

# Coping with Stress

**F**eeling stressed out? It's hard to stay calm and relaxed in our hectic lives. Our day-to-day tasks can feel overwhelming. On top of that, many of us are coping with serious illnesses in our families and dealing with other problems. As women, we have many roles: spouse, partner, mother, caregiver, friend, employee, boss. With all we have going on in our lives, it seems almost impossible to find ways to de-stress. But it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

## How Women React to Stress

We all deal with stressful things like traffic, arguments with spouses, and problems on the job. Some researchers think that women handle stress in a unique way: we *tend* and *befriend*.

- ◆ **Tend:** Women protect and care for their children.
- ◆ **Befriend:** Women seek out and get social support.

Women's bodies make chemicals that are believed to contribute to these responses to stress. One of these chemicals is oxytocin [ahk-see-toe-sin], which has a calming effect during stress. This same chemical is released during childbirth. It is also found at higher levels in breastfeeding mothers, who are believed to be calmer than women



who don't breastfeed. Women also have the hormone estrogen, which boosts the effects of oxytocin. Men, however, have high levels of testosterone during stress. This hormone blocks the calming effects of oxytocin and causes hostility, withdrawal, and anger.

## Stress Affects Your Entire Body

Everyone experiences stressful events at times. We have short-term stress, such as getting lost while driving or missing the bus. Even everyday events, such as planning a meal or making time for errands, can be stressful. This kind of stress can make us feel worried or anxious.

Other times, we face long-term stress, such as a life-threatening illness, chronic disease, disability, divorce, or the death of a loved one. Women often have to deal with all

### Common Effects of Stress on Your Health

- Trouble sleeping
- Headaches
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Irritability
- Lack of energy
- Lack of concentration
- Eating too much or not at all
- Anger
- Sadness
- Higher risk of asthma and arthritis flare-ups
- Tension
- Stomach cramping
- Stomach bloating
- Skin problems, like hives
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Weight gain or loss
- Heart problems
- High blood pressure
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Diabetes
- Neck pain, back pain, or both
- Less sexual desire
- Harder to get pregnant

aspects of a loved one passing away, especially if it is a parent or child. These stressful events also affect your health on many levels. Long-term stress can increase your risk for some health problems, like depression.

Both short-term and long-term stress can have negative effects on your body. Research is starting to identify how our bodies respond to stress. Stress triggers changes in our bodies and makes us more likely to get sick. It can also worsen some of the health problems we already have.

### Don't Let Stress Make You Sick

As women, we tend to carry a higher burden of stress than we should. Many times we're not even aware of our stress levels. Listen to your body, so you know when stress is affecting your health.

### Tips: How To Lessen Your Stress

- ◆ **Relax.** It's important to unwind. Every person has her own way to relax. Some ways include deep breathing, yoga, meditation, and massage therapy. You can also take a few minutes to sit, listen to soothing music, or read a book.
- ◆ **Make time for yourself.** It's important to care for yourself. Remember, you matter. You are worthy of your own care. No matter how busy you are, try to set aside at least 15 to 30 minutes each day to take a walk, work in your garden, play with your children. Maybe taking a bubble bath or calling a friend is your way to fight stress.
- ◆ **Sleep.** Sleeping is a great way to help both your body and mind. Your stress could get worse if you don't get enough sleep. You also can't fight off sickness as well when

you sleep poorly. When you get enough sleep, you can tackle your problems better, and you lower your risk of illness. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep every night.

- ◆ **Eat healthy.** Fuel up with fruit, vegetables, and whole-grain foods, such as whole-grain crackers and breads. Don't be fooled by the jolt you get from caffeine or sugar. That boost of energy you may feel will wear off.
- ◆ **Get moving.** Believe it or not, getting physical activity helps relieve your tense muscles. Moving also improves your mood, too! Your body makes certain chemicals, called endorphins, after you're active. These chemicals help relieve stress and improve your mood. *See the Eating Healthy and Being Active chapter starting on page 36.*
- ◆ **Talk to friends.** Talk to your friends to help you work through your stress. Friends are good listeners. Finding someone who will let you talk freely about your



### Most Stressful Life Events

Any change in our lives can be stressful. Even some of our happiest times can produce stress, such as having a baby or getting a new job. Here are some of the most stressful events in our lives.

- Death of a spouse
- Divorce
- Marital separation
- Spending time in jail
- Death of a close family member
- Personal illness or injury
- Marriage
- Pregnancy
- Retirement

Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General (1999)

problems and feelings without judging you does a world of good. It also helps to hear a different point of view. Friends will remind you that you're not alone.

- ◆ **Get help from a professional if you need it.** Talk to a therapist. A therapist can help you work through stressful times. He or she can help you find better ways to deal with your problems.
- ◆ **Compromise.** Sometimes, it's not always worth the stress to argue. Give in once in awhile.
- ◆ **Write down your thoughts.** Have you ever typed an e-mail to a friend about your lousy day and felt better afterward?

### Deep Breathing: A Guide

Deep breathing is a good way to relax. Try it a few times every day.

1. Lie down or sit in a chair.
2. Rest your hands on your abdomen.
3. Slowly count to four and inhale through your nose. Feel your abdomen rise. Hold it for a second.
4. Slowly count to four while you exhale through your mouth. To control how fast you exhale, purse your lips like you're going to whistle. Your abdomen will slowly fall.
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

Why not grab a pen and paper and write down what's going on in your life. Or type your thoughts. Keeping a journal of any kind can be a great way to get things off your mind and work through issues. Later, you can go back and read through your journal and see how you've made progress!

- ◆ **Help others.** Helping someone else can help you. Help your neighbor, or volunteer in your community.
- ◆ **Get a hobby.** Find something you enjoy doing. Be sure to give yourself time to explore your interests. Is it reading? Painting? Swimming?
- ◆ **Set limits.** When it comes to work and family, figure out what you can reasonably do. You only have so many hours in a single day. Set limits with yourself

and others. Don't be afraid to say NO to requests for your time and energy.

- ◆ **Plan your time.** Think ahead about how you're going to spend your time. Write a to-do list. Figure out what's the most important task to get done that day.
- ◆ **Don't deal with your stress in unhealthy ways.** Don't drink too much alcohol. Don't use illicit drugs. Don't smoke. Don't overeat.

### Then and Now

Among this group, who is the most likely to get an ulcer?

- a. High school teacher
- b. Police officer
- c. Medical resident
- d. Stockbroker
- e. Reporter
- f. Waiter
- g. Mother

They all have the same chance of getting an ulcer! Doctors used to think that ulcers were caused by stress and spicy foods. Now we know that stress doesn't cause ulcers—it just irritates them. Ulcers are actually caused by a germ called *Helicobacter pylori*. Researchers don't know for sure how people get this germ. It might be through food or water. Ulcers are treated with a combination of antibiotics and other drugs.