



Sadness in the spotlight

It's okay to feel sad. In fact, everyone feels sad from time to time. It's a normal human reaction to challenging, disappointing or distressing experiences. Sadness not only makes you feel miserable, irritable and tearful, it can also have physical symptoms such as stomach aches, headaches and insomnia.

While no one likes to be sad, it is an important part of the human experience.

The importance of sadness

All our emotions, including happiness, joy, fear and anger drive our thoughts, actions and give our lives meaning. Sadness is especially important because it helps develop emotional resilience – the ability to learn from our mistakes, change behaviours and bounce back from adversity. When we're sad, we're more likely to analyze the things that are causing us to feel blue, what we may be doing wrong and how we can change the situation.

Sadness may also foster creativity. Happiness feels great, but it can distract us or make us less likely to contemplate life, examine our feelings or focus and persevere on a task.

Everyone experiences life differently. Upbringing, culture and life experiences all play roles in how we react to situations, but some of us are simply genetically programmed to be more sensitive – we cry and laugh easily and feel great empathy for others. While we can't alter our DNA or our past, or prevent stressful or upsetting events from happening, we can find ways to better cope with sadness.

Coping with sadness

Unfortunately, many people try to numb negative emotions with alcohol, legal or illegal drugs (including nicotine) or other unhealthy behaviours. However, it's more productive to acknowledge our feelings and give ourselves time to deal with problems. The next time you feel sad, try some of these tips:

- **Don't retreat into self-pity.** Instead remember that sadness is a valid emotion and part of life.
- **Talk to people you trust.** They can help provide perspective, advice and encouragement during difficult times.

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- **Maintain a healthy lifestyle.** When we're feeling sad we can overeat or indulge in sugary, fatty or highly processed "comfort" foods. Stay focused on a healthy diet, staying active, getting plenty of sleep and watching your alcohol and caffeine intake.
- **Help others.** Supporting and caring for others will make you feel better about life.
- **Laugh.** The best cure for sadness is happiness. Do things that bring you joy: getting together with family and friends, watching your favourite sport, playing an instrument, taking the kids to the park or just going to a funny movie.
- **Tackle one problem at a time.** It doesn't matter if you start with the biggest or smallest problem, just make a list and begin.

Finally, remember that sadness passes and you'll feel better soon.

The difference between sadness and depression

Sadness is very different from depression. Sadness is a *temporary* feeling about *something*. Depression is a *lasting*, intense unhappiness about *everything*. Unlike sadness, depression is a mental illness that can occur without reason or warning and often worsens without treatment.

Depression is:

- Intense sadness that lasts all day, every day, for more than two weeks.
- Loss of interest or enjoyment in favourite activities.
- Feelings of worthlessness.
- Excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.
- Trouble concentrating and making decisions.
- Feelings of restlessness or being slowed down.
- Often life altering.

Life is full of ups and downs, highs and lows. Without sadness we wouldn't appreciate happy moments, want to change negative behaviours or situations or work to improve our lives. However, if your sadness does not pass and you're feeling overwhelmed, speak to your family physician or access counselling through your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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Good and bad stress: Do you know the difference?

Some stress is actually good for us. It can help our minds focus, our senses sharpen and our bodies get ready for physical challenges. Who hasn't felt butterflies in their stomachs and their heart beat faster before a presentation at work, a job interview, a date or a rollercoaster ride? These short bursts of stress are completely natural and normal.

It's the long-term, inescapable stress – job insecurity, chronic illness, financial difficulties, relationship breakdowns, work overload – that's not good for us. When our minds and bodies are constantly flooded with stress hormones, our physical and mental health can suffer.

Whatever the kind of stress we experience, one thing is clear: it's unavoidable. So we need to find ways to harness the power of short-term stress and control the negative effects of long-term stress.

Bad stress blues

According to the Mayo Clinic, long-term stress is a contributing factor to many health problems, including high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, diabetes and depression. It often makes us irritable, angry, withdrawn and/or unmotivated and this impacts our professional and personal relationships, resulting in more stress.

Long-term stress has such a damaging effect on our lives because many people develop unhealthy coping mechanisms. These include:

- Consuming too much alcohol or caffeine.
- Overeating or undereating.
- Dependence on prescription medication or illegal drugs.
- Smoking.
- Withdrawing from family, friends and activities.
- Consuming sugary, high-fat foods.

While these behaviours might provide temporary relief, they actually increase stress – and further damage our health over time.

Turning bad stress into good stress

While we can't control what life throws our way, we can find healthy and effective ways to cope. If you're starting to feel overwhelmed, try the following:

- **Exercise.** Physical activity not only keeps your body and mind in shape, it's also a great stress-busting tool. Exercise helps to increase the production of endorphins – your body's feel-good chemicals. Working up a sweat will help you shed the day's stresses, elevate your mood and remain calm.
- **Stop and breathe.** Find ways to relax and refocus. This can include breathing exercises, meditation, massage, yoga, tai chi or just finding time to read or listen to music.

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- **Focus on your accomplishments.** There are always those weeks when everything goes wrong or you have too much to do. When this happens, focus on your accomplishments rather than your failures. Many people find it helpful to keep a gratitude journal in which they write down what they are thankful for every day, including their own talents and abilities.
- **Talk to a trusted friend or family member.** Knowing that people have your best interests at heart can greatly reduce your stress levels. Your friends and family can help you put things into perspective and offer sound advice and support.
- **Socialize.** Stressful events can make you feel miserable, tired and sometimes sad. While the last thing you may want to do is be around other people, it's actually the first thing you should do. It's hard to feel anxious when you're around positive people and laughter is the best medicine – it triggers the release of endorphins that give you a sense of well-being.
- **Set boundaries.** Many of us find it hard to say no and, as a result, find ourselves overwhelmed with work, family and social obligations. Setting boundaries is a skill that takes practise so many experts suggest starting with small things.
- **Take action.** Sometimes we increase our stress by fretting about a problem instead of doing something about it. For example, instead of worrying constantly about your finances, take action by consulting a financial advisor, talking to your bank or contacting your Employee Assistance Program.

Finally, remember that some stress makes life exciting. It drives you to reach goals, deal with problems and increase your effectiveness in all areas of your life. However, if you continue to feel overwhelmed and/or sad, talk to your doctor or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program.

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