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MCHD HEALTH BLOG

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Public Health
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MORGAN COUNTY HEALTH DEPT.



STRESS AWARENESS MONTH

April is recognized as National Stress Awareness Month to bring attention to the negative impact of stress. Whether it's from everyday deadlines, financial struggles, or illness, stress shows up often in life. And your body reacts to it: your heart rate increases, your blood vessels narrow—and over time, these little blows can add up and do damage to your health, particularly your heart. With chronic stress, you're more likely to have high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and poor sleep. Even other parts of your body – from your lungs to your gut – can take a hit.

But while you can't always limit the amount of stress in your life, you can work on changing how you respond to it. Just like the automatic "fight or flight" response that kicks in when you're scared – your muscles tense, heart rate increases, and brain becomes more alert – your body also has a built-in, healthy relaxation response. When that's triggered, the opposite happens: your breathing and heart rate slow down, and your blood pressure decreases.

Luckily, with practice, you can learn to trigger that response. Try these techniques to help you get started. Don't get discouraged if you don't get the hang of it quickly. And if one approach doesn't work for you, try something new. You can learn to de-stress in lots of other ways.

- **Meditation.** One of the most studied approaches for managing stress, this involves developing your ability to stay focused on the present, instead of worrying about the past or future. Find a quiet location with as few distractions as possible. Get comfortable by either sitting, lying or walking. Focus your attention on a specific word or set of words, an object or your breathing. And let distractions, including thoughts, come and go without judgment.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** To feel the effect, first tense your muscles for a few seconds, then relax them. Start by tensing and relaxing your toes, then your calves and on up to your face. Do one muscle group at a time.
- **Deep breathing.** Take in a slow, deep breath, let your stomach or chest expand and then exhale slowly. Repeat a few times. Many people don't breathe deeply, but it is relaxing and something you can do anytime, anywhere.
- **Guided imagery.** This involves a series of steps that include relaxing and visualizing the details of a calm, peaceful setting, such as a garden.

Learn how to stress less for a healthier heart from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute by visiting www.nhlbi.nih.gov.