loved ones.** We know that strong families tend to spend time together often. Unfortunately, when families get under stress, a natural tendency is for individuals to go off on their own.

One of the healthiest things a family can do when under stress is to purposely plan to spend some time together, to go for a walk — even though it will initially feel unnatural and uncomfortable.



**8. Balance your commitment to your children...your job... your loved ones...yourself.** Either too much or too little emphasis on ourselves is unhealthy, but we can constantly search for that happy middle ground that is healthy for both ourselves and our families.

**9. Only you can determine the amount of stress that’s good for you.** The amount of stress you need to operate effectively, at your very best, is very personal. Figure out what is the best amount of stress for you, and then monitor it so that you don’t take on less or more than is healthy and productive for you.

Have a good month!

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Suggested citation: Nelson, P.T. (ed.) (2012). Stress is gonna get you if you don’t watch out! In Families Matter! A series for parents of school-aged youth. Newark, DE: Cooperative Extension, University of Delaware.



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