Stress is a fact of life. The key to reducing the unhealthy and aging effects of stress is identifying its causes and implementing positive coping techniques. It is vital to aging well to reduce your stress and manage its effects in healthy ways.
Impact of Stress on How We Age

Your immune system’s ability to recognize threats is essential to maintaining your health. Stress undermines your vitality, reduces your cognitive reserves and alters your immune system’s responses. Stress can lead to serious health problems and accelerate your biologic aging.

To cope, we often develop unhealthy approaches to dealing with stress. Stress may trigger emotional eating or arguments with loved ones. You may turn to cigarettes, alcohol or drugs to numb your stress.

Mild acute stress can be beneficial as it can spur you into action, motivate and energize you. The key is to not let stressors pile up.

Transitions Cause Stress

You will experience many transitions as you grow older that will significantly impact your lifestyle and quality of life. Your physical abilities change. Financial uncertainty increases as you plan for retirement. The health of your loved ones declines. Learning to manage the transitions of aging is important to effective stress management.

Taking proactive steps to integrate healthy lifestyle choices into your daily life will boost your resiliency. Incorporating a healthy diet, being physically active and getting enough sleep are three activities you can control.

Anticipate future adjustments to your living arrangement so you can consider your options before a stressful health crisis. Consult your financial advisor to develop a plan to secure the lifestyle you want.

Shifting to a caregiving role for your loved ones is one of the most significant transitions you will ever experience. Caregiving is very rewarding but is often emotionally and physically stressful, leaving you vulnerable to changes in your own health. If you are a caregiver, take action to preserve your own health and well-being.

Navigating aging transitions is very challenging. Recognizing you are in a period of transition helps you gain clarity and take steps to uncover your options for effectively dealing with it.

Strategies for Managing Stress

Beyond incorporating lifestyle changes into managing your stress, it is vital to integrate other key strategies. Connecting with others and having a sense of purpose in your life are crucial. Relaxation techniques are also an essential component of stress management.

Maintaining your social connections is a significant strategy for managing stress as you age. Social contact is an excellent stress reliever. Eat lunch with a friend, email a relative, take a workout class with a group or visit your place of worship.

Having a sense of meaning to your life is essential to stress management too. Find new passions. Volunteer for a charitable organization.

Practicing mindfulness in meditation or incorporating massage, tai chi or yoga into your day can help slow your breathing and focus your attention on the here and now. These techniques are easy to adapt to changes to your physical abilities and you can utilize them throughout your life.

As you begin to shed your tension, you will find you are better able to focus and your increased energy and optimism can help you remain calm and clear in everything you do.
Final Thoughts

You do not need to wait until stress has a negative impact on your life to take action. You can incorporate stress relieving activities to enhance your quality of life today. Navigating the range of stressors in our lives takes effort and many are outside our ability to influence or control. Learning to embrace life’s uncertainties is paramount to minimizing the impact of the stress of aging on your health and well-being.

Take Action Now

• Pay attention to your life now. Make a list of the 10 situations, concerns or challenges that trigger your stress and identify what you can do to deal with them.

• Practice Gratefulness. Each week write about three to five things you are grateful for in your life and why.

• Connect to Your Body. Take a yoga or Tai Chi class. Go for a walk (outside is best). Find outlets for physically releasing your stress.

• Connect to Others. Take the time to connect meaningfully with people who care about you.

• Try Meditation. Just sit silently and be with your breath for three minutes every day or use the free Mayo Clinic Patient Education CD Relaxation for Your Mind and Body.

• Seek Resources. Pick up a copy of The Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living or use the resources found on the Mayo Clinic Mindful Breathing Lab website.

GOAL: Each morning think about 3 to 5 things that you are grateful for in your life.

Expert Insight

From Roberto P. Benzo, M.D., Director of the Mindful Breathing lab at Mayo Clinic and Consultant for Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

““The stress brought on by aging or managing a chronic condition creates challenges for anyone. How you deal with and untangle the impact of stress on your life is the key. Overwhelming stress is the one that kills people. Paying attention to your life now in the present moment, developing self-awareness and maintaining a positive outlook are essential to managing the stress and navigate transitions. To deal well with stress you may need to make decisions to adjust to the changes in your life. Addressing life obstacles as “opportunities” can play an important role in how well you adapt and come to terms with these changes. Find your own deeply personal reasons for making life adjustments and do them. Engaging in a journey of self-awareness and making decisions based on that awareness will keep you grounded so you can make better choices on how you live your life and maintain meaning and contentment, essential elements for happiness.””
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