

Is Your Stress Level in the Red Zone?

Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the ever increasing demands of life. Surveys show that most Americans experience challenges with stress at some point during the year. In looking at the causes of stress, remember that your brain comes hard-wired with an alarm system for your protection. When your brain perceives a threat, it signals your body to release a burst of hormones to fuel your capacity for a response. This has been labeled the “fight-or-flight” response. Once the threat is gone, your body is meant to return to a normal relaxed state. Unfortunately, the nonstop stress of modern life means that your alarm system rarely shuts off.

That’s why stress management is so important. Stress management gives you a range of tools to reset your alarm system. Without it, all too often your body is always on high alert. Over time, high levels of stress can lead to serious health problems. Don’t wait until stress has a negative impact on your health, relationships or quality of life. Start practicing a range of stress management techniques today!

The first step in successful stress relief is deciding to make a change in how you manage stress. The next step is identifying your stress triggers. Some causes of stress are obvious—job pressures, relationship problems or financial difficulties. But daily hassles and demands, such as commuting, arranging for day care or being overcommitted at work, can also contribute to your stress level. Even positive events can be stressful. If you got married, started a new job and bought a new house in the same year, you could have a high stress level.

Once you’ve identified your stress triggers, you can start thinking about strategies for dealing with them. Sometimes the solution may be as easy as turning off the TV when the evening news is too distressing. Or, when you can’t avoid a stressful situation, try brainstorming ways to reduce the irritation factor. And don’t feel like you have to figure it out all on your own. Seek help and support from family and friends. You may want to ask them what stress-relief techniques have worked well for them. Stress won’t disappear from your life and stress management isn’t an overnight cure. But with practice, you can manage your stress level and increase your ability to cope with life’s challenges.

Relaxation techniques are an essential part of stress management. If you’re an overachiever, you may put relaxation low on your priority list. Don’t shortchange yourself. There are active ways of achieving relaxation. Relaxation is invaluable for maintaining your health and well-being, and repairing the toll that stress takes on your mind and body.

Almost everyone can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques help to slow your breathing and to focus your attention on the here and now. Embrace the concept of enjoying the moment you’re living in, rather than being worried about what could happen in the future.



Relaxation Techniques Can:

- ▶ Slow your heart rate
- ▶ Lower blood pressure
- ▶ Slow your breathing rate
- ▶ Increase the blood flow to major muscles
- ▶ Reduce muscle tension and chronic pain
- ▶ Improve concentration
- ▶ Reduce anger and frustration
- ▶ Boost your confidence to handle problems

To get the most benefit, use relaxation techniques along with other positive coping methods, such as exercising, getting enough sleep, and reaching out to supportive family and friends.

In general, relaxation techniques involve refocusing your attention on something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It doesn’t matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly to reap its benefits.

Try These Relaxation Techniques!

Autogenic Relaxation

Autogenic means something that comes from within you. With autogenic relaxation, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to relax and reduce muscle tension. For example, you may imagine a peaceful setting and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or feeling different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

When using progressive muscle relaxation, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. You become more aware of physical sensations. One method is to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. You can also start with your head and neck and work down to your toes. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds, then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.

Visualization

In this relaxation technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. During visualization, try to use as many senses as you can, including smell, sight, sound and touch. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about such things as the smell of salt water, the sound of crashing waves and the warmth of the sun on your body. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.



As you learn to relax, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and the other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment you start to feel stress symptoms. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control.

Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. And as with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself—don't let your effort to practice relaxation become yet another stressor. If one relaxation technique doesn't work for you, try another. If none of your efforts at stress reduction seem to work, talk to your doctor about other options.

Winter's Night Chicken and Dumplings



For the stew

- 1 lb. skinless, boneless chicken meat, cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1/2 cup onion, coarsely chopped
- 1 medium carrot, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 stalk celery, thinly sliced
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- Black pepper to taste
- 1 pinch ground cloves
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 cups water or low-fat, low sodium chicken broth
- 1 tsp. cornstarch
- 1 tsp. dried basil
- 1 package (10 oz) frozen peas

For the dumplings

- 1 cup yellow cornmeal
- 3/4 cup sifted all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1 cup low-fat (1%) milk
- 1 Tbsp. vegetable oil

Nutritional Information Per Serving

Calories: 308 | % Calories from fat: 13
Fat (gm): 4 | Saturated fat (gm): 1
Cholesterol (mg): 45
Sodium (mg): 542
Protein (gm): 25
Carbohydrate (gm): 40
Fiber (gm): 3

Stew: Place chicken, onion, carrot, celery, salt, pepper, cloves, bay leaf, and water in a large saucepan. Heat to boiling; cover and reduce heat to simmer.

Cook about 1/2 hour or until chicken is tender. Remove chicken and vegetables from broth. Strain broth.

Skim fat from broth; measure and, if necessary, add water to make 3 cups liquid. Mix cornstarch with 1 cup cooled broth by shaking vigorously in a jar with a tight-fitting lid. Pour into saucepan with remaining broth; cook, stirring constantly, until mixture comes to a boil and is thickened. Add basil, peas, and reserved vegetables to sauce; stir to combine. Add chicken and heat slowly to boiling while preparing cornmeal dumplings.

Dumplings: Mix together cornmeal, flour, baking powder, and salt into a large mixing bowl. Mix together milk and oil. Add milk mixture all at once to dry ingredients; stir just enough to moisten flour and evenly distribute liquid. Dough will be soft.

Drop by full tablespoons on top of chicken mixture. Cover tightly; heat to boiling. Reduce heat (do not lift cover) to simmering and steam about 20 minutes. Serves 6.