

Some stress is actually good for you. Here's how to get better at dealing with it

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You may think of stress as a bad thing — but it is actually a bodily response that has some benefits.

“Stress is just our body’s natural way of responding to demanding circumstances. It’s a programmed neurobiological response,” Vaile Wright, Ph.D., senior director for health care innovation at the American Psychological Association, tells TODAY.

You can feel stress about positive events or negative events. “What the stress is telling us is the degree to which these things are important to us,” Wright says. “It’s not like there’s good stress and bad stress. There’s just stress and then how we manage it.”

Ideally, you want a Goldilocks level of stress — not too little and not too much. “That moderate level of stress leads to optimal or peak performance,” Jennifer Beckjord, Psy.D., senior director of clinical services at University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Western Psychiatric Hospital, tells TODAY.

Too little stress? You might feel less challenged and motivated.

Too much stress? You might feel overwhelmed, distracted, unsettled or anxious.

“Under moderate stress, we can feel more physiologically and physically charged up. We might feel a more heightened sense of clarity and alertness and feel more motivation to perform well,” Beckjord says.

Remember that stress brings valuable life benefits

“There is evidence that we are at our best when we are a little stressed out – more productive, more focused, more engaged,” Samantha Boardman, MD, clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College, tells TODAY in an email. “Low to moderate levels of stress can actually help individuals develop resilience and reduce the risk of developing mental-health disorders such as depression and antisocial behaviors.”

Stress can give you an increased ability to tolerate and adapt to life’s challenges and changes. It can give you self-confidence in your ability to manage the next stressful event you face. It can also make you more comfortable in taking reasonable risks that might lead to personal and professional growth.

"Stressful situations and environments prompt individuals to be resourceful and cognitively flexible, and as a result learn strategies and skills that help them overcome adversity and thrive. Growth often accompanies challenging experiences," says Dr. Boardman.

Even in a stressful situation like [losing a loved one](#), you can find things you can learn or changes you can make. "That's really where we find that beneficial things happen as a result of stress — when we can take those moments of stress and learn from them and grow from them," Beckjord says.

"We've got to stop being mad at ourselves for having those reflexes and feeling stress with change, and recognize that navigating change is actually within our control," says Dr. Deborah Gilboa, MD, a resilience expert and author of "From Stressed to Resilient: The Guide to Handle More and Feel It Less." "We're not pinballs stuck in a machine, just getting battered around — we actually do have control over how we navigate, even if we don't have control over what we navigate."

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Dr. Deborah Gilboa

Reframe how you perceive stress

"People have really learned this mantra that stress is toxic, and you should avoid it at all costs. That's actually a false narrative. Stress is not toxic any more than exercise is damaging, meaning stress can be toxic, because exercise can be damaging, but it is also how we get stronger and healthier," says Dr. Gilboa. "One of the biggest problems people have is they look at it wrong. They think, 'gosh, if I feel stressed, I'm doing life wrong.' What is true, is that some stress is useless and avoidable, and if that's the case, you should run away from it. But some stress really is useful and unavoidable."

Boardman agrees: "How you think about stress actually influences how you experience it. The relentless emphasis on leading a stress-free-smiley-faced existence may be further exacerbating our discomfort with discomfort."

She encourages us to try and reframe how we perceive not just stress, but other unpleasant emotions; seeing them as something that can be helpful. "We live in a period in which there is a tremendous mandate for happiness. In fact, despite what the toxic positivity gurus tell us about thinking happy thoughts all the time, bad moods may not be so bad," Boardman says. "Indeed, if we use a bad mood as data and something to learn from, it won't take such a toll on us."

For example, you might perceive [losing your job](#) as negative. "But sometimes losing your job can be the catalyst that you need to spur you on to doing what you really wanted to do," Wright says. "How we interpret events is really the critical component. If you're always

thinking from this lens that it's bad, then it's always going to be bad."

Beckjord agrees. "Once you start perceiving stress as something negative, it can quickly devolve into catastrophizing about it and leading to that feeling of overwhelm and that fight, flight or freeze response," she says.

If you can think of it as something temporary, something you've overcome before, and your body's way of telling you to pay attention, stress doesn't feel so negative.

"Our brains see every change, even the good stuff, even the stuff we work for or pray for, as stressful. And understanding that our brain's initial reaction to all change is stress helps us understand why life feels so stressful and why we keep coming up against stressful situations when we're just trying to make our lives better," says Gilboa. "We have to stop the 'I must be doing life wrong' narrative. All it means is that you're in the world, you're not doing it wrong."

Focus on the things you can control

"It's really important to cognitively shift to focusing on what you have control over in a given situation. That can help keep stress in that kind of moderate, manageable level," Beckjord says.

Take [climate change](#), for example. "There are lots of things related to climate change that are out of our control. We don't set the laws, and we can't control the companies. But what we can do is recycle. We can use a hybrid car. We can support politicians and companies that are engaged in climate change," Wright says. Focusing on what you can control gives you more agency and less of a sense of hopelessness.

"The way to approach it is with a mindset of resilience. Resilience is the ability to navigate change and come through it the kind of person you want to be," says Gilboa. "So we reverse engineer stress. And that's how to manage it with the least negative impact on ourselves. Because there's no doubt that stress can be damaging ... the way to approach it so that it's the least damaging, and the most useful, is to reverse engineer and say, 'Okay, in this situation, what's the kind of person I want to be? And how do I navigate this change towards that?'"

Stress management tips: What to do when stress gets to be too much

Stress at a constant high level is not helpful or beneficial. So, as much as possible, you want to take steps to reduce chronic stress and give yourself breaks in between stressful events or situations:

- **Cover the basics.** Eat right, [drink enough water](#), [get enough sleep](#) and make time for the things you enjoy doing.
- **Name it:** “One way not to feel less overwhelmed by stress is to break down exactly what you are feeling. Are you frustrated? Disappointed? Exhausted?” says Boardman. “Research shows that when we put a label on how we are feeling, we feel less engulfed by our emotions and more capable of handling them.”
- **If you’re feeling stress physically** — you grit your teeth, tense your muscles or have headaches — try stress-reduction techniques like walking and [diaphragmatic breathing](#) to reduce that physical response.
- **If you’re feeling emotionally stressed** — you’re overwhelmed or facing the fight, flight or freeze response — try self-soothing activities, stay socially connected, connect spiritually, [meditate](#) or listen to music.
- **Work on strengthening your resilience muscle.** “Some people are naturally more resilient and can respond more effectively to stressors, where others may require more learned skills,” Beckjord says. Moderate doses of stress, over time and with breaks, can build that resilience.
- **Have a bad day backup plan.** When we’re stressed, we often end up doing the opposite of what would make us feel better. Instead of cancelling plans with friends, binge watching TV, eating unhealthy snacks or skipping your workout, be deliberate about how you respond to stress,” says Boardman. “Counter hassles with uplifts. What are three accessible activities that reliably give you a boost? Listening to music in your car? Going for a walk with a friend? Raking a long bath? Reading a book?”
- **Know when to walk away.** If stress is neither useful or unavoidable, then “set a boundary and walk away,” says Gilboa.

[Health & WellnessWalking can boost your mood and relieve stress — here's how to do it right](#)

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