Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Stress busters for a healthier heart

Breakfast, traffic jams, overloaded inboxes, meetings, doctor's appointments, grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry, sleep. Sound familiar? Life in the fast lane can be exhausting. It can also be unhealthy, causing high blood pressure, fatigue, headaches and depression. Even more troubling are the effects on your heart.



While short bursts of stress can give you a quick boost, over the long run it wears away at the heart, increasing the chances of heart disease, hypertension and clogged arteries. Below are some quick tips that can help keep stress in check and your heart light.

Spot the signs. Learning to listen to the stress signals of mind and body can save you problems down the road. Stress triggers the release of steroids and cortisol, which over time damage heart function. Physical stress symptoms caused by these same hormones can include insomnia; headaches; back, shoulder or neck pain; fatigue, heart palpitations and upset stomach.

Poor concentration, depression, mood swings and feelings of nervousness are all emotional signals that you're in stress overload. Combat minor symptoms with a relaxing routine, whether it's yoga, singing in the shower or a massage.

Get support. Ask family or friends to help with errands or watch the kids while you get some housework done. If you care for an older relative, look into respite services. Have friends with children? Take turns babysitting so you can get out. Assign chores to each family member to take the burden off of you. If balancing work and home seems too overwhelming, seek help from a professional to help you discover ways to reduce and manage stress.

Know your limits. Your co-worker has been asking you to stay late to help out and your sister keeps nagging you to baby-sit. Learning to say "no" is crucial when you have a full plate. Set boundaries by deciding in advance how much time you can commit to home, work and outside activities and stick to them. When you've already allotted all your time, you won't feel guilty turning down invitations that overextend your agenda.

Manage work. Good scheduling is the best way to rein in time-eaters. Allocate a realistic amount of time for each project and concentrate on one task, rather than trying to do five things at once. Let go of perfectionist issues by enlisting the support of colleagues who are willing to help. Finally, find a daily ritual that helps you decompress before arriving home. Try a quick walk, a workout, listening to music or reading a book on the commute home.

Plan and organize. Disorganization breeds anxiety. Map out a strategy that keeps you sailing smoothly. Make meals on the weekend and freeze them for later. Lay out clothes and pack lunches the night before. Can't remember the last time you watched a movie or took a walk with your partner? Set a weekly date for some time together. Stop worrying about the dishes and spend quality time with your kids each night. Staying connected with family and friends will help keep you focused on what's really important.

Switch work off and socialize. E-mail, text messaging and mobile phones can save time, but also make it more difficult to escape work, creating psychological distress and decreasing the quality of home time. The emotional affects can contribute to irregular heart rhythms and reduced estrogen levels in women. Try turning off the technology when not at work and reconnect to the world face-to-face through hobbies, volunteer work, spiritual involvement or meeting with friends. Studies suggest strong social connections help you cope with stress, keep you emotionally and physically healthy, and may (in men, specifically) actually help protect the heart from cardiovascular disease.

Have fun. Laughter is truly the best medicine. It releases endorphins—feel-good chemicals produced by the body that are 10 times more powerful than morphine. Laughter also helps to decreases stress hormones. So if you're feeling wound up, take a break. Get some laughs at a comedy show or schedule a fun 'play date' with your family or friends. Keep weekend plans to a minimum and leave time for a little spontaneity. With so many commitments, it's easy to forget the things we enjoy most: friends and family and fun.

Ensure that taking time out to relax and rejuvenate isn't a guilty pleasure. After all, when you're at your best, you're more engaged and valuable to those around you.

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