



# Pick Your Path to Health

## Keeping Stress Under Control

"Stress, stress, stress, uno, dos, tres," is a funny line coined by a Latin comedian. Now, if you can say that line a thousand times, you may begin to relieve some stress. If only it were that easy!

Well, sometimes it is simple and sometimes it isn't. As long as you are aware that what your body is expressing is the need to slow down, or take a break, or change scenery, then you can take simple steps to reduce or manage the stress in your life.

Stress is very real in the life of Latinas. Although it may mean different things for each person, it is clear that stress is a negative feeling rather than a positive feeling, reports the National Mental Health Association.

How many times have you said, "I'm tense," "I'm stressed out," or "I can't take it anymore"? But you take it. And because you're so busy, you move on—distressed, and like the comedian says, stressed, uno, dos, tres—you go on.

"A person who knows what stress is, knows when she's stressed," explains Gabriella Castro, who works as a flight attendant and has a large share of stress due to her work. Sometimes I don't know if I'm coming or going, she says of her frequent trips.

Stress may manifest in different ways in each person. For Castro, she says she knows she's stressed when she feels nervous, agitated, or anxious. "Your temperament or mood changes when stressed out," she emphasizes. "Sometimes people used to say you were hysterical, but what you really were is stressed out," says Castro of how stress used to be mistakenly diagnosed.

### How do you know you are stressed?

"I think I cope with stress very well," says Castro. "When I begin to feel nervous or agitated, I think of positive things—of all the things in my life that are good other than anything stressful."

For some, stress may not manifest in physical symptoms and may not be that easy to control, but if you feel overwhelmed, then it's time to look at

what things you can change in your daily routine that may help reduce stress. Some things to consider:

- How many hours a day are you sleeping? Is that enough?
- Are you in charge of all the housekeeping in your house? Do you feel that it's too much for one person?
- Do you eat a healthy diet that includes lots of vegetables and fruits?
- Are you living through a life-altering event such as the loss of a job, the death of a loved one, or illness in the family?
- Is your job generating excessive stress in your life?

Whatever the reasons are, keeping stress in check can help improve your health. According to the National Mental Health Association, too much stress can cause relatively minor illnesses like insomnia, backaches, or headaches, and can contribute to potentially life-threatening diseases like high blood pressure and heart disease.

### **Ways to relieve stress**

There is a lot of information out there about ways to relieve stress, and there are a lot of ideas on how to do it. But what works best is what will work best for you. While some of the literature out there may tell you to meditate or to make time to be alone, etc., the approach you take won't work unless you customize it to your needs, taste, and timeframe.

Besides the usual suggestions to exercise regularly, to eat well, to sleep enough, and to make time for yourself—which are all good for your health—there are other things you can do. First, learn more about what stress is and does to your body. Call the National Women's Information Center toll-free number to ask them to send you information on what is stress and what it does to your body. Call at 1-800-994-9662 or visit the Web site at [www.4woman.gov/faq/stress.htm](http://www.4woman.gov/faq/stress.htm).

In the meantime, take stock of your daily and weekly routines:

- How busy are you?
- What kinds of things generate feelings of tension, anger, sadness, etc.?
- Are there other activities you prefer doing but don't have enough time to do?

Once you have a list of your activities and what moods these generate, think of things that can help you reorganize your activities:

- Rearrange your schedule to fit in activities you enjoy doing.
- Make it a family date and play in the park.
- Share the household responsibilities with everyone. Many hands get hard work done quicker.
- Take time for yourself and visit a friend or enjoy some quiet time.

These activities will help you change the hectic pace of a busy day and perhaps allow you to clear your mind and feel renewed. You may be pleasantly surprised with how easy it can be to keep stress under control. Learning what you enjoy doing and what you can incorporate into your schedule is part of the process of enjoying your life to the fullest.

Stress will always be a part of life, but relieving stress is an important step on your path to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."*