

Employee Guide to Coping with Stress

Reacting to Stressful Events: Signs & Symptoms

It is common for people to react to stressful events in different ways. Some people have strong reactions right away, while for others, reactions are mild. For some other people, the impact of the stressful event changes over time. Stressful events can affect our bodies, minds, and actions.

Some of the most common reactions to stressful events are listed below. See if you can identify any signs or symptoms you are currently experiencing. Keep this sheet to refer to in case you notice your reactions are changing or intensifying over time.

This information is **not** a substitute for medical advice. If you find yourself troubled by any of these signs and symptoms, or if they worsen or interfere with your usual activities, follow the directions given in your debriefing about steps to take to obtain services.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

PHYSICAL Fatigue Headaches Sleep problems Stomach pain, nausea, indigestion Nausea Indigestion Shortness of breath Rapid heartbeat Restlessness	EMOTIONAL Anxiety, nervousness, fear, apprehension Sadness, grief, guilt Anger, irritability, impatience, frustration Shock, disbelief Mood swings Agitation Apathy, detachment, emotional numbness Helplessness
MENTAL Racing or intrusive thoughts Confusion Amnesia Inability to concentrate or pay attention Nightmares Feeling in a daze Loss of a sense of time Hyper-vigilance Preoccupation with event or aftermath “Reliving” the event Pessimism Thoughts of harm to yourself or another*	BEHAVIORAL Pacing, hyperactivity Crying Using alcohol or drugs to feel better Blaming yourself or other people Being argumentative, or even violent Making negative statements Neglecting basic needs Withdrawing from people and activities Being easily startled Attempting to harm yourself or another*

*If you are thinking of harming yourself or another person, get help immediately. Call your EAP program number (available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week) or speak to your doctor.

Resources Are Available

Call your Magellan Program for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you. Additional information, self-help tools, and other resources are available online at www.MagellanHealth.com.

Ten Practical Ideas for Feeling Better

Take one thing at a time. An unexpected event or crisis can make an ordinary task seem unbearable. Completing a project, for example, may seem overwhelming. Instead of giving up, break a project up into smaller tasks. Remember that a stress reaction is a temporary condition you can work your way through, one step at a time.

Give yourself permission to feel what you are feeling. Feelings are neither right nor wrong. There is nothing heroic about holding back tears or denying your feelings. Find a healthy, safe outlet for expressing yourself. Never use feelings as an excuse to hurt yourself or someone else.

Get enough rest and eat regularly. Lack of sleep and poor eating habits can lead to physical, emotional, and mental symptoms, such as fatigue, mood swings, and poor concentration. Taking good care of yourself will increase your ability to handle stress.

Find someone you trust. Don't carry your burden alone. Find a family member or close friend that can be a support to you. Consider having a friend stay with you for a day or so.

Practice relaxation or meditation. Find a quiet place to listen to guided relaxation tapes. Spend time in meditation or prayer. Allow your mind and body time to slow down and relax. Take a few minutes to take a mental vacation: close your eyes and see yourself at a favorite vacation spot or quiet haven.

Spruce up your surroundings. Make your environment warm and welcoming. Consider adding plants, a floral bouquet, art, or special photos. Listen to soothing music or nature sounds.

Maintain as normal a schedule as possible. Make daily decisions as you are able; this will give you a sense of control over your life. Be realistic. Avoid making major decisions based on the stress you feel right now.

Know your limits. Some problems are beyond our control. If something cannot be changed, learn to accept it for what it is. For things within your control, remember that change takes time. Resist the urge to fix the unfixable.

Allow plenty of time for a task. This will reduce any self-imposed time pressure. If you normally take 30 minutes to complete a task, schedule 45 minutes to an hour. This enables you to complete the job more deliberately and thoughtfully. Allowing plenty of time can improve the quality of your work.

Escape for a while. Sometimes it helps to get away temporarily from whatever is causing the stress. You might escape by taking a short trip or losing yourself in a book or movie. This can allow you to get a new perspective on things so that when you return, you will be better able to deal with the situation.

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Healthy Responses to Stress

Experiencing a traumatic event often causes people to make behavior or lifestyle changes in an attempt to cope with the resulting stress. You can prevent stress from getting the best of you! Here are some suggestions that may help you minimize any long-term negative effects of stress.

Behaviors to Avoid	Benefits of Choosing a Healthy Response
Sleeping too much or too little	Get enough rest to promote clear thinking, increase ability to cope with stress, and improve concentration and memory.
Drinking excessive amounts of alcohol or using other drugs	Limit alcohol use to decrease the likelihood of mood swings, sleep problems, and health problems.
Skipping meals; eating for comfort	Eat nutritious meals for adequate energy levels.
Withdrawing from others	Develop a good support system of family and friends who can listen and encourage you.
Increasing caffeine intake	Limit caffeine use to decrease agitation and irritability.
Reducing leisure activities, hobbies	Engage in hobbies and activities you enjoy as a healthy way of reducing stress and improving your mood and energy.
Staying away from work	Prioritize your tasks and communicate with your supervisor if you need assistance. Returning to work allows you to focus on tasks and be productive.
Thinking you can handle your problems alone	Seek professional help if you find that you are not able to function as well as you used to or your symptoms persist.
Expecting easy answers or a quick resolution to your problems	Take one day at a time, one step at a time. Patience decreases anxiety and increases one's sense of control.
Pretending everything is fine if it's not	Be honest about how you feel. You will find yourself calmer, relaxed, and accepting of your circumstances.
Ignore physical symptoms	Seek medical assistance if your physical symptoms concern you. A physician can provide appropriate treatments for physical ailments.

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Helping Children Deal with Stress

Workplace traumas can directly or indirectly affect employees' children. Just like adults, children's life experiences will affect how they handle difficult situations. And just like adults, children may try to make sense of traumatic events. When responding to children, be as open and honest as possible. Be very careful, however, about the information and messages you send. When adults are dealing with their own anxiety and uncertainty, children can sense their fear. Children look to adults for security and reassurance.

Tips for talking with children:

- **Consider your child's age and developmental level** when talking about a traumatic event. Young children think in concrete terms, so use accurate language like "dead" instead of "asleep." Children may also fear that another traumatic event will occur or that they will be separated from those they love. Provide reassurance and comfort. Accept that children may be a bit "clingy" at first.
- **Encourage children to talk** about their concerns and to express their feelings. When talking with younger children remember to talk on their level. For example, they may not understand the term "violence" but can talk to you about being afraid or a classmate who is mean to them. Encourage them to express their feelings through talking, drawing or playing. Sometimes, talking while doing an activity like playing "catch" or "house" sets a more relaxed tone that encourages children to open up and talk.
- **Listen to your child.** Make sure you understand what he or she is saying. Since children may use words differently, summarize and repeat back to them what they have said. For example, "It sounds like you are feeling really mad about that."
- **Validate your child's feelings.** Feelings are not right or wrong. How we act on our feelings is what is important. Chances are good that you are experiencing some of the same emotions. Share that with your child and talk about how you handle those feelings. If you don't know the answer to a child's question, be honest and say you don't know.
- **Teach by example.** Deal with stress in healthy ways and encourage your child to do the same. Take him or her with you for walks, watch silly movies, play games, and draw pictures.

Consider seeking help from a medical or mental health professional if, over a few weeks:

Sleeping patterns do not return to normal; nightmares or night terrors (waking up in the night very scared, screaming) persist; clinging behavior does not gradually diminish; fears or anxieties become worse.

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