

Managing Your Stress

Learn Coping Skills to Improve Your Health



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Understanding Arthritis

The word arthritis means joint inflammation. There are more than 100 forms of arthritis and related conditions. Arthritis affects the joints and tissues around the joints, such as muscles and tendons. Some forms of arthritis also can affect other parts of the body, including the skin, eyes and internal organs.

Arthritis usually causes joint stiffness and pain and limits the ability to use the joint. Some people have arthritis worse than other people. In some types of arthritis, only a few joints are affected and the impact may be small. In others, systems in the entire body may be affected. Arthritis is chronic, which means it lasts for many months, years, or even a lifetime.

About 46 million Americans have been diagnosed with arthritis. Because arthritis affects so many areas of a person's life, stress is extremely common among people with arthritis. While arthritis brings many challenges, there are ways you can meet them and continue to lead a fulfilling life.

This brochure is for people who have stress due to arthritis and related diseases. It provides basic information about stress as well as tips on how you can effectively manage it.

What Is Stress?

Stress is the body and mind's reaction to everyday tensions, changes and pressures. Too much stress can increase pain and make it harder for you to deal with the challenges of arthritis or related diseases.

Stress is a normal part of life. Many things can be stressful, such as a move to a new town, a job change, a divorce or the death of someone close to you. But stressful events are not

always “negative” ones. Weddings, vacations and births are happy occasions that also can be stressful. Dealing with stress is a daily challenge. By learning to manage your stress in a positive way, you can reduce your pain, feel healthier and manage your disease more effectively.

People with arthritis or related diseases and conditions (such as lupus or fibromyalgia) go through the same kinds of stressful periods as everyone else. However, with arthritis, it may take less to stress you.

Having a chronic disease can add a new set of challenges to your daily life. Managing your illness, including taking medications and dealing with side effects can be stressful. You may have to rely on family members and health-care professionals more than in the past. You may have to make changes to your lifestyle or give up favorite activities because of limited abilities. You also may see changes in your appearance because of joint deformities.

How Does the Body React to Stress?

When you feel stressed, your body’s muscles become tense. This muscle tension can increase your pain and fatigue and may further limit your abilities, which can make you feel helpless. This can cause you to become depressed. A cycle of stress, pain, fatigue, limited/lost abilities and depression may develop. If you understand your reactions and learn how to manage stress, you can help break that cycle.

Physical Changes

Some of your body’s reactions to stress are easy to predict. When you feel stress, your body quickly releases chemicals into your

bloodstream. This sets into motion a series of physical changes called the “fight or flight” response. These changes include:

- Faster heartbeat
- Increased breathing rate
- Higher blood pressure
- Increased muscle tension

These physical changes help your body prepare for stressful events by increasing strength and energy. When you handle stress in a positive way, your body restores itself and repairs any damage caused by the stress.

At times, you may feel unable to deal with ongoing stress in a healthy way. As a result, stress-related tension builds up, and with no outlet, takes its toll on your body over time. This toll can take many forms – you may experience headaches or fatigue, while someone else may have an upset stomach or a disease flare.

Emotional Changes

Your emotional reaction to stress is harder to predict than your physical reaction.

Emotional reactions vary, depending on the situation, the person and how that person handles stress. Emotional responses may include feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, helplessness, loss of control, annoyance or frustration. A small amount of stress can actually help you perform at your best, such as during an exam, an athletic event or performance. With too much stress, however, you may make a lot of mistakes and may function poorly.

People respond in different ways to events and situations. You may like to be busy and have lots of activity, or you may prefer a slow

pace with less activity. What you find relaxing may be stressful to someone else.

How to Manage Your Stress

The key to managing stress is to make it work for you instead of against you. A complete program for managing your stress has six parts:

1. Learn your body's signals of stress.
2. Learn to identify what causes your stress.
3. Learn changes you can make to help reduce stress.
4. Learn how to manage what you can't change.
5. Learn how to reduce the effects of stress on your body.
6. Maintain a lifestyle that can build your resistance to stress.

Listen To Your Body Signals

Just as reactions to stress vary, so do signals of stress. Managing your stress begins with knowing its signs and symptoms. Some of the common signs of stress are:

- Tiredness/fatigue
- Muscle tension or pain
- Anxiety
- Irritability/anger
- Upset stomach
- Nervousness/trembling
- Sleeplessness
- Cold, sweaty hands
- Increased or decreased appetite
- Grinding teeth/clenching jaws
- General body complaints (lightheadedness, headache, back pain)

Some of these symptoms may be caused by problems other than stress, such as the flu or your disease. If you are not sure the symptoms are related to a stressful event, consult your doctor. You also should tell your doctor during your visits if you think these symptoms might be stress-related. If you and your doctor determine that stress is contributing to the problem, you can work together to evaluate your situation, understand it and try to relieve it.

Pinpoint the Causes

Learning what causes your stress is a personal discovery. What causes stress for you may not bother someone else. Once you know what the stressful aspects of your life are, you can decide how to adapt to them.

Keep a stress diary to record the events in your life that cause you stress. Record the cause of your stress as well as any physical or emotional symptoms you feel. Ideally, you want to be able to stop yourself when you feel

SAMPLE STRESS DIARY				
Date of Stress	Cause	Time	Physical Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms
4/18	Getting kids off to school	7 a.m.	Fast heartbeat, clumsy	Feel rushed disorganized
4/18	Stuck in traffic	8:30 a.m.	Headache, heart beating faster, tightening in chest	Frustrated, angry for being late
4/18	Meeting presentation	10 a.m.	Fast heartbeat, dry throat, clammy palms	Anxious to be finished, nervous

Keeping a stress diary can help you learn what causes your stress and how you can manage it.

your body or mind becoming overstressed. Keeping this stress diary can help you track and manage your responses to stress.

Change the Situation

Once you've identified causes of your stress, divide them into things that can be changed and things that can't. For situations that you can change, here are some ways to take control:

- Make a list of your priorities. What must you do right away? What can you postpone? What can be eliminated? You may need to buy groceries today, but you can wash clothes tomorrow.
- Take time to pamper yourself and do things you enjoy. Learn to ask yourself when you're making a decision, "Does this take care of, or work for, me?"
- Set goals and develop a plan of action for reaching them. Remember to include hobbies and friends in your planning. Be flexible about the time you need to complete a goal.
- Don't put off doing important things. Do your holiday shopping early so you don't feel pressured by the holiday rush.
- Learn to say no without feeling guilty. It's OK to let other parents help your child's teacher with their class trip to the zoo. Turning down extra duties even for a short period of time can reduce your stress.
- Learn to communicate better. First listen to be sure you understand, and take the time to ask questions if you

don't. Communicate clearly, assertively and directly to be sure others understand you.

- Seek solutions to conflicts that will benefit both sides. If you want to go for a walk and your spouse has chores to do, help finish the work so you can take a walk together.

DO A REALITY CHECK

Learn to put stressful situations in perspective by asking these questions:

- What exactly is at stake?
- What are you saying to yourself right now?
- What are you afraid will occur?
- How do you know this will happen?
- What evidence do you have that this will happen?
- Are there other ways to look at this situation?
- What coping resources are available?

Change Your Outlook

Realize that there are some causes of stress that you may not be able to change. Because some situations can't be changed, you have to learn to deal effectively with them. Being flexible helps you keep a positive attitude, despite hardships. Here are ways you can change your outlook:

- Develop a healthy attitude.
Situations become stressful when you think about them in a negative way. To be healthy you should balance your positive and negative thoughts.

- Evaluate the situation's importance. Being objective about a situation can sometimes help you put it in perspective and manage it effectively.
- Refocus your attention. Thinking about something you like can help you relax and become less stressed.
- Utilize stress-relieving activities. Find ways to express your feelings of stress in a positive way, such as writing in a journal or exercising.
- Develop and use support systems. Share your thoughts with family, friends, clergy or others who are good listeners and can help you see the problems in a constructive way.
- Use humor. Schedule time for play and become involved in activities that make you laugh. No matter how sad your mood, laughing can make the world look better.

Reduce the Effects of Stress on Your Body

Learning how to relax is one of the most useful ways to cope with stress in a healthy way. Relaxation is more than just sitting back and being quiet. It is an active process using methods to calm your body and mind. Learning how to relax takes practice. As you learn new ways to relax, keep these principles in mind:

- Many things cause stress. This means there are many ways to manage stress. The better you understand what causes your stress, the more successfully you can manage it.

- Not all relaxation techniques work for everyone. Try out different methods until you find one or two you like best. You may learn that some techniques work well for specific situations.
- Remember that learning these new skills will take time. Practice new techniques for at least two weeks before you decide if they work for you.
- Be sure to get enough exercise, which helps relieve stress. Yoga and tai chi are two forms of exercise that can teach you how to relax.

If you need help learning how to relax, see a mental-health professional or contact your local

RELAXATION STEPS AND TIPS

Try some of these the next time you feel stressed and need to relax:

- Pick a quiet place and time of day when you won't be disturbed for at least 15 minutes.
- Make yourself as comfortable as possible. Loosen any tight clothing and uncross your legs, ankles and arms. Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down.
- Practice relaxation daily if you can. Or set aside time for it at least four times a week.
- Don't expect results right away. It may take several weeks before you notice a difference.
- Remember that relaxation should be helpful. If these exercises are unpleasant or make you more anxious, don't do them. Other techniques may work better for you.

Arthritis Foundation office. A few common techniques for relaxing are described below.

Deep Breathing

Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet on the floor and your arms at your sides. Close your eyes.

Breathe in deeply, saying to yourself, “I am...” then breathe out saying, “...relaxed.” Continue to breathe slowly, silently repeating something to yourself such as, “My hands ... are warm; my feet ... are warm; my breathing ... is deep and smooth; my heartbeat ... is calm and steady; I feel calm ... and at peace.” Try to coordinate the words with your breathing.

Progressive Relaxation

Muscle relaxation is one of the most common forms of stress management. It is easy to learn and can be practiced in many different places.

Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, filling your chest and breathing all the way down to your abdomen. Hold your breath for a few seconds. Breathe out, letting your stress flow out with the air.

Let all your muscles feel heavy and let your whole body sink into the surface beneath you.

Beginning with your feet and calves, slowly tense your muscles. Hold for several seconds, then release and relax the muscles. Slowly work your way through your major muscle groups using the same technique.

Continue breathing deeply. Enjoy the feeling of being completely relaxed for a few minutes before opening your eyes.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is similar to a guided day-dream. It helps you divert your attention, refocusing your mind away from your stress. Follow the steps below to try it.

Close your eyes.

Take a deep breath and hold it for several seconds. Breathe out slowly, feeling your body relax as you do. Release any tension in your body by taking deep breaths and relaxing your muscles as you breathe out.

Think about a place you have been where you felt pleasure or comfort. Imagine it in as much detail as possible – how it looks, smells, sounds and feels. Do this slowly, enjoying each detail. Recapture the positive feelings you had then and keep them in your mind.

Take several deep breaths and enjoy feeling calm and peaceful before you open your eyes.

Visualization

Visualization (also called vivid imagery) involves thinking of symbols that represent the pain or stress in different parts of your body. For example, you might imagine that your tense shoulder muscles are bright red. After creating this image in your mind, you try to change it. Watch the red slowly fade until there is no color left. Feel your stress and pain disappear with the color.

Biofeedback

Biofeedback is a technique you can use to help train your body to relax when you are faced with stress. To do biofeedback you will need the help of a therapist or other health professional.

During a biofeedback session a therapist will hook you up to a biofeedback monitor. The monitor allows you to see your body's reactions to stress such as faster breathing and increased heartbeat rate. The therapist will then teach you techniques for relaxing. You'll be able to practice relaxation and see the difference in your stress level on the monitor. Once you've learned how to relax, you'll be able to do it later without the help of the monitor.

Distraction

Train your mind to focus on something other than your stress. This is especially helpful if you feel overwhelmed or think constantly about your stress. Practicing distraction does not mean that you ignore your stress. It means that you choose not to dwell on it.

Distraction works best for short activities or times when you can anticipate stress. For example, if waiting in a line at the store is stressful to you, prepare yourself for the stress and how you will handle it. Make plans for what you will do once the stressful situation is past. By thinking about these plans, you can help take your mind off your stressful experience.

Positive Actions

Release unhealthy stress reactions in a positive way. Focus on positive thoughts and actions instead of negative ones. Rehearse positive statements so you can use them in real situations. Exercise, read a good book, sing, laugh, socialize or call a friend – there are lots of positive ways to release your stress.

STRESS BUSTERS

Here are nine simple ways you can relieve stress:

- Relax in a warm bath.
- Sit quietly and engage in deep breathing for five to 10 minutes.
- Drink a soothing cup of herbal tea.
- Read a good book.
- Work a crossword or other type of puzzle.
- Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal.
- Exercise – take a walk or do some stretching.
- Listen to your favorite soothing music.
- Do something creative and satisfying, like painting, drawing, sewing or cooking.

Exercise

Exercise has been shown to both relieve stress and improve sleep. Exercising on a regular basis helps your body create natural feel-good chemicals within your body that may help improve mood and reduce stress. Exercising on a regular basis can also help keep your joints flexible and improve pain. Other benefits of exercise include its ability to help you have more energy, increase your self-esteem and sense of well-being and strengthen your heart.

The key to exercising is making time to do it on a regular basis and going at your own pace. If you currently don't exercise, start off slow. You can begin exercising for five minutes and increase the amount of time you workout over days and weeks. Ideally, people with arthritis should be active everyday and exercise at least 30 minutes, most days of the

week. Walking, swimming and water exercise are all forms of exercise that can be good for people with arthritis. Be sure to talk with your doctor before starting a new exercise program. Your doctor and other members of your health-care team can help you to learn about other types of exercise that may be good for you and to come up with a personalized exercise plan for you.

Build Your Resistance to Stress

Stress can have a negative effect on your body. By taking good care of your body you can build up your resistance to stress. To take good care of your body:

- Eat a balanced diet.
- Exercise regularly.
- Do not rely on drugs and alcohol to solve problems.
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Pace your activities and schedule rest breaks.
- Try to have more positive activities than hassles in your life.

Research

Since 1948, the Arthritis Foundation has invested nearly \$380 million on research to help prevent, control and cure arthritis and related diseases. Arthritis Foundation-funded researchers at several sites are studying the interrelationships among stress, pain, mood and disease flares and are testing various types of coping strategies to help people with arthritis reduce their pain and take control of their condition.

For More Information

You can help yourself feel better. Managing your stress can help you have less pain and feel healthier and happier. It also can help you manage your disease effectively.

Contact your local Arthritis Foundation office or call 800-283-7800 to learn about the Arthritis Foundation Life Improvement Series classes and other programs designed to help you live better with arthritis. You can also get a complete list of free brochures about different forms of arthritis, treatments and self-management techniques.

Brochures

Brochures that you may find helpful include:

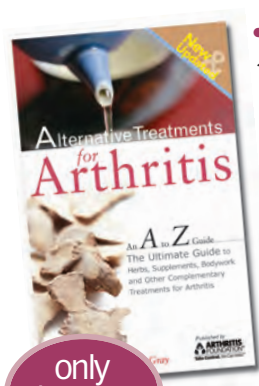
- ***Managing Your Activities*** – Suggestions on using your joints wisely during daily activities, plus lists of self-help aids.
- ***Managing Your Fatigue*** – Information about arthritis-related fatigue and tips on how to manage it to feel more rested.
- ***Managing Your Pain*** – An overview of how arthritis causes pain, how you react to pain and how you can manage it.

The Arthritis Foundation

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