

## Stress Management

<https://www.addiction.com/in-recovery/healthy-living/stress-management/>

Family and relationship conflicts, finances, looking for or starting a new job or resuming your old one, health worries — these are just a few of the many stressors you'll likely be dealing with during recovery. Unfortunately, stress is a normal and unavoidable part of life, including part of living a sober life. So that means learning new, healthier ways to deal with tension and frustration.

Stress is a common trigger for every type of addiction; the more stress you're under, the more likely you'll seek an escape from it. Whether that means of escape is drugs, alcohol, food, unhealthy sexual behavior, gambling or something else, or multiple things. According to the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) (NIDA), medical specialists believe that stress is the leading cause of relapse back into drug abuse as well as smoking. Research shows that the brains of drug abusers are more hypersensitivity to stress, which may prompt them to relieve their stress by returning to drugs.

The effect of stress on the body is complex, touching nearly every major system. When we experience tension-filled situations our bodies automatically release hormones designed to allow us to react to danger, the classic "fight or flight response." When we feel threatened, veins in the skin constrict to send more blood to the major muscles that allow us to flee or defend ourselves. That physiological response serves us well if we're running from a bear or need to pull a child out of harm's way quickly. But when stress levels get out of control — meaning they are severe and/or chronic — it takes a serious toll on your body.

Unchecked or poorly managed stress can be a slippery slope back to self-medicating, but by listening to your body and becoming aware of the signs of stress you can reduce your risk of relapse. Here are some of the ways your body is telling you that you need to de-stress, according to the [American Psychological Association](#).

- Headaches, muscle tension, neck or back pain
- Upset stomach
- Dry mouth
- Chest pains, rapid heartbeat
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite or overeating "comfort foods"
- Increased frequency of colds
- Lack of concentration or focus
- Memory problems or forgetfulness
- Jitters
- Irritability
- Short temper
- Anxiety

While stress is inevitable, you can take positive steps to acknowledge and defuse daily stressors so they're no longer a tipping point into relapse. The most effective stress management often comes from making healthy lifestyle changes, and, when necessary, working with mental health professionals. Here are a few practical ways to lower stress and increase your chances of staying sober:

**Manage your time.** Especially for the first 90 days of recovery — the period in which you're most likely to relapse — it's essential to streamline your day and manage your time. Too many duties,

chores, assignments, projects or to-do lists that you draw up and fail to complete will only serve as a major source of stress. Eliminate all but essential recovery activities, like 12-step meetings or counseling, from your daily schedule. If you wind up with only one or two things you simply must do, that's a great start. It's also important to add some margin for days when nothing seems to go as planned.

**Talk it out.** Bottled-up emotions increase frustration and stress, so it's important to share your feeling with a friend, family member, counselor or sponsor. Talking with someone else can help clear your mind of confusion so you can focus on problem-solving. Ask the person for pointers and even how they handle setbacks and discouragements. Similarly, it's important to distance yourself from any loved ones, friends or co-workers who don't fully understand addiction or support your recovery efforts. If you're not in the mood to talk, consider journaling. Writing down your thoughts and feelings (and what's causing your stress) can be a way to let out those emotions so you can move on to a happier state of mind.

**Identify stressors in advance.** What's most likely to be a source of stress for you? For example, is it running late, a looming work deadline or a relationship conflict? How can you plan ahead so you feel better? Could you leave a few minutes earlier or set your alarm 15 minutes for an earlier wake-up time? Is it possible to prioritize projects better, or be sure not to overcommit to more than you can handle? Decline an invitation to avoid a potential confrontation? Having a game plan ahead of time means that you don't have to be thinking perfectly in order to choose well at a vulnerable moment. And remember to take a calming breath when stress does happen; simply focusing on your breath for a couple of minutes will help slow things down so you can think through what, exactly, is stressful and remind yourself that you *can* deal with it positively.

**Get a good night's sleep.** Solid slumber — which for most people is seven to eight hours of shut-eye per night — can do wonders for your mood and your ability to manage stress. That's because sleep restores body and mind. And, in fact, the sleep-stress cycle works both ways: Unmanaged stress can interfere with sleep by making your mind and body more alert, aroused and awake. Visit the [Sleep](#) section for healthy slumber tips.

**Choose a stress-lowering activity.** When you feel tension creeping in get busy exercising, playing music, baking or reading – whatever helps you to feel relaxed.

**Take a deep breath.** Formally practicing deep breathing whenever you feel angry, upset, frustrated, stressed or anxious is an excellent way to reduce those negative feelings and calm yourself down. You may even considering scheduling a few “deep breathing breaks” into your day. Start with five minutes in the morning and five minutes in the afternoon. Try it: Sit with your eyes closed and place both hands on your belly. Start breathing slowly and deeply. Breathe in and feel the breath fill up your belly and breathe out and feel the breath leave your belly. Do this for 10 breaths.

**Try yoga.** Yoga is a form of exercise that combines specific postures with breath work and meditation. It can be done almost anywhere; take a class at a local fitness center or yoga studio, or use a DVD to practice at home. By focusing on your breath you can learn to pay attention to what makes cravings and urges crop up and what makes them seem less daunting and hard to manage. This ancient practice helps you become more mindful, which allows you to become more aware of your own thoughts and emotions as they arise. Breath work can also improve the detoxification and healing of your lungs and help you feel both energized and relaxed.

**Practice meditation.** If the idea of meditating sounds daunting, realize that it can be as simple as taking the time to calm yourself by breathing deeply and focusing on the present moment (yoga, mentioned above, is a form meditation, after all). There are many different kinds of meditation, some that you can teach yourself with the aid of a manual, a CD or DVD, or you can learn how to do it in a

class. Many meditators say it helps them to develop an inner calm and experience a direct connection to their inner self or higher power. Others say meditation improves their mental functioning, provides stress relief and promotes healthy behaviors.

Beyond achieving momentary calm, meditation can provide a sense of clarity to help you overcome the threat of stressors, which can turn into triggers to use. Suppose you know you'll be faced with situations that would trigger the desire to reach for alcohol or drugs to reduce stress and cope with physical or emotional pain. Meditation can be an effective way to reduce these harmful impulses and allow you to get through the challenging time without giving in to your urges.

**Be more mindful.** Self-criticism and self-judgment are a common source of stress for people in recovery. Mindfulness training, or the experience of paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and cravings without judging yourself, is one way to make peace with that inner voice. With mindfulness, you simply say to yourself *yeah, there's that voice, there's that urge again, interesting. I'm going to just notice it, accept it as part of me and let it move on.*

**Take care of your body.** Caring for your physical self is an often-overlooked way to manage stress. Regular exercise naturally makes you feel better by raising your level of endorphins, which are linked to a positive mindset. Similarly, eating a proper diet will provide the nutrients your body needs to create a foundation for healthy physical and emotional well-being. Visit the sections on [“Exercise”](#) and [“Nutrition”](#) to learn more.