



What is Stress?

Feeling stress is one of the most common human experiences. Everyone experiences stress at some point in life, but not everyone experiences stress in the same way. Most people use the word “stress” when they refer to a feeling of being overwhelmed by negative events or experiences. However, stress in its simplest form can be described as a person’s reaction to changes or demands in his or her life.

Stress is not always a consequence of a negative circumstance. Positive life events such as getting married, changing jobs or having a baby can also cause stress. This type of stress is known as “eustress,” or positive stress. In contrast, negative life events such as job loss or a cancer diagnosis may cause a negative form of stress called “distress.” Either type of stress—eustress or distress—can spark personal growth.

Stress management skills are coping skills. People with good coping skills are less likely to experience negative stress reactions. Cancer patients and their caregivers can benefit greatly from learning and utilizing these skills as they face the stress associated with cancer and its treatment.

Evidence-Based Approaches

Evidence-based approaches are interventions that have been well researched and proven to have an effective outcome for many people when used as intended. The following therapies are current evidence-based approaches used by mental health professionals to assist cancer patients who are coping with stress:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** is a type of psychotherapy that focuses on modifying the thoughts and actions that are contributing to anxiety, depression and insomnia. Cognitive behavioral therapy (and its variations) is a very powerful technique that has been adapted to help people to cope with all types of conditions and stressful events. There is strong evidence that CBT can help people suffering from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, pain and fatigue associated with cancer.
- **Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)** is a type of psychotherapy that can help people overcome distress and counterproductive thinking. It is based on the idea that a greater sense of well-being can be achieved by accepting negative thoughts, feelings and hardships. Cancer patients who received interventions based on ACT showed a better emotional state, better quality of life and greater psychological flexibility in regard to a variety of stressors.

Speak to a member of your healthcare team for a referral to a mental health professional to access these therapies.

Stress Management for Medical Procedures

Aside from the stress caused by a cancer diagnosis, patients report that having to undergo frequent medical procedures may add to their distress. Healthcare professionals also report that many patients do not complete cancer treatment because of procedure-related panic, distress and claustrophobia.

Patients should have the chance to use a relaxation technique before undergoing a potentially distressing procedure to instill a sense of confidence and control. Before a medical procedure, such as a blood draw, you can try out the following techniques—they may well help to alleviate your anxiety and stress:

- **Mindful moist mouth.** Take a sip of water, hold it on the tongue for 10 seconds before swallowing and then repeat the process three times. This helps alleviate dry mouth, a common symptom of stress.
- **Squeeze balls (also known as “stress balls”).** Using a stress ball or another squeezable item such as a small bean bag, squeeze tightly and then slowly release the ball. At the same time, take a slow comfortable breath. Each time you squeeze the ball, take a slow breath. Repeat four times.

Do-It-Yourself Stress Management

Relaxation techniques promote health by relaxing the body and quieting the mind. These are used to relieve stress and muscle tension, lower blood pressure and reduce pain. These techniques can be used for both children and adults to relieve stress during treatment, challenging procedures, or at bedtime. There are many techniques that patients and caregivers can perform by themselves, either on their own time or as part of a small group. The following approaches are examples of specific stress-relieving exercises:

Deep breathing/belly breathing

Involves focusing on taking slow, deep, even breaths. The way you breathe affects the whole body. Breathing exercises help you to relax, reducing tension and relieving stress. When you breathe deeply, a message is sent to your brain telling it you need to calm down and relax. The brain then sends this message to your body. Breathing exercises are easy to learn and do not require any special tools or equipment. See the following example of a deep-belly breathing exercise:

1. Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Place one hand on your stomach and your other hand on your chest.
3. Take a deep breath through your nose. Notice the hand on your stomach will rise. The hand on your chest will remain still.
4. Exhale through your nose. The hand on your stomach will move, and the hand on your chest will remain still. Focus on your breathing and your hands.

Guided imagery

Focuses your mind on a sequence or story of positive thoughts and mental images. Guided imagery can be used when you are alone or in group settings. There are many recordings and apps available that enable you to practice guided imagery anywhere.

Yoga

Uses breathing techniques, exercise and meditation for health and relaxation. The most basic of all poses in yoga is the “Mountain Pose.” Every yoga practice begins with this simple pose. The pose encourages your connection with earth, connects you with your own body, and grounds you in the present moment. It is very relaxing and calming. Here is how you achieve the Mountain Pose:

1. Stand barefoot on a mat, rug or the floor. Your shoulders, neck, and upper body are relaxed, yet straight. Your arms are at your side.
2. Become aware of your breath. Inhale slowly into your belly and then exhale. Continue taking deep slow breaths and exhaling.
3. Feel the ground underneath your feet. Spread your toes and lift them off the ground. Then relax and let your toes fall back onto the mat.
4. Imagine roots spreading from your feet deep down into the earth. Feel the connection and the stability that these roots offer you.
5. Continue breathing slowly and evenly. You are now standing strong as a mountain.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

A technique used to evoke a relaxation response in the body. During PMR, the major muscles of your body are systematically tensed and then relaxed, and attention is paid to the sensations you are feeling during that process. Many people find it helpful to practice PMR to help them relax during stressful situations and/or before going to bed. This is how you get ready to practice PMR:

1. Begin by finding a comfortable position—either sitting or lying down in a place where you will not be interrupted. Many people find that just sitting in a comfortable chair or on the couch is a good position to start.
2. Allow your attention to focus only on your body. If your mind begins to wander, that is okay. Accept that your mind will wander during this exercise. Just pause, then focus on the muscles you were working on when your attention slipped and you started thinking about something other than the PMR exercise. Your mind may wander many times; PMR takes practice.
3. Take a deep breath into your abdomen (stomach), hold for a few seconds and exhale slowly. As you breathe, notice your stomach rising and your lungs filling with air. Take your time and just spend a minute or two breathing and noticing your breathing. As you exhale, imagine the tension in your body being released and flowing out of your body. And again inhale ... and then exhale. Feel your body already relaxing. As you go through each step, remember to keep breathing normally. Try not to hold your breath.

The following steps will help you to begin your first progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) exercise:

1. Tighten the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as high as you can. Hold for about 5 seconds. Release the muscles in your eyebrows and let them go back to their normal state. Feel that tension fall away.
Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds, and just breathe.
2. Now smile widely; feel your mouth and cheeks tense. Hold for about 5 seconds and then release. Appreciate the feeling of softness in your face.
Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds, and just breathe.
3. Next, tighten your eye muscles by squinting (with your eyelids tightly shut). Hold for about 5 seconds, and then release.
Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds, and just breathe.

4. Gently pull your head back as if to look at the ceiling. Hold for about 5 seconds, and then release. Feel the tension melt away.

Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds, and just breathe.

5. Now feel the weight of your relaxed head and neck sink. Breathe in and then breathe out. Let go of all the stress. Breathe in, and breathe out. Then lift your head back up.

Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds, and just breathe.

6. Now, tightly (but without straining), clench your right fist and hold this position for about 5 seconds and then release.

Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds, and just breathe.

7. Now, tighten the muscles in your right forearm and hand. Feel that buildup of tension. You may even be able to visualize that set of muscles tightening. Hold for about 5 seconds ... and then release. Enjoy that feeling of limpness. Continue the exercise by progressively tightening the muscles in your other hand and arm and then relaxing them.

Pause for about 5 to 10 seconds, and just breathe.

Continue to do more of this series of PMR exercises (tighten and then relax each of the groups of muscles in your shoulders, your upper back, your chest, your lower back, your stomach, your legs and your feet) as you need to. Be sure to pause for about 5 to 10 seconds in between tightening and relaxing each muscle group and take those few seconds to breathe and relax. At the end of PMR exercises, you should be experiencing a feeling of complete body relaxation.

Adapted from Harold Cohen, PhD. Progressive Muscle Relaxation Script.

For tips on reducing stress, managing stress, breathing exercises, art templates and suggested technology to help with stress, please visit www.LLS.org/Booklets to find our free booklet *Managing Stress*.



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