

# INFORMATION SHEET #1

An initiative of the Workplace Wellness Committee  
Co-ordinated by the Department of Human Resources

# TAKE CHARGE OF STRESS

## UNDERSTANDING STRESS



### What is stress?

Stress is part of life. Stress is the body's response to a real or perceived threat (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2016), which can be physical, mental or emotional. This threat, also known as stressor, can be external or internal, positive or negative, real or imagined, and short or long-lasting.

Stress can be "good" or "bad". Good stress (eustress) can motivate us to achieve a goal, accomplish a project on time or conquer a fear. This type of stress is short-term and, once it is over, it can make us feel accomplished. On the other hand, bad stress can make us feel overwhelmed and may inhibit our ability to do what we need to do. This type of stress may result from job uncertainty, strained relationships, loss of a loved one, a medical diagnosis, or ongoing high demands at home and work. If this type of stress is experienced over a prolonged period of time, it can become chronic.

### What are some common sources of stress?

Stress is very individual. What one person may find stressful, another may not. The following are some examples of stressors:

Sources of Stress	Examples
Physical environment	Traffic, unexpected noise, uncomfortable/unsafe living conditions
Family and relationships	Marital disagreements, unhealthy relationships, rebellious teens, caring for an ill family member
Work	Job dissatisfaction, exhausting workload, office politics, insufficient pay, conflict with supervisor/co-workers
Life situations	Poverty, financial pressures, unemployment, isolation, lack of social support
Major life changes	Birth of a baby, divorce, career change/move

Source: Learn About Stress Information Sheet. Canadian Mental Health Association, British Columbia, 2014.

### How does our body respond to stressors?

When confronted with a stressor, our body activates the "fight or flight" response. This automatic response is what prepares our body to fight or flee from the harm or danger at hand. As part of the response, our nervous system releases the stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine) which prepare our body for emergency action. This causes an increase in heart rate, rapid breathing, sharpened focus, tense muscles and a boost of energy.

The "fight or flight" response can also make you feel dizzy or light-headed as blood flow to the brain and organs is reduced to provide our muscles the needed energy and nutrients to fight or flee.

### When does stress become a health concern?

Stress can become chronic when our "fight or flight" response remains in the "on" position for prolonged time. When we are in this heightened state of stress, we may experience a variety of health concerns such as:

- Autoimmune diseases
- Digestive problems
- Heart disease
- Insomnia
- Increased vulnerability to anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions
- Memory problems
- Skin conditions
- Weight problems



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### Stress Among Canadian Workers

According to the 2010 General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by Statistics Canada:

- 1 in 4 (27%) of Canadian workers (ages 20-64) described their lives on most days as "quite a bit or very stressful"
- 6 in 10 (62 %) highly stressed workers identified their job/ workplace as the main source of stress in their lives, followed by financial concerns and not having enough time (12% each)
- ¾ of the highly stressed workers who identified their job or workplace as their main source of stress were well-educated and more than ½ held white-collar jobs in management, professional or technical occupations.

### What are some of the common signs of stress?

Each person experiences stress in their own way. As a result, the signs and symptoms of stress can vary greatly from person to person. The key is knowing yourself and being able to recognize when you may be experiencing "stress overload". Some of the most common signs of stress include:

- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgement
- Moodiness
- Headaches and other aches and pains
- Nervousness and agitation
- Nausea and dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Eating more or less
- Turning to alcohol and/or smoking as a way to relax

### What can you do to cope with stress?

People have different tolerance levels for stress. The way one person copes with stress, another person may not find helpful. The first step is to know yourself and understand your personal coping style. The table below outlines three stress-coping styles.

Style	Description
Task-oriented	You feel comfortable analyzing the stressor and taking appropriate, positive action to deal directly with the situation.
Emotion-oriented	You prefer to deal with your feelings and find social supports.
Distraction-oriented	You use external sources such as music or physical activity to take your mind off your predicament.

Source: Coping with Stress. Canadian Mental Health Association and Heart & Stroke Foundation, 2009.

Take charge of stress and look for healthy ways to increase your ability to cope with it. For example:

- Exercise regularly
- Spend time with people who make you feel good
- Engage your senses (listen to music, pet your dog)
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get enough rest
- Incorporate relaxation techniques into your day



# TAKE CHARGE OF STRESS

HOW STRESS AFFECTS YOUR HEALTH



## We all have different stress tolerance levels.

What causes stress to one person may have no effect on another. When confronted with a situation that we may find challenging, we evaluate it, look for ways to resolve it and mobilize our coping skills. If the challenge outweighs our coping skills, our body moves into a “stress response”. Our bodies are “pre-programmed” with a set of automatic responses to deal with stress. This “pre-programmed” stress response – known as “fight or flight” response – includes the following (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety, 2012):

- Increased blood pressure
- Increased metabolism
- Decrease in protein synthesis and digestion
- Decrease in the immune and allergic response systems
- Increased cholesterol and fatty acids in the blood
- Faster blood clotting
- Increased production of blood sugar
- Increased stomach acids

Our bodies are designed to handle small doses of stress but when our stress response system is not able to “turn off” due to prolonged stress, it can negatively impact our health. For example, prolonged stress can contribute or exacerbate:

- Cardiovascular disease including hypertension, abnormal heart rhythms, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke
- Mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety
- Obesity and other eating disorders
- Skin and hair problems such as acne and eczema
- Gastrointestinal problems such as irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers and gastritis
- Diabetes
- Muscle and joint pain

## What are the symptoms of stress?

The symptoms of stress can vary from person to person. They are associated with a person’s stress tolerance level, coping mechanisms and the type of stress the person is facing (acute or chronic).

Acute stress is a normal level of stress. This type of stress is short-lived and typically results from unpredictable situations that may make us feel threatened/overwhelmed. Acute stress resolves itself once the situation causing the stress is addressed or is over. This type of stress can also be beneficial when it motivates us to achieve a task or overcome a fear. The following are some of the common symptoms of acute stress:

- Headaches
- Upset stomach
- Tense muscles or jaw grinding
- Temporary insomnia
- Nervousness
- Cold sweats or excessive sweating
- Dry mouth
- Agitation
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Difficulty relaxing



Chronic stress on the other hand is long-lasting and typically results from a situation that has not been resolved for a long period of time, a traumatic event or an ongoing situation such as an illness or divorce. Chronic stress can interfere with our ability to live a “normal life” and may make us feel that we have no control over our lives. Individuals who have been exposed to prolonged stress may:

- Feel fatigued and constantly exhausted
- Be unable to concentrate and experience increased forgetfulness
- Become irritable for no reason and may increase the use of negative/cynical language
- Experience low self-esteem and become withdrawn
- Experience feelings of worthlessness
- Become more prone to infections, colds and accidents
- Experience unresolved headaches and muscle or joint aches/pains
- Have poor sleeping patterns
- Experience an increase in unhealthy habits such as overeating, smoking and drinking

Since every person experiences stress in their own way, the key is to learn how to recognize the symptoms of stress. Take charge of stress and look for healthy ways to increase your ability to handle it. Try some of the following strategies (Canadian Mental Health Association and Heart & Stroke Foundation, 2009):

- Engage in physical activity. For example go for a walk, take an aerobics class or take the stairs at work
- Spend quality time with people who make you feel good. Visit friends and family
- Eat a healthy diet. For example, add more fruits and vegetables into your diet, eat at regular intervals and reduce your intake of caffeine
- Get a good night’s sleep
- Incorporate relaxation techniques into your day. For example, try breathing exercises or meditate
- Develop hobbies and personal interests and make time for them
- Enjoy nature. For example, take a stroll in the park or do some gardening

### **Reach out for professional support:**

If you feel overwhelmed, a mental health professional may assist you to look for ways to better manage your stress and may help you identify and change any unhealthy behaviours that may be contributing to the stress. The University of Windsor’s Employee Assistance Program, offered by Morneau-Shepell, is a great resource. You can access the confidential services by calling their toll-free number: **1-800-387-4765**.



# TAKE CHARGE OF STRESS

## STRESS MYTHBUSTERS



Stress is the body's response to a real or perceived threat (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2016), which can be physical, mental or emotional. This threat, also known as stressor, can be external or internal, positive or negative, real or imagined, and short or long-lasting.

There are many myths associated with stress. Dispelling these myths enables us to better understand stress and take action.

Myth	Dispelling the myth
Stress is the same for everyone.	Stress is different for each of us. What one person may find stressful may not be stressful for another. We all respond to stressors in different ways.
Stress is always bad for you.	Managed stress, also known as eustress, can make us more productive, motivate us to complete a project/task and drive us to achieve unmet goals. On the other hand, unmanaged stress can negatively impact our health and lead to chronic diseases.
Stress is everywhere, so you can't do anything about it.	Stress is part of life. Effective planning can ensure that stress does not become overwhelming. Effective planning involves setting priorities, working on simple issues first and then moving to more complex problems. When we do not manage the issues we face, they can become overwhelming. It is critical to incorporate stress-coping activities into our day/life so that stress won't overwhelm us.
The most popular techniques for reducing stress are the best ones.	Since we all react differently to stress, there are no universally effective stress-reduction techniques. Everyone has different circumstances in life, and stress-coping activities need to be chosen based on those.
No symptoms equals no stress.	Absence of symptoms does not mean absence of stress. Some medications may camouflage the symptoms that may signal stress.
Only major symptoms of stress require action.	Minor symptoms of stress, such as headaches and stomach acid, are the early warnings that you may need to do a better job at managing stress. Minor symptoms should be taken care of before they become more serious.

Source: Six Myths about Stress. American Psychological Association, 2017

**DO YOU WANT MORE  
INFORMATION ON STRESS?**

Visit the Take Charge of Stress website at  
**[uwindsor.ca/takecharge](http://uwindsor.ca/takecharge)**

Visit the website for a listing of the sources consulted to write this publication.



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# TAKE CHARGE OF STRESS

## TECHNOSTRESS: SOCIAL MEDIA AND EMAILS



### Can technology contribute to our stress?

Today's advancements in technology and communication systems allow us to stay connected to email and social media anywhere, anytime. Such constant connectivity can foster technostress. "Technostress captures all the ways technology causes irritation, frustration, stress and lack of sleep". (Dr. Larry D. Rosen, California State University).

Technology can save us time and in many instances contribute to us working more efficiently. The key is to establish limits and ensure that technology is not controlling us and/or impacting our health and well-being.

### What does it mean to be too connected?

With an easy access to email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, many people spend more time looking at a "small screen", instead of having face-to-face conversations with others. For many, a smartphone is their most prized possession. One consumer mobility survey found that 90% of mobile phone users would be willing to give up a number of other life pleasures for a chance to keep their phone (Bank of America Consumer Mobility Survey, 2014).

The pressure for connectivity can impact our:

- Ability to achieve tasks and meet deadlines
- Focus and concentration
- Sleep patterns
- Involvement in physical and leisure activities
- Family dynamics
- Face-to-face interactions and communication with friends and loved ones

The constant need to check emails, Facebook "likes" and Instagram followers can cause us more stress and anxiety, among other mental health issues.

### How does social media add stress to our lives?

Using social media does not directly cause stress. The relationship between the two is complex. The following are some examples that illustrate how social media can affect our mood and let it spiral in a negative direction:

#### Compare and despair

As we read online updates from our friends, we may unconsciously begin to compare their lives to ours. If we feel that they are more adventurous, more successful, happier and "better" than us, this perception can affect our mood, lead to feelings of anxiety and negatively contribute to our sense of self-worth. The added pressure to keep up may add significant stress particularly if we are not able to do or have the things we see as desirable.

#### Cost of caring

A research conducted by the Pew Research Center and Rutgers University (2014) concluded that the "cost of caring" contributes to the stress of many social media users. The study revealed that as people read about stressful situations and undesirable events faced by others, that awareness contributes to increased levels of stress.

#### Keeping up with the online persona

Social media provides the platform where anyone can create an image of themselves that they want others to see. For some people, the need to maintain this persona is not only time-consuming but can turn into an obsession. This need and added pressure of living up to the expectations of others can impact a person's sense of self and contribute to feeling depressed.



### Fear of missing out

A study from the University of Chicago found that social media can be more addictive than smoking. We become addicted to the Facebook “likes”, re-tweets, frequent updates and constant connection. When our access to social media is limited, some individuals may fear missing out on a news feed or another update from a friend, which contributes to elevated levels anxiety. In addition, stress can also be caused by our perceived failure to fulfil our own social media obligations, for example not commenting on a friend’s photo or not sharing/“liking” a post. (Psychology Today, 2015)

### Sleep quality

Do you check your emails or scroll through the Facebook posts while lying in bed or just before bedtime? These actions may be contributing to your stress as they impact the quality of your sleep. The screens from laptops, tablets and smartphones emit a blue light that inhibits the production of a hormone called melatonin, which is responsible for signaling our bodies when it is time to sleep. The use of these devices at bedtime can disrupt the natural sleep cycle that may lead to decreased ability to handle stress.

#### Who is in control?

- Do you take your smartphone or tablet everywhere you go?
- Do you quickly grab your smartphone without hesitation when it buzzes?
- Do you check your smartphone even if it has not beeped?
- Do you do this regardless if you are shopping, eating, reading the paper or watching a favorite show?
- Do you rush to update your social media page(s) to share some good news?
- Do you feel anxious when you are asked to turn off your smartphone or leave it out of reach? And look for opportunities to check it?

**If you answered yes to these questions, technology may be controlling you.**

### What can you do to take charge of technostress?

Managing technostress can be difficult because technology is integrated into every aspect of our lives. However, you have the power to control how it impacts you. Below are some suggestions on how you can break the techno-addiction and find technology-life balance:

- Establish boundaries. For example, when you are at work, turn off notifications to avoid temptation to constantly check your phone. Set time aside during your lunch or break to reply to personal communication or check your social media sites. At home, resist the temptation to check and respond to work-related emails unless you are required to respond to them outside of your regular working hours.
- Set a time limit for being on social media or surfing the web on your personal time. Challenge yourself to disconnect from all technology for an hour or two after work for a week. Use that time to engage in something active such as going for a walk or spending more time with friends and family.
- Resist the temptation to respond to personal emails, text or to social media updates the second the notification appears on your screen, particularly if these notifications come in while you are engaged in other activities such as having supper, walking, visiting a friend or shopping
- Cancel the auto-login to your social media sites on your devices. This adds a barrier when opening Internet browsers and mobile applications.
- Improve the quality of your sleep by refraining from using your smartphone, tablet or computer an hour before bedtime. Instead, read a magazine or your favourite book.
- If you use your phone/tablet as an alarm clock, dim the brightness of the screen and turn on the “flight mode” or “silent mode” to avoid having your sleep disrupted by text messages, email and social media notifications.

**These are some of the many simple things we can do to tackle technostress. Find what works best for you and don’t let technology control your life.**





# TAKE CHARGE OF STRESS

HOW CAN YOU TAKE CHARGE OF STRESS?



At times, we may feel that stress is difficult to manage and that we can't do anything to regain control of our lives. We may not be able to control the situation that is causing the stress, but we can take charge of our emotions, thoughts, lifestyle and coping mechanisms that may be adding to our level of stress.

## What are some strategies for managing stress?

### STRATEGY 1: GET MOVING

Physical activity plays an important role in reducing stress levels. Exercise is crucial in helping relieve anger, tension, and frustration. It is a great way to cope with stress because it releases endorphins that boost your mood. Try these simple activities to get you moving:

- Put on some music and dance
- Take your dog for a walk
- Use the stairs at work rather than an elevator
- Park your car in the farthest spot in the lot and walk the rest of the way
- Find a walking/exercise partner to help you stay motivated

### STRATEGY 2: REPLACE UNHEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES WITH HEALTHY ONES

How we cope with stress is very personal. Unfortunately, some individuals choose coping strategies that reduce stress only temporarily (smoking, alcohol, procrastination, etc.). The following are some examples of healthy ways of coping with stress:

- Develop a "stress relief toolbox" - come up with a list of healthy ways to help you relax
- Reduce nicotine, alcohol, caffeine and refined sugar consumption - these are stimulants that may prevent you from keeping calm

- Take up a hobby - activities outside work/home can help alleviate stress
- Take a deep breath - oxygen helps you become calm and regain focus
- Rest - get enough quality sleep and recognize your limits when you are ill
- Keep your sense of humor - the act of laughing helps your body fight stress
- Take part in relaxing activities that encourage breathing techniques - studies have shown that by redirecting your focus to the challenge of yoga or meditation, stress levels can be greatly reduced

### STRATEGY 3: CONNECT TO OTHERS

One of the most effective ways to relieve stress is being with people who make us feel comfortable and understood. Interacting with another person face-to-face, making eye contact and active listening can have a calming effect. If you are stressed out, avoid isolation and loneliness. The following are examples of things you could explore:

- Help others through volunteering
- Schedule lunch or coffee with a friend you trust
- Ask a loved one to check in with you regularly
- Schedule a weekly dinner date
- Take a class or join a club to meet new people





#### **STRATEGY 4: SOLVE PROBLEMS/ISSUES AS THEY ARISE**

Procrastination or conflict avoidance can add to your daily stress. Tackling the issues as they arise can help you lower your stress levels. Try the following:

- Explore perceptions and assumptions that may be contributing to the issue
- Address conflicts in a timely manner
- Brainstorm options for addressing the issues that you may be facing. Decide on a solution and determine realistic steps for implementing it
- Don't try to address all the issues that you may be facing at once. Prioritize and address one at a time

Problem-solving is a great skill and an excellent long-term strategy that can help you feel in control again.

#### **STRATEGY 5: IDENTIFY HABITS AND BEHAVIORS THAT ADD TO YOUR STRESS**

Identifying the situations that cause daily stress can be difficult. In order to identify some of the sources of your stress:

- Closely observe your habits, attitude, and excuses that may be contributing to your stress
- Accept the role your emotions and behaviors play in creating or maintaining stress and regain control over them
- Keep a stress journal. Keep track of the stress you are experiencing, your physical and emotional responses, any symptoms that you are feeling and actions taken to deal with the stress. Analyze the diary to identify any areas where you can improve how you respond to and manage stress.

Some stressors are unpredictable, while many others can be anticipated. Prepare for the predictable through the four A's (avoid, alter, adapt and accept).

##### **Avoid unnecessary stress**

For example:

- Learn to say no
- Try avoiding situations that cause you stress

##### **Adapt to the stressor**

For example:

- Reframe problems
- Look at the big picture

##### **Alter the situation**

For example:

- Be willing to compromise
- Learn to delegate

##### **Accept the things you can't change**

For example:

- Don't try to control the uncontrollable
- Look for the positive side of things

Source: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.html>

#### **Reach out for professional support when needed:**

If you are experiencing chronic stress, the coping strategies outlined above may not be effective enough to reduce your level of stress. If you feel overwhelmed, a mental health professional may assist you to better manage your stress and identify/change any unhealthy behaviours that may be contributing to the stress. The University of Windsor's Employee Assistance Program offered by Morneau-Shepell is a great resource. You can access the confidential services by calling their toll-free number: **1-800-387-4765**.



# TAKE CHARGE OF STRESS



This document lists the sources that were consulted to develop the five information sheets that are part of the Take Charge of Stress campaign. The information sheets that are part of this campaign were written by Faculty of Nursing Student Matthew Carlone as part of his 4<sup>th</sup> year placement with the Department of Human Resources (Winter 2017) and edited by members of the Workplace Wellness Committee and the Department of Human Resources.

## Websites:

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<http://www.heartandstroke.ca/-/media/pdf-files/canada/other/coping-with-stress-en.ashx>

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2011002/article/11562-eng.htm>

[http://www.cmha.ca/mental\\_health/stress/#.WAQWf5MrKb8](http://www.cmha.ca/mental_health/stress/#.WAQWf5MrKb8)

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