

Manage Your Mind and Body with Stress Management Techniques

Hi, and thanks for checking out Aetna's Maximize Your Benefits website. I'm Louise Murphy, Head of Aetna Behavioral Health.

Today, we're going to provide you with quick tips on how to help you handle stress. It's a problem that could be close to your heart. Maybe even too close! Here's why.

See, when you're stressed out, your body gets a big shot of adrenaline. That makes your heart pump faster, your breathing get faster and your muscles tense up. It's called a "fight or flight" response. Great for facing a pack of wolves. Not great for facing more modern problems – like today's economy!

So don't let stress take control. Remember that stress is the body's natural reaction to any event that disrupts your life. You can feel stress when there's good news – or bad news. In fact, sometimes stress can be positive – helping you to concentrate better or to perform more efficiently. Occasional stress is no fun, but it won't do any lasting harm. The idea is not to get rid of stress, but rather, to manage it.

On the other hand, if your body is under stress for too long – your health could suffer. Long periods of stress can weaken your body's immune system. And when that happens, you're more likely to get sick. Chronic stress has been known to make health problems you already have worse – asthma symptoms, high blood pressure and blood-sugar control for people who have diabetes.

These symptoms are bad enough on their own, but stress can lead to more problems. An October 2008 survey by the American Psychological Association, or APA, found that almost half of Americans reported overeating or eating unhealthy foods to manage stress. And one in four people skipped a meal during the last month because of stress. On top of that, nearly one-fifth of Americans reported drinking alcohol to manage their stress and 16 percent reported smoking.

If you're feeling stressed by the ongoing economic slump, you're not alone. The APA survey results show that eight out of ten Americans say the economy is a major cause of stress. This survey also found that many people are having trouble sleeping, which leaves them feeling tired and angry. Other reported symptoms include lack of interest or motivation, problems concentrating, feeling depressed or sad, headaches and muscle tension.

Of course, it's hard to stay relaxed when you're worried about your financial security. But you can make things even worse if you don't do a good job managing your stress.

Try these simple tips to put stress in its place.

Start by getting enough sleep, eating healthy and by exercising on a regular basis. You'll handle stress a lot better if you're well-rested and in fairly decent shape.

Also take time to relax. Even a few minutes of quiet time every day can be helpful. You can try deep-breathing exercises or some meditation techniques. Learning to live in the moment can keep stress from stealing your sense of control – over your life, your finances and your health.

If you feel that stress is becoming too much of a problem, you may need expert help. Call your doctor or talk with a mental health professional.

We all know that too much information is not a good thing. Don't throw your TV out the window. But don't dwell on every move the stock market makes either.

Keep a close eye on your family budget. Hold a family meeting to discuss ways to cut expenses and work on getting out of debt. Talk to a credit counselor or financial planner for more help.

And remember that laughter is still good medicine. For example, a study by the University of Maryland found that laughter may help prevent heart disease. So if you can laugh about your problems – even a little bit – you may have a better chance to solve them.

To learn more about managing stress, try these books:

- *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Martha Davis, Matthew McKay and Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman
- *Full Catastrophe Living* by John Kabat-Zinn
- *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* by Robert Sapolsky

Feeling a little bit better already? I hope so. But be patient. You can't change how you handle stress overnight. Get a plan and stick with it. Soon you'll be ready to beat stress at its own game. Thanks again for checking out our website. Tune in again for more tips that make a healthy difference in your life.

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