

having trouble coping?

stressed out?

feeling overwhelmed?



if your answer is **YES**,
you are not alone

Everyone feels stressed from time to time. Some people, though, say that they feel very stressed most of the time. In fact, 21% of Canadians aged 12 and older rated their life stress as quite a bit or extremely stressful. While stress isn't always bad and can even be helpful, too much stress can affect your well-being negatively.

What causes stress?

Stress comes up when you feel like the demands of a situation or event are too much to manage. It can come up with everyday situations, such as:

- Managing demands at work or school
- Managing relationships
- Managing finances
- Dealing with unfair treatment
- Managing long-term health problems

Stress can also come up in response to a specific event or situation. Both positive and negative life events can be stressful, especially those that involve major changes to your regular routines. Here are some examples:

- Changes in a relationship
- Changes in housing arrangements
- The death of a family member or friend
- Changes in your job or other source of income

As stress is based on the way you see and react to a situation or event, the events or situations that cause stress are different for different people.

How you feel when issues come up can also affect the way you experience stress. If you feel well and confident in your ability to manage challenges, a problem may not seem very stressful. However, if you already feel stressed or overwhelmed, the same problem may add to your existing stress and feel very overwhelming.

Are you experiencing signs of stress?

Stress can affect your body, your behaviours, your feelings and your thoughts. Here are common signs of stress:

Changes in your body

- Tense muscles
- Rapid breathing and heart rate
- Headaches
- Difficulties sleeping well
- Fatigue
- Changes in sex drive
- Weaker immune system

Changes in your behaviours

- Withdrawing from others
- Fidgeting, feeling restless
- Smoking, drinking or using more drugs than usual
- Avoiding situations that you think are stressful

Changes in your feelings

- Feeling worried or confused
- Feeling angry or irritable
- Feeling overwhelmed or helpless
- Feeling like you can't cope

Changes in your thoughts

- Struggling to concentrate, remember or make decisions
- Losing your self-confidence
- Having a negative attitude towards yourself and your life

Why are Canadians feeling stressed?

- 23% Work
- 24% School (for youth and young adults)
- 19% Finances
- 16% Family obligations
- 11% Time pressures
- 7% Health

Source: Statistics Canada

Many Canadians report that stress positively impacts their lives

- 46% I exercise in response to stress
- 48% Stress is proof I am involved in important things
- 31% Stress improves the quality of my work

Factors related to high levels of stress?

- Women are more likely than men to report high levels of stress
- Younger adults report higher levels of average stress compared to other generations
- People with few social supports
- People who expect too much of themselves
- People with high levels of responsibilities and duties
- People who see stress negatively or believe that they can't cope with it

What kinds of stress are you coping with these days?

Take our stress survey at www.heretohelp.bc.ca to determine the different sources of stress you and your family are facing.



why does stress make me feel so awful?

Your body is designed to react to stress in ways that protect you from threats, such as predators. Although facing life-threatening predators is not common today, you do have many daily demands, such as paying bills, working, and taking care of family. Your body treats these demands as threats and the fight-flight-freeze response is activated in your body. At times, stress can have a negative effect on the basic dimensions of mental health (your thoughts, emotions, behaviours and body reactions). Stress may affect your health if you use unhealthy behaviours to cope. The negative effects of stress on your wellness can become a source of stress in and of themselves. Just talk to anyone who isn't sleeping well due to stress! For more information about the dimensions of mental health that can be influenced by stress, see *Wellness Module 1: Mental Health Matters* at www.heretohelp.bc.ca.

can stress be a good thing?

Sometimes, stress can have a positive effect on your thoughts, emotions, behaviours and body reactions. Stress is more likely to result in positive outcomes if you see it as a challenge or something you can strive to overcome. It can help motivate you to work hard. Stress can also lead to positive effects if you respond with healthy behaviours that improve your situation. You can experience the positive effects of stress even in the face of some negative effects.

stress and illness

Your stress levels and your coping skills can also influence your physical health. Higher levels of stress can increase the risk of illness and disease. For example, you're more likely to catch a cold or the flu when you're coping with high levels of stress. There is also evidence that stress can aggravate disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis, insulin-dependent diabetes, multiple sclerosis and more. Chronic stress also has a negative impact on your physical health. Some of the connections between stress and illness are determined by the ways you cope with stress.

coping with stress

There is no right or wrong way to cope with stress. What works for one person may not work for another, and what works in one situation may not work in another situation. Below, you will find common ways to cope with stress and maintain wellness.

Focus on what you can do

There is usually something you can do to manage stress in most situations.

- Resist the urge to give up or run away from problems—these coping choices may feel good in the short-term, but often make stress worse in the long run

Manage your emotions

Feelings of sadness, anger or fear are common when coping with stress.

- Try expressing your feelings by talking or writing them down. Bottling up your emotions makes it harder to cope with stress.
- Try not to lash out at other people. Yelling or swearing usually pushes people away when you need them the most
- Many of the coping strategies listed below are useful ways of managing your emotions

Seek out support

Seeking social support from other people is helpful—especially when you feel you can't cope on your own. Family, friends, co-workers and health professionals can all be important sources of support.

- Ask someone for their opinion or advice on how to handle the situation
- Get more information to help make decisions
- Accept help with daily tasks and responsibilities, such as chores or child care
- Get emotional support from someone you trust who understands you and cares about you

Focus on helpful and realistic thoughts

This is one of the hardest things to do when coping with stress. At times, it can seem impossible. But, dwelling on the negatives often adds to your stress and takes away your motivation to make things better.

- Focus on strengths rather than weaknesses—remind yourself that no one is perfect; think of times where you have been able to overcome challenges in the past
- Look for the challenges in a situation by asking, "What can I learn from this?" or, "How can I grow as a person?"
- Try to keep things in perspective – is it a hassle or a horror?
- Try to keep a sense of humour
- Remind yourself you are doing the best you can given the circumstances

Make a plan of action

Problem-solving around aspects of a situation that you can control is one of the most effective ways to lower your stress.

Try breaking a stressful problem into manageable chunks.

Think about the best way to approach the problem. You may decide to put other tasks on hold to concentrate on the main problem, or you may decide to wait for the right time and place to act.

- Identify and define the problem
- Determine your goal
- Brainstorm possible solutions
- Consider the pros and cons of each possible solution
- Choose the best solution for you—the perfect solution rarely exists
- Put your plan into action
- Evaluate your efforts and choose another strategy, if needed

See our Wellness Module on problem-solving at www.heretohelp.bc.ca.

Self-care

Taking good care of yourself can be difficult during stressful times, but self-care can help you cope with problems more effectively. The trick to self-care is to look for little things you can do everyday to help yourself feel well.

Here are some self-care activities to try. Try to think of other activities that might help!

- Eat healthy foods and drink lots of water throughout the day to maintain your energy
- Try to exercise or do something active on a regular basis
- Try to avoid using alcohol or drugs as a way to cope
- Explore relaxation techniques like deep breathing, meditation or yoga
- Spend time with family and friends
- Spend time on things you enjoy, such as hobbies or other activities
- Get a good night's sleep

Take care of your relationships

Family, friends and co-workers can be affected by your stress—and they can also be part of the problem.

Be assertive about your needs rather than aggressive or passive. Being assertive means expressing your needs in a respectful way, which allows you to keep your feelings and needs, as well as the feelings and needs of others, in mind.

- Try to discuss your concerns with others in a firm and calm voice
- Consider the other person's point of view – if needed, take some time before responding
- Accept responsibility, apologize or try to put things right when appropriate
- Talk to others who are involved and keep them informed about your decisions

Spirituality

Spirituality takes many forms and means different things to different people. It can vary from culture to culture, with religion being one way that people experience or express spirituality. People who engage in a spiritual practice often experience lower levels of distress. If community is part of a spiritual practice, it may also offer helpful social support.

- Consider spiritual practices that fit with your beliefs, such as prayer, meditation, tai chi, enjoying nature, or creating art
- If you have a formal place of worship, spend time there, or get together with others who share your beliefs
- Talk with a respected member or leader of your spiritual community

Acceptance

There may be times when you can't change something. This can be the most challenging aspect of coping with stress. Acceptance means allowing unpleasant feelings and sensations to surface and come and go without trying to resist or fight them. It allows people to recognize and come to terms with what is out of their control while focusing on the actions they can take to improve their lives. Sometimes, all you can do is manage your distress or grief.

- Acceptance is a process that takes time. You may need to remind yourself to be patient
- Denying that the problem exists may prolong your suffering and interfere with your ability to take action
- Death, illness, major losses or major life changes can be particularly difficult to accept
- Engage in the present moment – try not to get caught up in wishful thinking or dwell on what could have been, but focus on what you are experiencing in the here-and-now

Distraction

Distraction can be helpful when coping with short-term stress you can't control, such as reading a magazine while getting dental work done. Distraction strategies can help you to tolerate distress until it is a more appropriate time to resolve the issue.

Distraction can be harmful if it stops you from taking action on things you can control, such as watching TV when you have school or work deadlines to meet.

Distraction by using drugs, alcohol or over-eating often leads to more stress and problems in the long term.

Distraction by overworking at school or on the job can easily lead to burnout or other problems, like family resentment.

You can do many things to take your mind off problems, such as:

- Daydreaming
- Going for a drive or walk
- Doing something creative
- Leisure activities, exercise, hobbies
- Housework, yard work or gardening
- Watching TV or movies
- Playing video games
- Spending time with friends or family
- Spending time with pets
- Connecting with others on social media
- Sleeping or taking a short nap

When used for short periods of time, many of these forms of distraction create opportunities to take a break and refuel—an important part of self-care.

If you feel like you can't cope, try these options:

- Talk to someone that cares about you. They may be able to provide help and support.
- Seek professional help as early as possible. Prevention strategies can strengthen protective factors and improve mental health. Talk to your family doctor or mental health care provider, or visit a drop-in clinic or the hospital emergency room.

Try these helpful numbers:

- Crisis Line: Call 310-6789 (no area code) to connect to a crisis line in BC
- Kids' Help Phone: Call 1-800-668-6868 (free call anywhere in Canada)

Select sources and additional resources

- Understand Freeze, Fight, Flight – your body's response to threats at <https://anxietycanada.com/learn-about-anxiety/anxiety-in-youth/>
- Find the Stress info sheet from HeretoHelp at www.heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/stress.
- Download the MindShift CBT App and use Chill-Out Tools at <https://anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>
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