



American Heart Association®

Hard Hats with Heart™



Toolbox Talks

Stress and Heart Health

Stress is a fact of life. A 2017 American Psychological Association survey found that a whopping 80% of respondents reported experiencing at least one symptom of stress over the past month.¹

Everyone feels stress in different ways and reacts to it in different ways. How much stress you experience and how you react to it can lead to a wide variety of health problems —that's why it's critical to know what you can do about it. Stress may affect behaviors and factors that increase heart disease risk. For example, some people may choose to drink too much alcohol or smoke cigarettes to "manage" their chronic stress, however these habits can increase blood pressure and may damage artery walls.

What happens in your body?

A stressful situation sets off a chain of events. Your body releases adrenaline, a hormone that temporarily causes your breathing and heart rate to speed up and your blood pressure to rise. These reactions prepare you to deal with the situation — the "fight or flight" response. When stress is constant, your body remains in high gear off and on for days or weeks at a time.

Long-term activation of your body's stress response system, along with prolonged exposure to cortisol and other stress hormones, may put you at risk for health troubles like:

- digestive problems
- anxiety or depression
- headaches or back strain,
- sleep problems
- weight gain
- memory and concentration issues
- high blood pressure
- heart disease and stroke

De-stressing shouldn't stress you out. Try healthy stress relieving strategies like exercising, socializing, maintaining a positive attitude, and taking time for mindfulness practices. Spend at least 15 minutes a day doing something you enjoy.

If you feel like you have too much stress to handle on your own, that is ok. If your stress is nonstop, there are resources to help such as stress management classes or speaking to a mental health professional.

Frequently Asked Questions:

I feel like I'm the only one experiencing this much stress, what should I do?

Everybody experiences stress. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Reach out to a family member, friend, colleague, or medical professional.

Discussion Questions:

- What activities do you do to help yourself de-stress?
- What are your benchmarks to know when your stress is getting out of control?