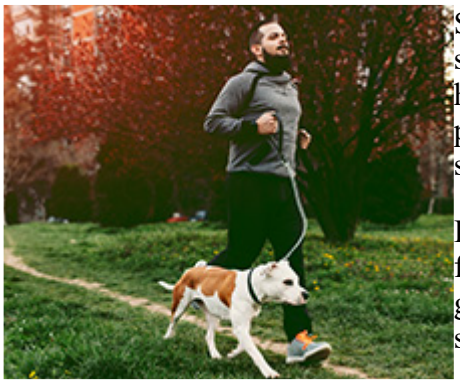
Good and bad stress: Do you know the difference?



Some stress is actually good for us. It can help our minds focus, our senses sharpen and our bodies get ready for physical challenges. Who hasn't felt butterflies in their stomachs and their heart beat faster before a presentation at work, a job interview, a date or a rollercoaster ride? These short bursts of stress are completely natural and normal.

It's the long-term, inescapable stress – job insecurity, chronic illness, financial difficulties, relationship breakdowns, work overload – that's not good for us. When our minds and bodies are constantly flooded with stress hormones, our physical and mental health can suffer.

Whatever the kind of stress we experience, one thing is clear: it's unavoidable. So we need to find ways to harness the power of short-term stress and control the negative effects of long-term stress.

Bad stress blues

According to the Mayo Clinic, long-term stress is a contributing factor to many health problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, diabetes and depression. It often makes us irritable, angry, withdrawn and/or unmotivated and this impacts our professional and personal relationships, resulting in more stress.

Long-term stress has such a damaging effect on our lives because many people develop unhealthy coping mechanisms. These include:

- Consuming too much alcohol or caffeine.
- Overeating or undereating.
- Dependence on prescription medication or illegal drugs.
- Smoking.
- Withdrawing from family, friends and activities.
- Consuming sugary, high-fat foods.

While these behaviours might provide temporary relief, they actually increase stress and further damage our health over time.

Turning bad stress into good stress

While we can't control what life throws our way, we can find healthy and effective ways to cope. If you're starting to feel overwhelmed, try the following:

- **Exercise.** Physical activity not only keeps your body and mind in shape, it's also a great stress-busting tool. Exercise helps to increase the production of endorphins − your body's feel-good chemicals. Working up a sweat will help you shed the day's stresses, elevate your mood and remain calm.
- **Stop and breathe.** Find ways to relax and refocus. This can include breathing exercises, meditation, massage, yoga, tai chi or just finding time to read or listen to music.
- **Focus on your accomplishments.** There are always those weeks when everything goes wrong or you have too much to do. When this happens, focus on your accomplishments rather than your failures. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal in which they write down what they are thankful for every day, including their own talents and abilities.
- **Talk to a trusted friend or family member.** Knowing that people have your best interests at heart can greatly reduce your stress levels. Your friends and family can help you put things into perspective and offer sound advice and support.
- **Socialize.** Stressful events can make you feel miserable, tired and sometimes sad. While the last thing you may want to do is be around other people, it's actually the first thing you should do. It's hard to feel anxious when you're around positive people and laughter is the best medicine − it triggers the release of endorphins that give you a sense of well-being.

- **Set boundaries.** Many of us find it hard to say no and, as a result, find ourselves overwhelmed with work, family and social obligations. Setting boundaries is a skill that takes practice so many experts suggest starting with small things.
- **Take action.** Sometimes we increase our stress by fretting about a problem instead of doing something about it. For example, instead of worrying constantly about your finances, take action by consulting a financial advisor, talking to your bank or contacting your Employee Assistance Program.

Finally, remember that some stress makes life exciting. It drives you to reach goals, deal with problems and increase your effectiveness in all areas of your life. However, if you continue to feel overwhelmed and/or sad, talk to your doctor or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.