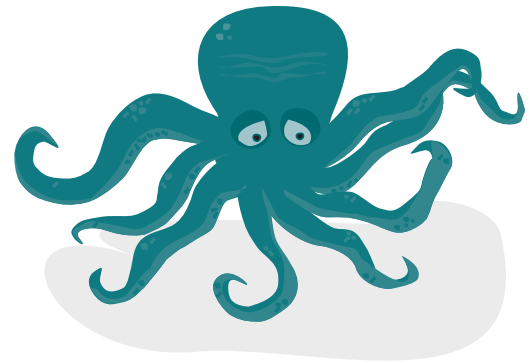


having trouble coping?

stressed out?

feeling overwhelmed?



if your answer is YES,  
you are not alone

Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Some people, though, say that they feel very stressed most of the time. While stress isn't always bad, too much stress can affect your well-being.

## What causes stress?

Stress comes up when you feel like the demands of a situation or event are too much to manage. It can come up with everyday situations, such as:

- Managing demands at work or school
- Managing long-term health problems
- Dealing with inequalities
- Managing relationships

Stress can also come up in response to a specific event or situation. Both positive and negative life events can be stressful, especially those that involve major changes to your regular routines. Here are some examples:

- Changes in a relationship
- Changes in housing arrangements
- The death of a family member or friend
- Losing a job or other source of income

As stress is based on the way you see a situation or event, things that cause stress are based on your own situation. Different people may find that different things are stressful.

How you feel when issues come up can also affect the way you experience stress. If you feel well and in control, a problem may not seem very stressful. However, if you already feel stressed or overwhelmed, the same problem may add to your existing stress and feel very overwhelming.

## Are you experiencing signs of stress?

Stress can affect your body, your behaviours, your feelings and your thoughts. Here are common signs of stress:

### Changes in your body

- Tense muscles
- Rapid breathing and heart rate
- Headaches
- Difficulties sleeping well
- Fatigue

### Changes in your behaviours

- Withdrawing from others
- Fidgeting, feeling restless
- Smoking, drinking or using more drugs than usual
- Avoiding situations that you think are stressful

### Changes in your feelings

- Feeling worried or confused
- Feeling angry or irritable
- Feeling overwhelmed or helpless
- Feeling like you can't cope

### Changes in your thoughts

- Struggling to concentrate, remember or make decisions
- Losing your self-confidence
- Having a negative attitude towards yourself and your life

Many Canadians report that stress negatively impacts their lives

- 48% Sleep quality
- 41% Personal health
- 33% Home or family
- 23% Quality of sex life
- 23% Quality of work

Many Canadians report that stress positively impacts their lives

- 46% I exercise in response to stress
- 48% Stress is proof I am involved in important things
- 31% Stress improves the quality of my work

Who is most at risk for high levels of stress?

- Women
- Younger adults
- People with few social supports
- People who expect too much of themselves
- People with high levels of responsibilities and duties
- People who see stress negatively or believe they can't cope with it

## What kinds of stress are you coping with these days?

Take our stress survey at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) to determine the different sources of stress you and your family are facing.



why does stress make me feel so awful?

At times, stress can have a negative effect on the basic dimensions of health (your thoughts, emotions, behaviours and body reactions). Stress is more likely to have a negative impact on your health if you feel threatened or at risk of danger or loss. Stress may also affect your health if you use unhealthy behaviours to cope. The negative effects of stress on your wellness can become a source of stress in and of themselves. Just talk to anyone who isn't sleeping well due to stress! For more information about the dimensions of mental health that can be influenced by stress, see *Wellness Module 1: Mental Health Matters* at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca).

can stress be a good thing?

Sometimes, stress can have a positive effect on your thoughts, emotions, behaviours and body reactions. Stress is more likely to result in positive outcomes if you see it as a challenge or something you can strive to overcome. It can help motivate you to work hard. Stress can also lead to positive effects if you respond with healthy behaviours that improve your situation. You can experience the positive effects of stress even in the face of some negative effects.

stress and illness

Your stress levels and your coping skills can also influence your physical health. Higher levels of stress can increase the risk of illness. For example, you're more likely to catch a cold or the flu when you're coping with high levels of stress. There is also evidence that stress can aggravate disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis, insulin-dependent diabetes, multiple sclerosis and more. Some of the connections between stress and illness are determined by the ways you cope with stress.

# coping with stress

There is no right or wrong way to cope with stress. What works for one person may not work for another, and what works in one situation may not work in another situation. Below, you will find common ways to cope with stress and maintain wellness.

## Focus on what you can do

There is usually something you can do to manage stress in most situations.

- Resist the urge to give up or run away from problems—these coping choices often make stress worse in the long run

## Manage your emotions

Feelings of sadness, anger or fear are common when coping with stress.

- Try not to bottle your emotions up. Try expressing your feelings by talking or writing them down
- Try not to lash out at other people. Yelling or swearing usually pushes people away when you need them the most
- Many of the coping strategies listed below are useful ways of managing your emotions

## Seek out support

Seeking social support from other people is helpful—especially when you feel you can't cope on your own. Family, friends, co-workers and health professionals can all be important sources of support.

- Ask someone for their opinion or advice on how to handle the situation
- Get more information to help make decisions
- Accept help with daily tasks and responsibilities, such as chores or child care
- Get emotional support from someone who understands you and cares about you

## Focus on the positives

This is one of the hardest things to do when coping with stress. At times, it can seem impossible. Dwelling on the negatives often adds to your stress and takes away your motivation to make things better.

- Focus on strengths rather than weaknesses—remind yourself that no one is perfect
- Look for the challenges in a situation by asking, "What can I learn from this?" or, "How can I grow as a person?"
- Try to keep things in perspective
- Try to keep a sense of humour
- Remind yourself you are doing the best you can given the circumstances

## Make a plan of action

Problem-solving around aspects of a situation that you can control is one of the most effective ways to lower your stress.

Try breaking a stressful problem into manageable chunks.

Think about the best way to approach the problem. You may decide to put other tasks on hold to concentrate on the main problem, or you may decide to wait for the right time and place to act.

- Identify and define the problem
- Determine your goal
- Brainstorm possible solutions
- Consider the pros and cons of each possible solution
- Choose the best solution for you—the perfect solution rarely exists
- Put your plan into action
- Evaluate your efforts and choose another strategy, if needed

**See our Wellness Module on problem-solving at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca).**

## Self-Care

Taking good care of yourself can be difficult during stressful times, but self-care can help you cope with problems more effectively. The trick to self-care is to look for little things you can do everyday to help yourself feel well.

Here are some self-care activities to try. Try to think of other activities that might help!

- Eat healthy foods and drink lots of water throughout the day to maintain your energy
- Try to exercise or do something active on a regular basis
- Try to avoid using alcohol or drugs as a way to cope
- Explore relaxation techniques like meditation or yoga
- Try to balance work and play—too much work can eventually lead to burnout
- Spend time on things you enjoy, such as hobbies or other activities
- Get a good night's sleep

## Take care of your relationships

Family, friends and co-workers can be affected by your stress—and they can also be part of the problem.

Keep the feelings and needs of others in mind when coping with stress, but balance them with your own.

- Be assertive about your needs rather than aggressive or passive. Being assertive means expressing your needs without hurting others
- Try not to confront others in a mean-spirited or antagonizing manner
- Accept responsibility, apologize or try to put things right when appropriate
- Talk to others who are involved and keep them informed about your decisions

### Spirituality

People who engage in a spiritual practice often experience lower levels of distress. If community is part of a spiritual practice, it may also offer helpful social support.

- Consider spiritual practices that fit with your beliefs, such as prayer or meditation
- Spend time at your place of worship or get together with others who share your beliefs
- Talk with a respected member or leader of your spiritual community

### Acceptance

There may be times when you can't change something. This can be the most challenging aspect of coping with stress. Sometimes, all you can do is manage your distress or grief.

- Denying that the problem exists may prolong your suffering and interfere with your ability to take action
- Acceptance is a process that takes time. You may need to remind yourself to be patient
- Death, illness, major losses or major life changes can be particularly difficult to accept
- Try not to get caught up in wishful thinking or dwell on what could have been

### Distraction

Distraction can be helpful when coping with short-term stress you can't control, such as reading a magazine while getting dental work done.

Distraction can be harmful if it stops you from taking action on things you can control, such as watching TV when you have school or work deadlines to meet.

Distraction by using drugs, alcohol or over-eating often leads to more stress and problems in the long term.

Distraction by overworking at school or on the job can easily lead to burnout or other problems, like family resentment.

You can do many things to take your mind off problems, such as:

- Daydreaming
- Going for a drive or walk
- Leisure activities, exercise, hobbies
- Housework, yard work or gardening
- Watching TV or movies
- Playing video games
- Spending time with friends or family
- Spending time with pets
- Surfing the Internet or sending e-mail
- Sleeping or taking a short nap

When used for short periods of time, many of these forms of distraction create opportunities to take a break and refuel—an important part of self-care.

If you feel like you can't cope, try these options:

- Talk to someone that cares about you. They may be able to provide help and support.
- Seek professional help as early as possible. Talk to your family doctor or mental health care provider, or visit a drop-in clinic or the hospital emergency room.

Try these helpful numbers:

- Crisis Line: Call 310-6789 (no area code) to connect to a crisis line in BC
- Kids' Help Phone: Call 1-800-668-6868 (free call anywhere in Canada)

### Select sources and additional resources

- Visit [www.healthlinkbc.ca](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca) for a stress journal to track stressors and how you respond to them.
- Maté, G. (2004). *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.
- Paterson, R. J. (2000). *The Assertiveness Workbook: How to Express Your Ideas and Stand Up for Yourself at Work and in Relationships*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions. (2009). *Learn About...Stress [fact sheet]*. Vancouver, BC: Author. [www.heretohelp.bc.ca/publications/factsheets/stress](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/publications/factsheets/stress)
- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2010). *Info on Stress*. Toronto, ON: Author. [www.camh.net/About\\_Addiction\\_Mental\\_Health/AMH101/info\\_stress.htm](http://www.camh.net/About_Addiction_Mental_Health/AMH101/info_stress.htm)
- Ipsos-Reid. (2002). *Canadians and Stress: A Special Report*. Toronto, ON; Author. [www.ipsos-reid.com/search/pdf/media/mr020919%2D1.pdf](http://www.ipsos-reid.com/search/pdf/media/mr020919%2D1.pdf)
- Statistics Canada. (2010). *Perceived life stress 2008*. Ottawa, ON: Author. [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2010001/article/11108-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-625-x/2010001/article/11108-eng.htm)