How to Make Stress Work For You

Prioritize Your Mental Health & Well-Being in 2021

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, millions of Americans face increased levels of fear, stress and anxiety that tend to overwhelm and cause strong negative emotion. The compounding feelings of worry surrounding one's livelihood and future can actually make someone more susceptible to getting sick. Through practice and the adjustment of your mindset, you can use stress to improve your overall health and well-being. Learning how to consistently cope with daily stressors and better manage your health will make you, the people you care about and even your community stronger.

HOW STRESS & YOUR HEALTH CORRELATE

Your body is hard-wired to react to stress in ways meant to protect you against threats from uncomfortable and unfamiliar situations. Inevitably, you may face multiple demands each day, such as taking on massive workloads, paying the bills and taking care of yourself and your family. Your body treats these 'hassles' as threats, which can ultimately make you feel like stress is controlling your life and emotions. The long-term activation of the stress-response system, the overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones that follow can disrupt almost all of your body's processes, which can put you at increased risk of several health problems.

LEARNING TO REACT TO STRESS IN A HEALTHY WAY

It can be extremely difficult, almost impossible, to avoid stress given today's climate. Practicing good stress management skills, however, can help you cope with stress in a healthier way. Take an honest look at how you react to stress and then adopt or modify stress management techniques to ensure your physical and emotional health stay top of mind.

1. *Scale Back* — Cut back on your obligations when possible. While it may seem easier said than done, take a close look at your daily, weekly and monthly schedule, and find meetings, activities, dinners or chores that you can remove or reschedule.
2. *Prepare* — Stay ahead of stress by preparing for meetings or trips in advance, practicing time management and setting realistic goals for tasks both big and small. When you do not account for unexpected scenarios, especially if you are in a rush, stress and emotions can escalate causing you to put yourself at even more risk.
3. *Reach Out* — Make or renew connections with others. Surrounding yourself with supportive family, friends, co-workers, clergy or spiritual leaders can have a positive effect on your mental well-being and overall health.
4. *Relax* — Prioritize time for physical activity, meditation, yoga, massages, deep breathing exercises and other relaxation techniques that can help your body better regulate stress. When doing so, focus your attention on something calming and increase your awareness of your body and mind.

Stressful events are facts of life — take the global pandemic as an example. You may not be able to change what is happening around you, but you can take steps to manage the impact these events have on you. Learning to identify what stresses you, how you feel and how to take care of yourself physically and emotionally in the face of stressful situations, can ultimately help boost your overall health and well-being.