

Fostering Wellness

You Should Know

When times are challenging, stress can take a toll on your physical health as well as your emotional health. Without proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise, it can be difficult to cope, stay focused, and solve problems. According to numerous scientific studies, developing healthy wellness habits strengthens your body's resilience and reduces the impact of stress on your ability to cope.

The following strategies can build your resilience by enhancing your physical wellness:

Physical activity. Regular physical activity is essential to overall health and resilience. Active people are less likely to be depressed or anxious, and they have lower stress levels because exercise increases mood-boosting chemicals like endorphins and dopamine. Exercise also improves information processing and memory. Aim for two-and-a-half hours of physical activity each week, or thirty minutes most days of the week. The thirty-minute segments can be broken up into increments throughout the day (three ten-minute walks, for example). Consider taking virtual fitness classes, going for a swim, or hiking out in nature.

Posture. Some studies show that shifting your posture can change your mood. If you are feeling nervous or anxious, try striking a pose that expresses the opposite, such as putting your hands on your hips and holding your head high (sometimes called the "power" or "superhero" pose). Additionally, certain yoga poses increase confidence and well-being.

Sleep. Adequate sleep increases mood stability and cognitive function. When you get enough sleep, you are better able to process new information, avoid overreacting, and make better decisions. For optimal energy and functioning, the Centers for Disease Control recommend adults sleep from seven to nine hours a night to recharge mentally and physically. Avoid consuming caffeine and eating heavy meals at least three hours before bedtime. It is also important to eliminate screen use at least an hour before you fall asleep. Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.

Diet. Several studies found a link between poor diet (processed foods or other junk foods) and the worsening of anxiety, depression, and insomnia. There is growing evidence that the Mediterranean diet lowers the risk of depression and improves cognition. Avoid skipping meals, eat less junk food, and limit your intake of stimulants to decrease your irritability and anxiety.

Meditation and mindfulness. Research indicates meditation, yoga, and practicing mindfulness are effective in increasing your capacity to tolerate change and stress, while focusing your attention on more positive aspects of life. Your problems are put into perspective, and you gain clarity to solve them. Try integrating five minutes of a mindfulness practice into your day. Follow a guided breathing exercise on YouTube, or use an app such as Headspace or Calm. Or, take a moment to focus your attention on the sensations you experience (touch, smell, sight, sound) while washing dishes or taking a shower.

Limiting intake of alcohol and drugs. While using substances may dull uncomfortable emotions caused by stress, they will not help you manage your reactions to the problems or allow you to solve them.

What to Do

Write down your own ideas for increasing your physical wellness:

Of the strategies listed above, what small changes can you make now to increase your physical wellness and your resilience? Write down those activities or actions:

Where do you usually feel stress in your body?

Which healthy habits are most challenging to maintain when you feel stressed?

Next, use the following chart to track your activities/actions for one week. Note their effectiveness in reducing your stress. Rate your stress level from 0 to 10, with 0 = completely calm and stress-free, and 10 = extreme distress and unable to function.

Date	Stress level before (0–10)	Healthy activity or action	Stress level after (0–10)

Reflections on This Exercise

When you feel good physically, how do you feel emotionally? How does it affect your moods?

When you feel good physically, how does it affect your ability to solve problems and cope with stress?
