

# STAYWELL

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## COPING WITH STRESS

Everyone—adults, teens, and children—experience stress at times. Stress can be positive in helping people develop the skills they need to cope with and adapt to new situations throughout life. However, the beneficial aspects of stress diminish when it is severe enough to overwhelm a person's ability



to take care of himself/herself and family. Finding healthy ways to manage stress and receive the proper care and support can put problems in perspective and help feelings and symptoms of stress subside. Sometimes after experiencing a traumatic event that can be frightening—including personal or environmental disasters or being threatened with an assault—people have a strong and lingering stress reaction to the event. Strong emotions, jitters, sadness, or depression may all be part of a reaction to the stress of an overwhelming event.

### Common Reactions to a Stressful Event:

- Disbelief, shock, and numbness
- Feeling sad, frustrated, and helpless
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Feelings of guilt
- Anger, tension, and irritability
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Crying
- Reduced interest in usual activities
- Wanting to be alone
- Loss of appetite
- Increased eating and snacking
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Nightmares or bad memories
- Reoccurring thoughts of an event

- Headaches, back pains, and stomach problems
- Increased heart rate
- Difficulty breathing
- Smoking or use of alcohol or drugs

What individuals often overlook is that many reactions to a stressful incident can be enhanced or diminished by:

- Medications
- Supplements
- Poor diet
- Medical conditions such as diabetes

Often individuals suffer symptoms of depression, but the underlying problem may not be depression. A good example of this is diabetes. Symptoms of diabetes can include depression, low mood, lack of energy, irritability, and an inability to cope. All of these symptoms are the result of poor control of blood sugar.

When faced with stress, certain medications may cause emotional strain and enhance or diminish coping skills. Supplements can often have the same effect. People are often duped into thinking that "natural" means no side effects. The rule of thumb is this: if it is processed by humans, chances are it can have side effects.

## Stress and Nutrition

Diet plays a big role in coping with stress. The body becomes deficient in certain vitamins and minerals when an individual does not eat a variety of fruits and vegetables. With an inadequate diet, the body cannot produce the hormones or chemicals to help balance out the stress response. Even if the body does produce the hormones and chemicals, it cannot use them properly because other nutrients are lacking to process them appropriately. Eating certain foods too often can increase stress; not eating them enough can inhibit a healthy body's response to stress. There is a direct

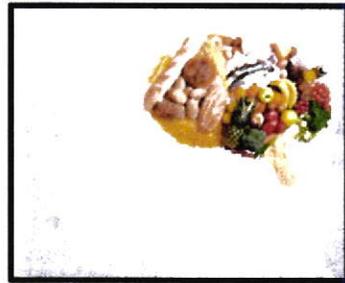
connection between foods and stress. This connection runs multi-directional. For example, stress can create a desire to eat unhealthy foods and certain foods can stimulate the body's stress response.

### Eating When Stressed

A bad habit many people engage in is eating when stressed. This can be for many reasons. Stress eating can create a full, satisfied feeling that counteracts the butterfly anxiety feelings we feel because of the stress. This is why, within a short period of time, a person begins to indulge in eating again. Once the food starts to digest, the butterflies come back. Eating to feel full takes away the anxiety. The junk foods we typically eat to deal with the stress actually leads to more stress. These create the physiological stress response in the body and our stress response actually continues or increases.

### Food Can Cause the Stress Response

In simple terms, the stress response is the "flight or fight" response. Any type of stress stimulates the body to react, leading to greater sympathetic nervous system activity and the release of specific hormones—cortisol and epinephrine. Certain chemicals and foods cause the same response in the body when consumed. These include caffeine, alcohol, simple carbohydrates, and traditional junk foods such as pop, Twinkies, donuts, chips, etc. Sports drinks and pre-game snacks consist of these simple sugar foods. These foods are also ideal in a diabetic low blood sugar situation because the body responds so quickly to them, i.e., the stress response.



Serotonin is the hormone that helps calm the nervous system (stress), but also keeps a person alert. Foods that increase serotonin production and reduce the stress response are non-processed meats, fish, complex carbohydrates (versus simple carbs), beans, legumes, fruits, and vegetables. Even dark chocolate eaten in moderation helps reduce the stress response. Creating a diet around these types of foods creates a long term effect on the "flight or fight" response. Individuals with a propensity to anxiety and stress will show improvement to stress by altering their diets with whole

grains, fruits, and vegetables. This will also result in a better sense of well-being, often weight loss, and decreased stress levels.

### Healthy Ways to Cope with Stress

Feeling emotional and nervous or having trouble sleeping and eating can all be normal reactions to stress. Engaging in healthy activities and getting the right care and support can put problems in perspective and help stressful feelings subside with time.



Some tips to feeling better are:

- ✓ Take care of yourself.
- ✓ Eat healthy, well-balanced meals.
- ✓ Exercise on a regular basis.
- ✓ Get plenty of sleep.
- ✓ Give yourself a break if you feel stressed out.
- ✓ Talk to others. Share problems and feelings with a parent, friend, counselor, doctor, or pastor.
- ✓ Avoid drugs and alcohol. Drugs and alcohol may aid with the stress; however, in the long run, they create additional problems and increase the stress being felt.
- ✓ Take a break. If stress is caused by a national or local event, take breaks from listening to the news stories that can increase the stress.

### Recognize When You Need More Help

If problems continue and there are thoughts of suicide, talk to a psychologist, social worker, or professional counselor. If help is needed, contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for counseling for employees and their families. Call KEPRO at 1-800-999-1077 to schedule an appointment. In an emergency or crisis situation, call 1-800-833-3031.

Source:

[http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/coping\\_with\\_stress\\_tips.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pub/coping_with_stress_tips.html)

