

Coping With Stress and Anxiety



Stress and anxiety are the fight-and-flight instincts that are your body's way of responding to emergencies. An intruder crawling through your bedroom window in the dark of night may spark the response. Fears and worries may also set off the instinct. For example, worry over a loved one's fragile mental or physical health is a common source of ongoing stress and anxiety.

When stressful challenges occur, your body senses danger and responds by releasing hormones into your bloodstream, which speed up your heart, breathing, and other physical processes and prepare you to react fast to avoid the threat. This natural reaction is known as the stress response.

Research shows that long-term activation of your body's stress response impairs your immune system's ability to fight against disease and increases the risk of physical and mental health problems. For example, studies have shown that stress and anxiety in older adults are associated with the following:

- Increased physical problems, such as disability and difficulty in carrying out activities of daily living
- Increased health problems, such as coronary artery disease
- Decreased sense of well-being and satisfaction with life

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Stress and Aging

Challenges, which often go hand-in-hand with aging and can cause both short-term and chronic stress, may include:

- A serious illness, such as cancer or Alzheimer's disease
- Multiple medical conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, and arthritis
- Physical limitations, such as not being able to walk around the block or drive a car
- Chronic pain
- Retirement
- Financial concerns, such as learning to live on a limited income or coping with today's struggling economy
- Cognitive changes, such as declines in short-term memory
- Caretaking demands, such as responsibility for a loved one's care
- Changing life situations, such as moving to a new residence
- Loss of loved ones and grief

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Signs of Stress

Although there are tremendous differences among individuals, if you are feeling stress, you may have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Worry, anxiety, or panic attacks
- Sadness or depression
- Feeling pressured and hurried
- Irritability and moodiness
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Physical symptoms, such as stomach problems, headaches, or chest pain
- Allergic reactions, such as a skin rash or asthma
- Problems sleeping
- Feeling overwhelmed and helpless
- Drinking too much alcohol, smoking, or misusing drugs
- Sexual dysfunction
- Eating too much or not enough

Tips for Preventing and Coping With Stress and Anxiety



Participate in social and community activities.

Social interaction and a sense of giving to your community enhance self-esteem and reduce stress.

Take care of yourself. Get regular exercise, eat nourishing food, and maintain a healthy weight.

Participate in activities you enjoy. Have you always wanted to learn a new language? Take up ballroom dancing? Mentor a child? Now is the time! (And activities like these will also help your brain.)

Stay focused on positive things and avoid negative self talk such as “I can’t do that” or “I’m too old.” When your self talk is negative, you will feel more stress. Instead of thinking what you can’t do, remember what you can do.

Connect with the people who are most meaningful to you. People with friends tend to be

happier than those without. Stable social relations help you adjust to changes such as retiring, moving, and losing loved ones.

Remember stressful events that you successfully coped with in the past and repeat what worked before.

Focus on addressing your problems instead of feeling helpless about them. Think of them as “challenges” or “tests” rather than as insurmountable obstacles.

Learn and use relaxation techniques and meditation.

If you are a caregiver, **make use of support and education groups**, as well as respite care, which provides time off for caregivers.

Seeking Help



If you have an ongoing problem with stress and worry that prevents you from enjoying life, and you feel that you cannot control these feelings, help is available. Seeking the assistance of a psychologist may be beneficial.

Three of the therapeutic approaches that psychologists use to help older adults who are having problems with stress and anxiety are:

- Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which helps clients uncover and change negative thoughts or points of view that are causing and prolonging stress and anxiety.
- Relaxation training, which may include progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, meditation, and education about tension and stress.
- Supportive therapy, in which the psychologist listens to and validates feelings.

Other Ways Psychologists Can Help



Psychologists are experts in the therapies just described. These are techniques that are proven to reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety in older adults.

Psychologists can treat the depression that often accompanies anxiety disorders. Between one third and one half of older adults who are depressed also have anxiety disorders. Individuals experiencing both anxiety and depression have more physical and mental health problems than those with one of these disorders.

Psychologists can assist older adults with related symptoms, such as overuse of alcohol. They can help increase one's motivation to stop drinking, identify

circumstances that trigger drinking, and help one learn new methods to cope with high-risk drinking situations.

Psychologists can help older adults reduce or stop the overuse of medication taken for anxiety or other symptoms.

Psychologists can also assist family members who are having trouble coping with the stressful demands of caregiving.

Resources



To find a psychologist

www.findapsychologist.org

AARP's Relax Your Stress Away

www.aarp.org/health/staying_healthy/stress/a2003-03-11-takingtime.html

APA Office on Aging

www.apa.org/pi/aging/homepage.html

This fact sheet was developed by the APA Office on Aging and Committee on Aging, in cooperation with Elizabeth Vierck, health writer.

For more information about psychology and aging, visit the APA Office on Aging Web site listed above.