
Under Pressure to Relax: Managing Stress and Anxiety



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Never have we been under so much pressure not to feel pressure.

Despite our best efforts, stress and anxiety are parts of life. They are parts of life even without the broader pressures of pandemics, economic disruption and social change. There is stress in our work, finances, relationships and health. We can become anxious about everything from family milestones to the wins and losses of our favourite hockey team.

Sometimes, stress and anxiety actually work in our favour by helping us rise to a challenge, meet a deadline or push through peak times at work. More often, however, we try to avoid stress and anxiety if we can and, if we can't, we try to manage the impact so they don't adversely affect our health, wellbeing, work and relationships.

Feeling stress and anxiety is normal. In fact, it's unavoidable. But when stress and anxiety become sustained and unmanageable, the consequences can be severe. That's why it's so important to use do-it-yourself approaches to mitigate the day-to-day and even unusual stresses in our lives.

Before we explore what we can do to manage stress and anxiety, let's look at what these two terms actually mean because they are connected, but they aren't identical.

Stress is a natural human reaction to feeling pressure or facing demands. Those pressures can come from anywhere. We usually recognize stressful situations in our work, relationships, finances and health, for example, but stress can also develop from less expected sources like living in a hectic environment or experiencing something positive like earning a promotion or welcoming a new child. When stress persists and is not well managed, it can trigger a range of issues. It can impact our sleep, social relationships and professional productivity. It can take a toll on our mood, morale and confidence. Stress can lead to physical issues including headaches, digestive difficulty and muscle pain. It can cause behavioural changes like teeth grinding, nail biting and the use of drugs and alcohol. Stress can even lead to serious mental and physical health issues like depression, cardiovascular disease and stroke.

Anxiety, like stress, is a normal part of life if it happens occasionally. Typically, our experiences with anxiety are uncomfortable rather than debilitating, but in its more intense forms, anxiety can impair our ability to think clearly, to socialize and to complete the tasks of daily life. Anxiety can also lead to physical responses including accelerated heart rate, rapid breathing, chest tension or sweating. At its peak, an anxiety disorder can make us feel anxious most of the time even when there's no apparent reason for those feelings. Some people even experience occasional anxiety attacks that are so intense they cause immobilizing terror.

A common reaction to stress and anxiety is trying to eliminate the source. We think that if we change jobs, relationships or cities, the stress and anxiety will go away. Sometimes, that approach works, but the challenge is that more often than not, if there is a specific trigger for our stress or anxiety, it's not something we can just leave behind. In fact, the situations that trigger our stress or anxiety responses are often multifaceted and beyond our control. We can't just walk away from a pandemic, for example, or from a health problem. And the truth is that most unhealthy stress or anxiety situations usually develop because of multiple factors – tangible triggers combined with intangible factors that can be difficult to define.

So, if we can't just eliminate or walk away from stress and anxiety, the way we respond becomes critically important and our first and often best response starts with ourselves. You are your own greatest ally in fighting stress and anxiety. There are many strategies you can try as you work to find the approach or combination of approaches that works best for you.

1. **Review and reframe your sources of stress:** “Focus on the positive” became a cliché for a reason – it's a helpful approach. Take time to remind yourself of the best parts of your life. Think about good memories, favourite places and enjoyable activities. Try not to focus on the negative, but rather challenge yourself to find the positives in any situation.
2. **Establish clear priorities and goals:** If you can identify the things that are truly important to you, it can guide your plans and schedule. Write down your top five goals – not just the kinds of professional and financial goals people typically make, but personal goals like being the best parent you can be or trying a new experience. Then consult your list daily to help you refocus.
3. **Reduce demands on your time and attention:** We all have to-do lists. Take a look at yours to identify things that you don't need to do or can get help doing or that you can delegate to someone else. The ability to say “no” when you need to is a powerful tool in managing life's pressures.
4. **Talk about your stress and anxiety:** Talk to someone you trust about your feelings. Most of us feel better after we've shared our feelings, especially if you can find someone who will listen and, if it's what you want, help you look at your stressors and anxieties with fresh eyes.
5. **Make time for the things you enjoy:** It doesn't matter what you enjoy – cooking, yoga, playing the violin, building model trains – plan time for that activity into your schedule. Block it into your daily or weekly plan the same way you would a work commitment or an important appointment.
6. **Keep physically active:** Our bodies need to be active to be healthy. Whether your version of “active” is walking, stretching, dancing, tai chi, boxing, running or extreme rock climbing, it doesn't matter. Make sure you give your body something to do other than simply reacting to your stress and anxiety.

7. **Take care of your body:** Stress and anxiety seem to make junk food even more enticing and sleep even more difficult, but good food and good sleep help form the foundation of our resistance to stress and anxiety. Eat healthy meals and cut down on your junk food. That will also help your body be more ready for sleep, which you should try to enhance with a regular sleep schedule and habits.
8. **Develop your ability to relax your mind:** Stress and anxiety can make our minds feel out of control, but techniques like meditation (now with the help of what seems like a new smartphone app every day) and mindfulness can help relieve your everyday stress levels, particularly if you make the commitment to practice.
9. **Develop your ability to relax your body:** Our bodies can help our minds relax. Relaxation techniques like deep breathing and muscle relaxation or even just a hot bath or neck massage can help quiet a racing mind. In stressful times, something as simple as rubbing your jaw muscles or temples with your fingers can help your body resist the anxiety of the moment.
10. **Limit your reliance on alcohol, drugs and tobacco:** When we're under stress or we're anxious, we often tell ourselves that we "just need" a drink, a cigarette or a coffee. Building that kind of emotional and physical reliance on substances – including alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and other drugs – actually reduces our ability to combat stress and anxiety in the long term.
11. **Think about the big picture:** Keeping in mind the big picture gives us the ability to see smaller stressors for what they are – temporary and surmountable. Before letting an incident or situation trigger your stress or anxiety response, take a moment to think about context and impact. This is a way to ensure that small problems stay small.
12. **Be realistic in your expectations:** Perhaps the most important tip for dealing with stress and anxiety is to be realistic with your expectations: give yourself a break. No one's life is stress-free and anxiety-free. No one handles every stressor and anxious moment perfectly. Give yourself permission to react and respond, but also give yourself the tools to manage, minimize and curtail your stress and anxiety.

Finally, no matter how well equipped or well prepared we are, sometimes it can feel like stress and anxiety are beyond our personal control. If that happens to you or someone close to you, remember that you're not alone. As with any mental health issue, if you feel that your situation has become severe, chronic or unmanageable, you should seek qualified professional help. There are many effective psychological treatments for stress and anxiety including everything from relaxation training to biofeedback and from counselling to medications.

If you think you'd benefit from consulting with a healthcare professional, whether to learn more about tips for managing stress and anxiety or perhaps to access the kinds of supports and treatments that are available for more urgent situations, please **call Homewood Health, your free and confidential Employee Family Assistance (EFAP) provider at 1-866-565-4903. EFAP is available to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week.**