



Topics

1. What is stress?
2. Common stress responses
3. Dealing with stress
4. Problem solving skills
5. Your stress management plan

"Believe you can and you're halfway there"

~ Theodore Roosevelt

For any weight loss program to be successful in the long term, you will need to establish and maintain a range of new, healthy habits for life. Some of these healthy habits relate specifically to having a healthy mind, which includes the ability to deal with stress. There is a strong relationship between stress, obesity and ill health. Unfortunately, some stress responses will work against your healthy weight strategies.

This module outlines ways to deal with stress in a healthy and productive way that will support your weight loss program.



Key Points



- Stress has been linked to obesity and other health problems, so it's important to manage stress in a healthy and productive way.
- There are many causes of stress – identifying the causes of your stress is often the first step in minimising and dealing with it.
- Many strategies for dealing with stress will actually help you achieve your weight loss goals.



Identifying the causes of your stress is often the first step in dealing with it

Environmental stress

Environmental stress is a response to things around you such as loud noise, time constraints or pressure from colleagues at work or family members.

Fatigue and overwork

This stress builds up over a long time and can cause significant health problems. It can result from not managing your time efficiently and not taking time out to relax and rest.

1. What is stress?

Stress is a normal part of our lives - it is your body's way of responding to a demanding situation. It is often described as the feeling of being overloaded, tense and worried. We all experience stress at times. It can sometimes help to motivate us to finish a task or perform well. However, stress can also be harmful if we become over stressed and our response to stress interferes with a healthy, productive lifestyle.

Identifying the causes of your stress is often the first step in dealing with it. There are many causes, such as:

Survival stress

Survival stress may be a response to a dangerous situation, e.g.: an approaching bushfire or an intruder in your home.

Internal stress

Internal stress is caused by your thoughts about a situation, and these thoughts themselves can make you feel stressed. This often happens when we worry about things beyond our control, or the possibility of bad things happening. What is stressful for one person may not actually be considered stressful by another.

Stress can be acute, which is a brief stress response due to a specific demand such as a deadline, performance, or argument. Short, sharp reactions to acute stressors that are quickly resolved and forgotten about will not cause permanent harm because your body is well designed to cope with this type of situation.

However, there may be episodic acute stress, where acute stress is experienced over and over, such as someone who is always in a rush, or is constantly in arguments with family members.

Stress may also be chronic, due to ongoing demands and pressures with no end in sight, such as an extremely demanding job or financial stress. These types of stress can be very detrimental to your health and happiness.



2. Common stress responses

When you face a stressful event, your body releases hormones called adrenalin and cortisol. These hormones give your body increased strength and energy to get through the stressful situation. Our heart rate increases, our breathing becomes more rapid, our blood pressure goes up and our muscle tension increases. This is often referred to as the “fight or flight” response.

This response may be helpful in some situations, such as when dealing with survival stress, where you either need to fight off a danger or run away from it. However, if the stress is emotional, there is no outlet for this response, so the body deals with it in various other ways.

Unfortunately, many people’s stress response is unhealthy and unproductive. These coping strategies may feel like you have temporarily reduced your stress levels, but they cause more damage in the long term.

They include:

- overeating or skipping meals
- withdrawing from family and friends
- watching television, scrolling social media, or playing video games for hours
- staying in bed and oversleeping
- being forgetful and unfocused
- procrastinating and filling up your day to avoid facing issues
- taking stress out on others (verbal or physical outbursts)
- smoking, drinking, or using other drugs to relax

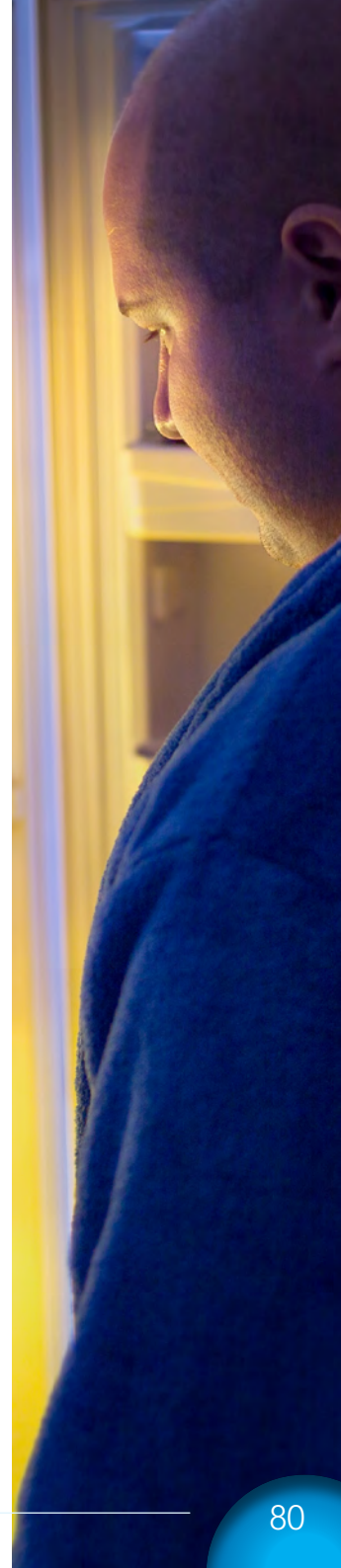


Unhealthy symptoms of stress can include:

- susceptibility to common infection
- headaches and other aches and pains
- upset stomach, indigestion, diarrhoea
- decreasing self-esteem, lack of confidence, negative self-talk
- anger, irritability, depression, anxiety, and fatigue
- insomnia
- feeling overwhelmed and out of control
- high blood pressure, heart disease

Stress can contribute to weight gain in the following ways:

- Chronic stress often means we are too busy to prepare healthy meals, and opt for processed, fast foods instead.
- People experiencing chronic stress tend to crave more fatty, salty, and sugary foods. In addition, excess nervous energy can often cause you to eat more than you normally would, leading to weight gain.
- Prolonged stress can affect sleep and alter blood sugar levels, causing mood swings and fatigue and long-term health problems.
- Stress hormones influence where we store our fat. High levels of stress cause an increase in cortisol. This rise in cortisol is linked to increased abdominal (visceral) fat, which is linked to greater health risks than fat stored elsewhere in the body.
- Too much cortisol can slow your metabolism, which makes it more difficult to lose weight.
- When stressed and overloaded, many people feel that they don’t have time to exercise or just don’t ‘feel’ like it. What should be a priority then often becomes neglected.





3. Dealing with stress

Learning how to deal with stress in healthy ways is very important. The first step is becoming aware of your triggers and their relationship to your health. For example, when I am feeling stressed/anxious I will skip my meals and reach for sweets instead. It's very helpful to recognise your triggers and write them down.

There are some simple techniques that may help turn an unhealthy, unproductive stress response into a productive, focused one:



Deep Breathing

All you need for this strategy is find a quiet, comfortable place you can go to for around five to ten minutes where you won't be disturbed. Even just two minutes can make a big difference! Close your eyes and concentrate just on the sound of your breath in and out. When we are stressed, we usually take shallow, quick breaths, so try to increase the depth of each breath in so the air fills your lungs from the bottom up. Deep breathing activates our vagus nerve in our diaphragm which helps us to feel more relaxed. Practicing simple breathing techniques 1 - 3 times per day is an incredibly helpful (and quick) way to regulate our nervous system, and in turn can improve symptoms of stress or anxiety.

To try any of the following practices - Sit comfortably on a chair with your back straight and chin parallel to the floor or lie down comfortably with your face and shoulders relaxed.



Healthy diet

Your body and mind are better prepared to deal with stress when they are fuelled by good nutrition. Taking the time to prepare, sit and savour a meal at home allows you to relax and take a break from the worries of the day. In addition, the social interaction afforded by sitting around the family dinner table to eat a meal can also facilitate communication about the concerns of the day, which is another means of letting go of stress.



Exercise

Getting enough exercise (at least 30 minutes each day) will provide a natural release of endorphins, which are hormones that make you feel good, and also make you more likely to sleep better at night. These benefits will make it easier for you to cope with stressful situations. The other benefit of taking time away from the home or office to do exercise means you have time to clear your head. You may like to try yoga or Tai Chi as the slow, rhythmic, deliberate movements and controlled breathing associated with these activities are excellent for achieving relaxation.

Box Breath

- Imagine a square or 'box' with each side representing one part of the 'count' for this breath practice.
- Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose for a count of 4 going 'up' the side of the box
- Gently hold your breath at the 'top' for a count of 4
- Exhale out slowly and deeply for a count of 4 going 'down' the other side of the box
- Gently hold your breath for count of 4 at the 'bottom' of the box, and repeat.
- Repeat this pattern for 3 - 10 rounds.
- Imagine all the tension in your muscles being released.

Balanced Breath

- Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose for a count of 4
- Exhale out slowly and deeply for a count of 4
- Breathe in and out following this pattern for 3-10 rounds.



Positive self-talk

Negative thought patterns and depressed mood states can increase your stress levels, and they can certainly undermine your weight loss efforts. When stuck in a negative mindset, it is easy to overemphasise any perceived threats and feel overwhelmed. Self-talk such as “I can’t cope” or “I am too busy” can be replaced with more calming thoughts such as “I am doing well and have already achieved great things” or “I can handle this situation if I take it one step at a time”. Adopt a positive perspective and look at the big picture, being patient and assigning ourselves praise can be challenging, but celebrating little wins is powerful for long term success. Talk to yourself as you would a loved one. Having your own back will help you face any challenges.



Take control

You may need to prioritise and manage your time more efficiently. Sometimes, this can be by saying no. Differentiate between “should” and “must” and learn to say “no” if saying “yes” means increased stress for you. Often, saying no is in fact saying yes to ourselves. For example: if someone asks if you want to do something that you don’t want to do, often we may feel pressured to say yes to please the other person. Perhaps by saying no, that means you then have time to food prep this afternoon or spend time with your kids. By saying no, we are taking care of ourselves by putting ourselves first and prioritising our health and our own needs. Ask your support network for help and share your workload. You may need to learn to express your feelings more effectively and communicate your needs and boundaries.



Relax

Take time out to nurture yourself. Make time for fun, laughter, and rest. Schedule regular time out to do something you enjoy, like reading a book, spend time in the garden or listen to music. This can be just 10min every morning just for you! Spend more time with friends and family members that you find uplifting. Surround yourself with people who motivate you and bring you joy.



Professional help

If you are not able to achieve adequate stress relief with any of the strategies listed above, or you feel you could benefit from some professional help to better deal with stress, speak to your doctor about a referral to a stress management counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist. They have been specifically trained in a whole range of specialised and effective techniques, and will no doubt be able to help you find a stress management technique that works for you.

This can be done by working with your GP to access a mental health care plan.

Alternatively, here are some online or phone-based resources:

- www.beyondblue.org.au or 1300224636
- www.lifeline.org.au or 131114
- www.headspace.org.au
- www.au.reachout.com



4. Problem solving skills

In addition to the techniques listed above, you can learn to develop simple problem-solving skills. Problem solving requires you to be mindful of problems and prepared to deal with the issues. High stress situations tend to crop up as a result of emotional and / or social factors. Building greater awareness of yourself through reflection and being able to identify these high-risk situations and modify or adapt your eating and exercise habits will enable you to find a solution that works for you.

But just knowing what to do may not be enough to ensure success. Negative thinking patterns and negative mood states can undermine your efforts.

The development of problem-solving skills is particularly helpful at times when you are dealing with emotional stress, so you don't revert to unhealthy coping habits to deal with these situations.

Negative thinking patterns and negative mood states can undermine your effort

STEPS FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

1. Define the problem as you see it.
2. Make a list of possible solutions.
3. Weigh up the pros and cons of each option.
4. Choose the best and healthiest option for you and make this your goal.
5. Make a plan of how to achieve your goal.
6. Commence your chosen course of action.
7. Enjoy the feeling of accomplishment and confidence you get from solving a problem effectively

5. Your stress management plan

By focusing on your stressors and how you usually deal with stressful situations, you can clearly identify what needs to change.

How do you usually respond to stress?

(e.g. lose sleep, eat sweet foods, skip meals, lose my temper)

How can you change any of your stress responses that are unhealthy behaviours?

(e.g. I will go for a walk to clear my head instead of eating a handful of biscuits)

Choose a specific situation that frequently causes you stress

(e.g. meeting deadlines at work)

How do you usually respond to this stress?

(e.g. become unfocused and procrastinate)

What are some problem solving strategies for you to deal specifically with this situation?

(e.g. I will timetable activities, and turn my phone and email off for an hour a day, in order to focus on meeting my deadlines)

How can you eliminate some of the other major stressors in your life?

(e.g. I can say "no" to taking on extra tasks when I feel overloaded)