

FS1730 (Revised July 2025)



Nourishing Your Mind and Body: Manage Stress for Better Health

Jane Strommen, Ph.D., Gerontology Specialist
Divya Saxena, M.S., Extension Program Coordinator



What is Stress?

Stress is defined as the body's response to any demand or challenge. It can be **acute** (short-term), **episodic** or **chronic** (long-term). While stress is a natural reaction, chronic exposure can impair physical and psychological health.

The American Psychological Association (2023) reports that 77% of adults experience stress that affects their physical health, and 73% say it impacts their mental health.¹

Is Stress a Problem?



Not all stress is bad. Eustress, or positive stress, can motivate and improve performance. Chronic stress, however, increases the risk for a range of health problems.

- The World Health Organization identifies stress as a major contributor to the global burden of disease, especially linked to anxiety, depression and cardiovascular disease.²
- Stress is now understood to directly influence immune function, inflammation and metabolic regulation.³

Stress and Your Health

Prolonged stress contributes to the following:

- High blood pressure and cardiovascular disease
- Weakened immunity
- Increased inflammation
- Gastrointestinal disorders
- Mental health issues (depression, anxiety)

A 2023 review in *The Lancet Psychiatry* found that individuals with chronic stress have up to 2.5 times the risk of developing depression.⁴

Stress-related inflammation is now recognized as a shared pathway in many chronic diseases, including diabetes, cancer and autoimmune disorders.⁵

Coping with Stress

Healthy coping strategies promote resilience and well-being:

Nutrition

Avoid excessive caffeine, ultra-processed foods and sugar. Adopt a healthy diet, one rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fats, which is linked to lower stress and anxiety.

Exercise

Aim for 150-300 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity. Exercise significantly reduces cortisol levels and boosts endorphins.⁶

Sleep

Prioritize seven to nine hours of quality sleep. Chronic sleep deprivation increases stress sensitivity. Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia is highly effective.⁷

Limit Smoking and Alcohol

Nicotine and alcohol may provide short-term relief but worsen long-term stress and health outcomes.

Financial Management

Poor financial health was a top stressor in 2024. Use budgeting tools or speak to a financial counselor for assistance.



Psychological Coping Tools

- **Mindfulness-based stress reduction:** Proven to reduce symptoms of anxiety and improve immune function.⁸
- **Cognitive behavioral therapy:** One of the most effective treatments for stress-related disorders.
- **Social support:** Strong support networks are protective against mental illness.
- **Digital tools:** Apps like Calm, Headspace, and Insight Timer offer guided meditation and breathing exercises.

NDSU

EXTENSION

Personal Action Plan for Coping with Stress

Developing a personal action plan helps us manage stress and improve our overall health and well-being. According to the American Psychological Association's 2024 Stress in America report, 76% of adults reported experiencing stress-related symptoms in the past month, such as headaches, fatigue or difficulty sleeping. Taking proactive steps can help you live a longer, healthier life.

Step 1: Identify Your Major Stressors

Write down two or three of your top sources of stress (work, caregiving, finances, relationships, health, etc.).

Examples from current research: In 2024, top stressors in the U.S. included economic uncertainty, health concerns and work-life balance.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Step 2: Set a Realistic Goal for Each Stressor

Think about what outcome you would like. Make it specific, measurable and achievable.

Example: If your stressor is finances, your goal could be: "Reduce monthly spending by \$200 over the next three months."

1. _____
2. _____

Step 3: List Strategies or Activities to Reach Each Goal

Use evidence-based coping strategies such as physical activity, relaxation techniques, time management or social connection.

Based on CDC and Mayo Clinic guidelines (2024), effective techniques include the following:

- Exercise (at least 150 minutes/week)
- Mindfulness or meditation (10 minutes daily)
- Connecting with supportive people
- _____

Step 4: Estimate Time to Reach Each Goal

Be realistic. Some goals may take weeks; others may take months.

Example: "I will track my stress management activities for 30 days, then reassess."

- _____

Step 5: Identify Your Support System

Name people who can help you stay accountable and offer encouragement (friends, family, therapist, coach).

Tip: Research shows social support reduces cortisol levels and improves recovery from stress.

- _____

Step 6: Plan How You Will Celebrate Your Progress

Celebrate in ways that reinforce healthy habits (not high spending or overindulgence).

Ideas: Take a day trip, buy a new book, enjoy a hobby, spend time with friends or do a creative project.

- _____

Common Symptoms of Chronic Stress

- ☐ Appetite changes
- ☐ Sleep disturbances
- ☐ Low energy or fatigue
- ☐ Muscle tension or pain
- ☐ Weakened immunity
- ☐ Cognitive difficulties
- ☐ Mood swings or depression
- ☐ Increased use of alcohol/drugs
- ☐ Feelings of hopelessness or panic

References

1. American Psychological Association. (2023). *Stress in America™* survey. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress>
2. World Health Organization. (2023). *Mental health: Strengthening our response*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>
3. Cohen, S., Janicki-Deverts, D., & Miller, G. E. (2023). Psychological stress and disease. *JAMA*, 329(12), 1040–1047.
4. Walker, E. R., Smith, J. A., & Brown, T. M. (2023). Chronic stress and depression: A systematic review. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 10(5), 400–415.
5. Petrinović, S. V., Milošević, M. S., Marković, D., & Momčilović, S. (2023). Interplay between stress and cancer—A focus on inflammation. *Frontiers in Physiology*, 14, 1119095. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphys.2023.1119095>
6. Rebar, A. L., Stanton, R., Geard, D., Short, C., Duncan, M. J., & Vandelandotte, C. (2024). Effect of exercise on depression and anxiety: A review of meta-analyses. *Health Psychology Review*, 18(1), 1–18.
7. Yu, D. J., Recchia, F., Bernal, J. D. K., Yu, A. P., Fong, D. Y., Li, S. X., Chan, R. N. Y., Hu, X., & Siu, P. M. (2023). Effectiveness of exercise, cognitive behavioral therapy, and pharmacotherapy on improving sleep in adults with chronic insomnia: A systematic review and network meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Healthcare*, 11(15), 2207. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11152207>
8. Javadzade, N., Esmaeili, S. V., Omranifard, V., Eslami, A. A., Kheirkhah, F., & Tayebi, N. (2024). Effect of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program on depression, emotion regulation, and sleep problems: A randomized controlled trial study on depressed elderly. *BMC Public Health*, 24, 271. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-17759-9>

NDSU Extension does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names.

For more information on this and other topics, see www.ndsu.edu/extension

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. NDSU does not discriminate in its programs and activities on the basis of age, color, gender expression/identity, genetic information, marital status, national origin, participation in lawful off-campus activity, physical or mental disability, pregnancy, public assistance status, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, spousal relationship to current employee, or veteran status, as applicable. Direct inquiries to Vice Provost, Title IX/ADA Coordinator, Old Main 100, 701-231-7708, ndsu.eoaa@ndsu.edu. This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, 701-231-7881. 1M-8-14; w-4-20; w-7-25