

Reduce Your Stress to Improve Both Physical and Mental Health

Protect yourself from stress-induced illnesses with mindfulness-based stress-reduction techniques.

Stress is a state of physical or mental tension that results from your interactions with your environment. Stress is a normal part of dealing with everyday life events: you get stuck in traffic, the washing machine breaks, a storm knocks out the power for two days.

Positive events, such as getting a new job or buying a home, can also generate stress, but it is usually the negative events in your life that put prolonged, excessive demands on your coping resources and cause you to feel lasting stress.

The Physiology of Stress

While you may think of being “stressed out” as a state of mind, research has confirmed that stress creates numerous physical manifestations.

“Chronic, high levels of stress are associated with overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones, which has widespread implications for physical health and well-being. Over time, high levels of these hormones can contribute to damage of the blood vessels of the heart and brain,” explains Susan Evans, PhD, professor of psychology in clinical psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College. “Chronic stress can take a major toll on your body, contributing to an increased risk of heart disease, digestive problems, depression, memory impairment, worsening skin conditions, and a weakened immune system.”

The general function of cortisol, the “stress hormone” secreted by the adrenal gland, is to restore balance in your body following a stressful event; it affects blood pressure, cardiovascular function, metabolic rate, blood glucose levels, and immune responses. However, when your stress level remains high, your cortisol level remains elevated, which produces inflammation and disrupts processes throughout your body.



Practicing mindfulness can be done virtually anywhere at any time.

Another hormone, dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), also fluctuates in response to chronic stress.

“When stress levels go up, DHEA levels go down. DHEA is involved in turning off the inflammatory response,” explains Dr. Evans. Chronic inflammation is associated with a host of diseases, including heart disease, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn’s disease, and cancer.

Fortunately, you can reduce your stress level.

Mindfulness for Stress

Mindfulness-based stress reduction, or MBSR, is based on centuries-old meditation practices. According to Dr. Evans, “MBSR is a client-centered approach that uses intensive training in various forms of mindfulness meditation practices aimed at teaching people to develop calmness of both mind and body. It’s about training your mind to be completely present, right here, right now.” Although MBSR is based on an Eastern contemplative tradition, it involves no religious, philosophical, or cultural teaching.

Formal practices that increase mindfulness include body scan meditation (focusing your attention on each part of your body from head to toe), sitting

WHAT YOU CAN DO

AN EXERCISE IN MBSR

No matter how well it is explained, mindfulness is difficult to understand unless you experience it. Here is an exercise in MBSR; try it for five or 10 minutes. To gain the most benefits, practice this exercise every day, gradually increasing your time to 30 or more minutes.

- ▶ **Sit quietly** in a comfortable position.
- ▶ **Focus your awareness** on your breath at your nostrils or your belly. Become aware of breathing in and breathing out.
- ▶ **Don’t force or manipulate** your breath in any way—just allow it to anchor you to the present moment.
- ▶ **When your mind wanders** away from your breath, bring your mind back to your breath, letting go of any judgment.
- ▶ **Keep coming back** to your breath whenever you find your mind has wandered off.

meditation (in which the primary focus is on the breath), and gentle hatha yoga.

Effects of MBSR

Many studies have shown that MBSR is effective in decreasing both physical and psychological symptoms.

“Studies on MBSR have included patients with cancer, fibromyalgia, chronic pain, and skin conditions. MBSR has also been found effective in patients with anxiety and eating disorders, and in preventing relapse of depression,” says Dr. Evans. MBSR training has also been linked to other physiological responses, such as improved glucose metabolism.

MBSR is now widely accepted by mainstream healthcare providers, and it’s also popular because it can be practiced virtually anywhere at any time; no special equipment is needed.

“Overall, people who practice MBSR report an increased ability to relax, greater energy and enthusiasm for life, improved self-esteem, and an increased ability to cope more effectively with stress,” says Dr. Evans. 🧘