

# Achieving Optimal Health



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HEALTH AND  
UNDERSTANDING

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# STRESS

Everyone feels worried and anxious at various times in their lives. Each of us is different. Things that worry one person may not be such a big deal for another person. The fact is that it's normal to feel under pressure and experience tension. Pressure and tension can come from forgetting to do your homework or your parents arguing. It can be anything that makes you feel worried.

The good news is that you can learn to understand why you are stressed. You can develop positive ways to take care of yourself. There are lots of activities that help you unwind, relax and feel good all over. So don't worry, be happy!

Stress is the way a person reacts to change. Maybe you feel 'butterflies' in your stomach, or feel sad and frightened. Think about the times, or situations, when you feel this way. These situations that cause you stress are called stressors.

## Top 10 stressors

What makes you stressed?

1. Dad always yells at me for not finishing my homework.
2. I hate being teased at school for being short.
3. I'm too fat to be picked for the footy team.
4. I get nervous when I have tests.
5. I'm scared to make new friends.
6. Mum and Dad always argue too loudly.
7. My parents are getting a divorce.
8. My grandma died.
9. I'm too busy and I can't get everything done on time.
10. I hate my hair.

Add or subtract.

2.

$$\begin{array}{r} 18 \\ - 9 \\ \hline 9 \end{array}$$
$$\begin{array}{r} 8 \\ + 6 \\ \hline 14 \end{array}$$



## What does stress do to your body?

When a person feels stressed, the body releases the stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, to prepare the body to protect itself from danger. They make sure that the blood gets the signal to move quickly to the heart and other organs so that the body is ready to fight or run away. This is called the fight-or-flight response. It's a very quick reaction — the body doesn't know yet what to do, but it's ready to respond to the situation.

## Stress hormones can be damaging

You need stress hormones to help you survive, but long-term stress can be damaging to the body. It can lower the immune system and damage bones, organs and brain cells.

## Not enough stress hormones may be damaging

Cortisol is needed to keep the immune system healthy. If the body doesn't produce enough cortisol, it can lead to inflammation and autoimmune diseases (where the immune system attacks the body). Examples of autoimmune diseases are arthritis and multiple sclerosis.



Your body has an inbuilt immune system which works to keep out any harmful bacteria and viruses (germs). If any do manage to get inside your body, your immune system attacks and destroys them.



# Good stress, bad stress

Have you ever felt sick in your stomach during a test? Have you had days when you had so much homework that you couldn't get to sleep? Have you had a fight with your best friend? Have you worried so much about an argument that you ended up with a bad headache or stomach ache?

If so, then you know what it's like to feel short-term stress.

Signs of short-term stress might include:

- feeling worried or uncomfortable
- feeling angry, frustrated or scared
- stomach ache
- headache
- not being able to sleep
- feeling cranky and irritable
- not enjoying your food
- not being able to concentrate
- tense muscles, especially in the neck.

I get so stressed when I give a school talk, I shake.



However, not all short-term stress is bad for you. When you have to give a presentation in class, butterflies in your tummy or sweaty hands can help you get things done. The anxiety inspires you to prepare well. After you have finished the task, your body will calm down again and return to normal.

In the same way, once you have a chance to speak to your best friend, you can fix the problem and your stress will go away. If you ask your teacher for help with organising your homework and get some extra time to finish it, then the stress will slowly disappear. That is why it is called short-term stress. It lasts a short time, even though sometimes it comes back. Eventually, however, it will disappear.



## Long-term stress

Long-term stress is when the stressful feelings continue over time. This type of stress is not good for you – mentally or physically.

Sometimes, short-term stress turns into long-term stress. You may not feel well if your parents are fighting, if someone at home is ill, if things at school are not going well or if something makes you feel upset most of the time. That kind of stress can make you feel physically sick because you've had no chance to rest and recuperate.

This means that you may have even more physical signs of stress. You need to listen to your body's signals and learn healthy ways to handle long-term stress.

**Physical signs of long-term stress might include:**

- not feeling hungry or eating too much
- always feeling tired or too active
- not sleeping or sleeping too much
- nail biting
- hair twisting
- feeling sad, irritable, angry or in a panic
- headaches, stomach aches or neck pain
- crying a lot
- lack of concentration
- forgetfulness
- making silly mistakes
- being very disorganised
- nightmares.

**Hint: Avoid watching the news before you go to bed. Some of the stories might make you anxious and you won't sleep well. They might even give you nightmares. Read a funny book instead.**



### Hurry, hurry!

One of the greatest problems facing everyone today is that we need to do things in a hurry – lots of things. We need to learn new things all the time because technology is changing very quickly. Sometimes we can't keep up. This makes us feel stressed.

### Relax

You can't always avoid long-term stress, but there are ways to manage it. These include talking about your problem with a friend or adult, organising your time, not taking on too many activities at once, learning to relax, and making sure that you get enough exercise. Exercise can help you relax, get a good night's sleep and keep your body healthy.



# How to beat stress

All of us are different. Just because something works for one person doesn't mean it will definitely work for you. But we do know, from research, that physical activity helps most people to beat stress and feel better.

Physical activity releases the natural, feel-good chemicals in your body, called endorphins. These chemicals are stress fighters. They not only leave you feeling happy, but they block nerve impulses that carry information about pain to the brain. That means that exercise provides relief from the physical symptoms of stress.



**Go ride your bike.**



**Go for a run.**



**Try a team sport.**

## What if you're not into fitness?

There are many different ways to exercise. If you're not into dancing, running, jumping, bike riding or organised sport, there are other activities you can do.

Do some push-ups or leg kicks while you are watching TV. If you have a dog or a cat, spend time playing with them.

When you are doing a physical activity, your body flushes away the stress chemicals it produced during the fight-or-flight response. You will feel more relaxed and in a happier mood when you stop.

It doesn't matter whether you like team sports, tennis, skateboarding or riding your bike, it's important to get moving. Keep moving for at least one hour, every day.

A minimum of  
**1** hour of  
physical activity  
every day!