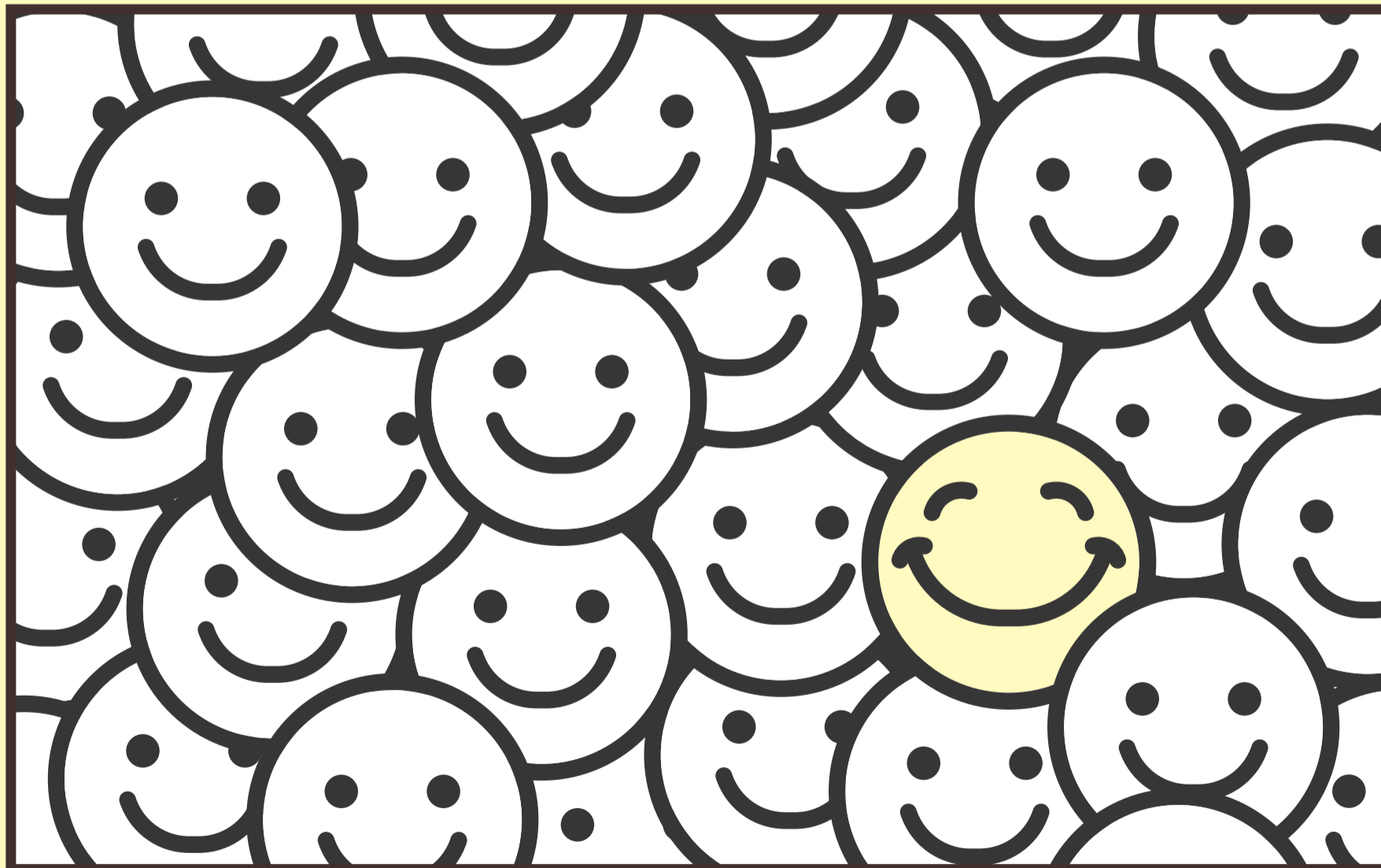


Kai

The Essential Guide to Less Stress in 2021

Recognizing National Stress Awareness Month



Introduction

Since 1992, April has been celebrated internationally as Stress Awareness Month. Not a day, not a week, but an entire month out of each and every year. Stress gets its own month because its effects are serious, pervasive, and surprisingly - often ignored.

So to give everyone a needed boost of wellbeing and mental health, we've put together a month's worth of insights, facts, and tips about stress, including: the science of stress, why we experience it, and good coping strategies.

TL;DR: The best thing you can do to manage stress is figure out your own personal triggers - and try to make friends with them.

WEEK 1

Understanding Stress: Science, Theory, & Behavior



STRESS AS A BEHAVIOR

The most important thing to know about chronic stress is that you can change it. While it's true that the 'fight-or-flight' response is an evolutionary survival mechanism that often begins even before our senses have registered an oncoming threat, much of what we perceive as threatening isn't really dangerous. Over time, however, our stressful responses to it can be.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

The fight-or-flight response is an extreme physiological reaction in response to a perceived threat. It triggers a cascade of stress hormones which make your heart pound, your muscles tense, and your breath quicken. We evolved with the fight-or-flight response to help us adapt to life-threatening situations quickly. Unfortunately, it often kicks in with daily stressors that aren't physically threatening.

TEND AND BEFRIEND

Interestingly, the Fight of Flight theory, developed by physiologist W.B. Cannon at Harvard in the 1930s, was tested exclusively on male participants. Groundbreaking research from psychologist Shelley Taylor at UCLA shows that women are more likely to respond by 'tending and befriending'. This critical adaptive strategy of protecting offspring, and turning to social sources for support in times of stress, is thought to be one of the factors in explaining why women have a longer life expectancy than men.

GENERAL ADAPTATION SYNDROME

GAS is the three-stage process that describes the physiological changes the body goes through when under stress.

Stage 1: Alarm

This is the stage where the fight-or-flight response occurs. Heart rate increases and stress hormones are released.

Stage 2: Resistance

If your stress doesn't subside, your body eventually adapts in negative ways to cope. Signs include lack of focus and irritability.

Stage 3: Exhaustion

After long periods of stress, your body is left depleted of energy and your immune system is compromised.

Signs include burnout, depression, and anxiety.

STRESS AND COPING THEORY

Developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, this popular theory defines coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” In other words, it’s how we turn lemons into lemonade. These efforts can be conscious or unconscious, and are highly individualized for each person.

Importantly, Lazarus found that stress often had less to do with a person's actual circumstances, than with how they perceived the strength of their own resources.

TYPE A PERSONALITY

Stress is synonymous with Type A personalities, who are characterized as impatient, competitive, easily upset, aggressive, and associate their sense of self-worth with achievement.

Type As are twice as likely to suffer from stress-related physical diseases, including high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease. A longitudinal study testing the Type A hypothesis found that 70% of the men in the study who developed coronary heart disease were Type A personalities.

Recognizing and understanding what it means to have a Type A personality can be transformative in helping to manage your own stress, or responding to people around you who may be Type A.

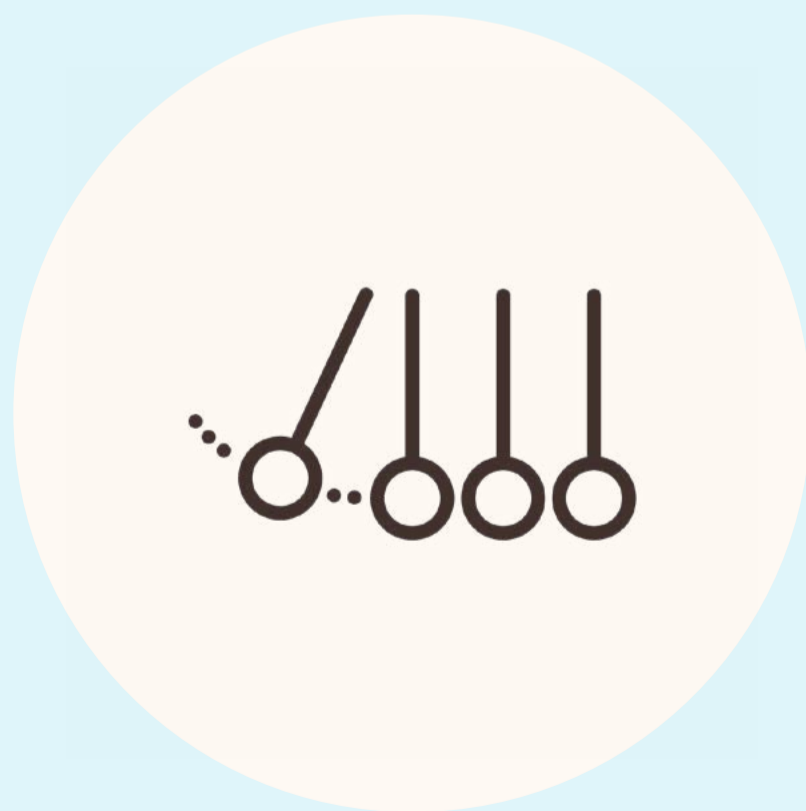
THE HPA AXIS

The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis is the network that controls your body's hormonal response to stressful situations.

The hypothalamus – a cluster of nuclei located in the brain – tells your pituitary gland to release hormones. The pituitary gland then signals to the adrenal glands to produce steroids, including cortisol and adrenaline, also known as stress hormones.

WEEK 2

Leading Causes Of Stress



PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS TRIGGERS

EMOTIONAL

Resentment

Fear

Anger

Frustration

Sadness

Grief

COGNITIVE

Information
overload

Worry

Guilt

Shame

Jealousy

Resistance

Self-criticism

Anxiety

Panic attacks

Feeling out of
control

PERCEPTUAL

Beliefs

Roles

Stories

Attitudes

World view

PHYSICAL STRESS TRIGGERS

Trauma from injury or surgery

Over-exertion

Environmental pollution

Illness

Fatigue

Lack of oxygen

Low blood sugar

Hormonal/biochemical imbalance

Dietary stress from allergies, deficiencies

Dehydration

Substance abuse

Dental challenges

Musculoskeletal misalignments

MONEY

According to a 2014 survey by the American Psychological Association:

72% of Americans say they feel stressed about money

31% report that money is a major source of conflict in their relationships

1 in 5 skip healthcare needs because of financial stress

What you can do to manage financial stress: Financial planning aside, one of the best predictors for positive outcomes in managing money-related stress is having someone to ask for emotional support. This includes a partner, family, or friends.

FAMILY

A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association found that 73% of U.S. adults report family responsibilities as a major source of stress. And while two-thirds of those parents believe their stress levels don't impact that of their children, research shows otherwise. Children model their parents' behaviors - stress management included.

What you can do to manage family-related stress:
Lack of communication increases stress. Talk openly about stress-related feelings in a way that is suited to your child's level of emotional and mental maturity. This encourages them to be more aware of their own feelings, and offers you a chance to do the same.

RELATIONSHIPS

Some amount of internal stress is normal in romantic relationships. But many people carry over external sources of stress (from work, finances, or daily hassles), which negatively affects how they relate to their partners. This often leads to poor communication, less empathy, and feelings of isolation that can break down even a good relationship in the long run.

What you can do to manage relationship-stress:

Partners aren't mind readers, though sometimes we inadvertently expect them to be. Speaking up about what's stressing you out removes the guesswork for your partner, and helps you unload.

UNCERTAINTY

A nationwide study in China about the impacts of ‘uncertainty stress’ on college students found that stress over uncertainty was more significant than life- or study-related stress in the development of mental health disorders.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has increased uncertainty stress in every area of our lives: economy, work, relationships, as well as physical and mental health. Global research into the causes and impacts of this stress is robust, and some researchers fear that our mental health impairments may linger long after the pandemic subsides.

What you can do to manage uncertainty stress: Take time out during the day to bring your awareness back to the present moment with mindful breathing techniques. This is an effective way to regain control over your parasympathetic nervous system and calm your body down.

WEEK 3

The Effects of Stress



LACK OF FOCUS

A certain amount of stress can make us more productive in a healthy way. But if you're feeling overwhelmed, all that worry impairs your working memory. The more anxious and stressed you feel, the worse your working memory performs.

Recent research from Åbo Akademi University in Finland, shows a clear correlation between pandemic-related anxiety and decreasing working memory performance. "There's an idea that it [anxiety] somehow eats up your capacity," says professor of psychology Matti Laine. "When you're anxious, your head is full of those thoughts, and your brain is somehow biased and paying more attention to negative things." The prolonged state of increased stress that many of us have been experiencing since the pandemic means we're all working harder to stay focused.

What you can do to focus when feeling stressed:

Keep a journal. As productivity guru David Allen says, 'our minds are for creating ideas, not keeping them'.

POOR SLEEP

Chronic levels of stress are correlated with hyperactivity of the HPA axis, the body's regulatory center for stress hormones. This starts a downward spiral of negative responses that make it harder to fall asleep, shorten sleep duration, and impair sleep quality by reducing REM and deep sleep stages.

What you can do to improve sleep when feeling stressed: A study cited in [VeryWellMind](#) shows that coping strategies which involve emotional engagement (meditation, breathing exercises) can help you fall asleep faster; while strategies of emotional disengagement (avoidance, substance abuse) prolong sleep onset latency.

OVEREATING AND OBESITY

The stress hormone cortisol increases your appetite and cravings for sugary or fatty foods. It also increases abdominal fat deposits. Excess belly fat is believed to pose the greatest physical health risks among other types of body fat, and is associated with chronic inflammation, insulin resistance, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

What you can do to manage emotional eating:

Try healthy coping mechanisms like eating more mindfully and keeping a food journal. These work together, both to reduce overeating and the stress that causes it.

ANXIETY OR DEPRESSION

Stress and anxiety share physical and biological elements, and prolonged stress actually leads to anxiety. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, almost half of people diagnosed with depression also suffer from anxiety disorder.

Since the pandemic, roughly [4 in 10 adults in the U.S](#) have reported feelings of anxiety or depression, up from 1 in 10 adults in the same period during 2019.

What you can do to manage stress-related anxiety or depression: Establishing a consistent routine helps manage the feelings of overwhelm or lack of control that stress often causes, says Carolyn Mazure, a Yale Medicine psychologist and director of Women's Health Research at Yale. Mazure also recommends doing things that have personal meaning. "One of the central aspects of resilience is feeling that you have purpose in life. To ensure this, remind yourself what is important, remember your values, and value your relationships."

PREMATURE AGING

The evidence connecting stress and aging is comprehensive. In a study comparing the DNA of mothers caring for a chronically ill child with women who were not, the stressed mothers experienced between 9 and 17 years of accelerated aging.

Physiologically, chronic stress is thought to shorten DNA telomeres, the two protective caps at the end of each of the chromosomes in our cells. Studies show that telomere length is a marker of biological and cellular aging, and is influenced by stressful life experiences in both childhood and adulthood.

What you can do to reduce premature aging:

In 2013, a groundbreaking study on mindfulness meditation showed that just a single day of practice was enough to dramatically change genetic and molecular activity for the better. Imagine what a daily mindfulness practice can do!

ASTHMA

Asthma is a lung disease that causes wheezing, breathlessness, chest constriction, and coughing - particularly in the early morning or at night. Stress and asthma are a two-way street. Having asthma causes stress, and having stress both triggers attacks and worsens symptoms for asthma sufferers. Recent research even suggests that chronic stress in parents can increase the risk of developing asthma in children.

What you can do manage stress-related asthma:

Positive, predictable routines support our innate craving for security, especially in children. Setting up morning and evening routines is a simple proactive step in preventing stress-triggered asthma attacks.

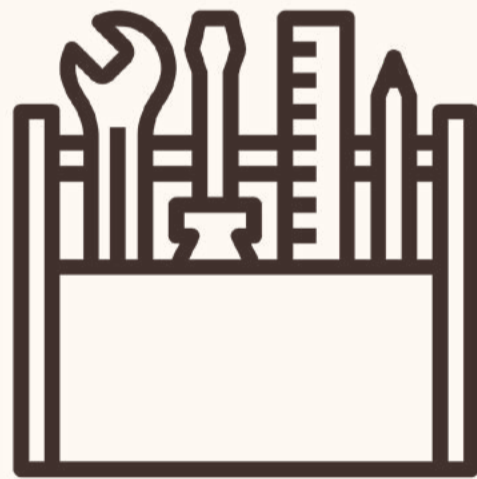
HEART DISEASE

Researchers have long suspected that stressed-out personalities have a higher risk of high blood pressure and heart problems. We don't exactly know why, but we do know that stress releases cholesterol and triglycerides into the bloodstream. We also know that intense emotional stress, especially when appearing suddenly, can trigger heart attacks.

What you can do to manage stress-related heart disease: The heart is symbolized as our emotional center, and strong emotional reactions often trigger stress. If you suffer from chronic heart disease, it's imperative you learn to manage and understand your emotions better - especially the difficult ones. Behavioral coaching, psychotherapy, or Acceptance & Commitment Training offer good outlets.

WEEK 4

Tools for Coping with Stress



MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

Mindfulness techniques such as focusing (looking inward to observe your mind), and awareness (looking outward to reconnect with your senses in the present moment), are opposite approaches that work in a similar way to reduce stress: by bringing your attention back to the present moment. This is effective because most of the chronic stress we experience isn't related to a clear or present danger, but rather, to our perceptions of past and future threats.

JOURNALING

The daily practice of journaling helps to relieve stress by creating distance to untangle from stress-inducing thoughts and emotions. In psychology it's called defusion: "The separation of an emotion-provoking stimulus from the unwanted emotional response as part of a therapeutic process, in the same way as when a bomb is defused."

Journaling is also effective in helping us identify low-level chronic stress by pointing out areas of resistance.

For example, when you journal consistently, you'll begin to notice that if you write about something that you want, but don't believe you're actually worthy or capable of having, it will resonate with a feeling of resistance. This resistance offers powerful insight to identify and release the limiting beliefs that often contribute to hidden stress.

BREATHING

Buddhist monks have known it for centuries and science has now caught up:

Breathing deeply through the nose, with a slow and balanced ratio of inhales and exhales, signals to our parasympathetic nervous system to calm the body down. Conscious breath is the most direct and immediate way in which you can manage your body's stress response and improve your physical, mental, and emotional health in the short and long run.

GRATITUDE

In the short term, practicing gratitude is an effective way to combat chronic stress because it teaches you to focus on what's going right in your life, instead of what's 'wrong' or lacking. When you do this for long enough, you'll begin to realize that it's a skill you can cultivate and call upon in challenging moments.

But there are also indirect, long-term benefits of gratitude for managing stress. For example, people who practice gratitude regularly are also more likely to have stronger relationships, which they can turn to for support in times of need.

FOREST BATHING

The Japanese practice of Shinrin-yoku, aka “forest bathing”, is defined as spending time in nature in a way that activates your five senses. Like a good bath, it helps you soak in stillness. Studies have shown that forest bathing has numerous benefits in decreasing stress, including lowering blood pressure, reducing activity of the sympathetic nervous system, and boosting immune health. The idea remains the same whether you can get in 20 minutes a day, two concentrated hours a week, or the lockdown version of burning pine essential oils with a diffuser in your home. Be sure to put your devices aside and let yourself truly unplug.

SLEEP

Are you getting 8 hours of sleep a night? Studies show that even minor sleep deprivation affects our memory and mood, making us more prone to stressful reactions.

And chronic sleep deprivation has a profoundly negative impact on our emotional, mental, and physical health. If you're not prioritizing sleep, your ability to manage stress becomes greatly diminished. Try getting in the habit of a relaxing evening routine that includes journaling and recounting the day's wins, to help set your mind at ease so you can fall asleep more easily.

DON'T BE HARD ON YOURSELF

Being human is a real challenge and things will go wrong from time to time. You will mess up and overreact. Everyone does, this is normal. But day by day, year by year, you can get to know yourself better and learn to accept your unique weaknesses. Simply knowing that you are one of 9 billion other perfectly flawed people can be deeply reassuring. That, and having good daily practices for stress management.

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It All Starts With A Conversation

Kai is an AI-powered mental health and wellbeing companion. Using chat-based conversation it helps you create positive daily routines to reframe your mindset and make your life happier and more meaningful. Try it anywhere, anytime, to get through anxiety, stress or whatever life throws at you.

Learn more about [Kai](#) and [Kai for work](#).

Good morning, Maya 🌻

One Thing 🌟

What is the one thing you'll focus on to make today great?

The interview I have in 30 minutes

How do you feel toward your interview?

Worried and nervous :(

Want to do something to boost your confidence and energy? 💪

Yes!

Maya, do you want to pick up a