



REMOVING DISABILITY DISPARITIES IN WOMEN'S HEALTH

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CENTER
FOR
RESEARCH ON
WOMEN WITH
DISABILITIES

STRESS

JUST THE FACTS!

High levels of stress have been linked to headaches, high blood pressure, heart disease, and a weakened immune system.

- Women with physical limitations or disabilities have higher levels of stress than men with physical limitations or disabilities.
- A national survey found that women who have three or more physical limitations were 10 times more likely to have difficulty with day-to-day stress than women with no limitations.
- Nearly half of adults with physical limitations report that stress negatively affects their health compared to a third of adults without physical limitations.
- Stress can be related to depression and other psychological problems among persons with physical limitations and chronic illness.
- Stress may worsen symptoms in conditions such as multiple sclerosis, arthritis, and fibromyalgia. This may be compounded by poorer health behavior during stressful times.



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TIPS FROM WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS:

- Stop, close your eyes, and take a few relaxing breaths (deep breaths if you can) when you feel yourself getting stressed. Picture yourself sitting somewhere peaceful, such as by a mountain stream, or on your grandma's porch swing.
- Do all that you can to make sure you get enough sleep every night.
- When you feel yourself becoming upset about something, stop and listen to what you are telling yourself.

The negative messages you are telling yourself *can* cause stress.

- Stop and think about what causes stress in your life and then think about how you might avoid those causes.
- Be realistic about what you can do. Setting unrealistic goals or taking on more than you can manage can set you up for additional stress.
- Do whatever type of exercise you can and do it regularly.

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MORE TIPS FROM WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS:

- Eat a well balanced diet, being sure not to drink too much caffeine or alcohol during times of stress.
- Go outside, breathe in the fresh air, feel the sun on your face, listen to a bird sing, notice the bright colors of nature... just clear your head for a moment and be pleasantly distracted by the world around you.
- Think about who in your life you enjoy being around... who makes you feel good and who makes you laugh... then be sure to have plenty of contact with them, even if just by phone or e-mail.
- Try out different types of relaxation strategies (visual imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation), find which works best for you, and then enjoy doing it regularly.
- Listen to your body's signals. Learn to identify stress and tension in your body as early as possible.
- Listen to CDs or tapes of relaxing music or soothing sounds of nature.
- Give yourself permission to play and do some of your favorite things.
- Write about the events in your life that cause you stress.
- Share your life, your joys, and your struggles with those around you, especially during times of stress.

“ Learn to ‘Just say NO’.”

IF YOU ARE A WOMAN WITH A PHYSICAL LIMITATION WHO:

- has a low income or is living below the poverty level,
- is young or early middle-aged,
- is more severely limited in physical activities,
- has pain that limits activities of daily life,
- has had recent health problems or a decline in health and functioning,
- has had recent negative events in your life, or
- has limited positive social support,

...then you may be at greater risk for elevated stress and its negative effects.

There are three general approaches to managing stress. If you use all three approaches, you will be well on your way to a less stressful life.

1. Reduce or eliminate the *causes* (“stressors”) of your stress.
2. Change how you *think about* and how you *react to* stressors.
3. Manage your stress responses (through relaxation techniques) so those stressors don't have as big an impact on your health.

WHERE TO GET ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

<http://www.healthylife.com> (click on “online products” then “Systematic Stress Management Online” for an online stress management program; site sponsored by the American Institute for Preventive Medicine, AIPM)

<http://www.healthywomen.org> (search on “stress” for helpful information; site sponsored by the National Women’s Health Resource Center, NWHRC)

<http://www.girlshealth.gov> (click on “mind” then “stress” for information on stress for girls aged 10-16; site sponsored by National Women’s Health Information Center, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women’s Health)