

No Quick Fixes

Why Drugs, Alcohol and Tobacco Can't Really Relieve Stress

Drinking a few beers or smoking a joint might seem like an easy way to beat stress, but the truth is that drugs and alcohol don't really fix anything. When you get drunk or high, you're not facing the causes of stress in your life. You're just getting too wasted to care — and when you sober up, everything that was stressing you out before will still be there.

In addition to not really solving any of your problems, drug and alcohol abuse can actually lead to entirely new problems, such as:

- Trouble at work or school
- Relationship problems
- Legal problems related to underage drinking or illegal drugs
- Greater risk of driving while drunk, buzzed or high
- Greater risk of having unprotected sex or engaging in other dangerous behavior
- Addiction
- Overdose or alcohol poisoning

People who abuse drugs and alcohol are also putting themselves at risk for all sorts of long-term health issues. Alcohol abuse can cause liver disease, brain damage, heart problems and an increased risk for cancer and stroke. Same goes for most types of drug abuse. Plus, because illegal drugs such as cocaine are unregulated, you never know exactly what kinds of chemicals you're actually getting — and how those chemicals will affect your brain and body.

WHAT ABOUT TOBACCO?

Some people think that smoking or chewing tobacco can relieve stress. Tobacco products contain a drug called nicotine — and when you smoke a cigarette or take a dip of snuff, nicotine travels through your bloodstream and causes your brain to release dopamine.

Dopamine is a chemical that your brain naturally produces when you're doing something fun, like laughing with a friend or watching your favorite movie. People get hooked on tobacco because they want to keep that feeling going.

When you use tobacco, though, you're just tricking your brain into feeling happy. You're not dealing with the causes of your stress, and you're actually doing serious harm to your body. Smokers and tobacco users end up with all sorts of health problems: They are at a greater risk for developing several types of cancer, and they are more likely to suffer from strokes or heart disease. In addition, people who smoke cigarettes are at risk for developing respiratory problems such as emphysema.

NOT WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

Prescription Drug Abuse

Sometimes, doctors prescribe drugs to patients dealing with anxiety or depression. It's a common misconception that prescription medications are safe for anyone to take — regardless of whose name is on the label. The truth is a lot more complicated than that, though.

It's never a good idea to take someone else's prescription drugs. In fact, using prescriptions that don't belong to you (or even taking extra doses of your own prescriptions) is another form of drug abuse. You never know how a drug will interact with your body, and some drugs can have serious or even fatal effects when combined with alcohol or other drugs.

Bottom line? When it comes to relieving stress, drugs and tobacco don't cut it.

SAFE AND HEALTHY STRESS BUSTERS

Looking for a few ways to unwind — that don't involve drugs or alcohol? The next time you feel stressed out, try one of these instead:

- Talk to a friend about your problems
- Do something creative — paint, draw, play music or write
- Play a video game
- Meditate
- Go for a walk
- Relax — take a hot bath, watch a favorite TV show or curl up with a good book

A NATURAL HIGH

Exercise and Stress Relief

One of the best ways to beat stress is to get moving — go for a jog, hop on your bike, hit the gym or break out the yoga mat. When you exercise, your brain releases endorphins — chemicals that make you feel happy and positive. This surge of endorphins is sometimes called a "runner's high" — but you can get that same feeling from other types of exercise, too.

Unlike the kind of high you get from drugs and alcohol, a runner's high is safe, legal and good for you.

TEST YOURSELF!

See what you know about stress and drugs, alcohol and tobacco by answering the questions below:

1. Your body's response to stress is also known as the _____ response.
A.) "Good-stress" B.) "Bad-stress"
C.) "Fight-or-Flight" D.) "Do-or-Die"
2. Positive life changes — such as planning a wedding or getting ready for college — can cause "bad stress."
A.) True B.) False
3. Prescription drugs are safe to take — even if they don't belong to you.
A.) True B.) False
4. The physical symptoms of stress include:
A.) Insomnia B.) Depression
C.) Headaches D.) All of the above
5. A "runner's high" occurs during exercise, when your brain releases a chemical called:
A.) Cortisol B.) Endorphins
C.) Hormones D.) None of the above

DEALING WITH STRESS



Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. B 4. D 5. B

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WITHOUT DRUGS, ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO



NOT SO BAD

“Good Stress”

If you’ve ever felt nervous or anxious before a big test, a job interview or a date, you know what it’s like to be stressed out. Your heartbeat speeds up. So does your breathing. You may start to sweat. You feel jittery and alert.

Events like planning a wedding or preparing to go away to college can be very stressful at times. This biological response to stress is also known as the “fight-or-flight response.” When you’re in a stressful situation, your nervous system kicks into overdrive. Your brain releases chemicals called cortisol and adrenaline, and these chemicals travel through your bloodstream, giving you the extra energy you need to react quickly and appropriately in a challenging – or even dangerous – situation.

The fight-or-flight response is an example of “good stress” – it’s the kind of stress that keeps you alert and focused on what you’re doing. Normally, good stress subsides after the stressful event is over.

THE CAUSES OF “BAD STRESS”

What happens, though, when that tension and anxiety doesn’t go away?

Unlike the good stress that kicks in when you need an extra burst of adrenaline, “bad stress” – or stress that lingers for days, weeks or even months – isn’t helpful. In fact, bad stress can lead to a variety of physical and mental health problems, including:

- Anxiety attacks
- Insomnia
- Fatigue
- Weakened immune system
- Depression
- Headaches and muscle pain
- Stomach problems

As we’ve already discussed, good stress is usually caused by short-term stressors, such as a first date or a job interview.

Bad stress, on the other hand, is brought on by long-term sources of stress, such as:

- Problems at school or work
- Relationship problems
- Health problems
- Moving to a new place
- Problems with bullying or peer pressure
- An overloaded school, work or activity schedule

This is just a partial list of things that can cause bad stress. The bottom line is, everyone feels stress – good and bad – at some point.

UNDER PRESSURE

Jasmine’s Story

Everyone knew that Jasmine was destined to do great things. The 22-year-old college senior was one semester away from earning a bachelor’s degree in biology, and she had just been accepted to medical school, where she was planning to pursue her lifelong dream of being a surgeon. In addition to keeping up with loads of schoolwork, Jasmine worked at a local coffee shop to pay for tuition, and she volunteered two nights a week at the local hospital. Somehow, she also managed to maintain an active social life. She was on the Dean’s list, and she was set to graduate with honors.

What most of Jasmine’s friends didn’t know, though, was that even though Jasmine seemed like she could do it all, she was barely keeping it together – she had trouble sleeping, and she almost never had a chance to just kick back and relax. She was stressed out.

A few months into the spring semester, Jasmine started drinking. Drinking helped her relax, she explained to her puzzled friends – they’d never seen her drink before.

At first, it was just a few drinks at parties – but soon, Jasmine was drinking every night. If she couldn’t find a friend to drink with, she’d drink by herself. She started experimenting with drugs, too. Her grades started to drop. She started skipping classes, and she even missed one of her midterms – she was too hung over to show up for it. When she stopped showing up for work, she got fired from her job at the coffee shop.

One night, after hitting a few bars, Jasmine was pulled over for driving erratically. She failed a field sobriety test and was arrested on the spot for drunk driving. Her parents had to drive five hours to bail her out.

Jasmine might not be going to medical school next year. She’ll have to re-take a few of the classes she failed. She doesn’t have a job, and her GPA is ruined. She dreamed of doing great things one day, but now she’s not sure if her dreams will ever come true.



STOPPING STRESS BEFORE IT STARTS

You already know that there are different kinds of stress. You also know that there are lots of safe and healthy ways to deal with stress – without turning to drugs or alcohol.

There are also things you can do to prevent “bad” stress from taking over. Here are a few ways you can reduce your risk of getting stressed out:

- Don’t overschedule. A lack of downtime can do a number on your ability to beat stress. If you’ve got a schedule that’s jam-packed with activities, consider cutting out a few in order to give yourself some much-needed free time.
- Be a (small) problem solver. Often, bad stress comes from a feeling of being overwhelmed by one or two huge problems or situations. Instead of focusing on a big issue, try to focus on smaller, related problems that you can solve quickly. By tackling the little stuff first, you’ll feel more accomplished – and you’ll slowly make the big stuff more manageable.
- Eat right. Junk food might be quick and convenient, but it’s also loaded with unhealthy fats, starches and sugars. Too much junk food can make you feel sluggish – and it’s not great for your health. Choose healthy foods to ensure your body gets the right nutrition.
- Be positive. Studies have shown that having a positive attitude can help you manage stress more effectively. Try to see the good things instead of just focusing on the bad.

LEARNING MORE

If you’d like to learn more about stress – and how to handle stress without turning to drugs, tobacco or alcohol, check out a few of these websites:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/Features/HandlingStress/
- KidsHealth: www.kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/kids_stress.html
- GirlsHealth: www.girlshealth.gov/feelings/
- WebMD: www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-management-topic-overview

HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH STRESS?

“What a lousy day – I can’t wait to go home and have a beer.”

“I’m so stressed out. That’s why I get high.”

“It’s one of those days . . . I really need a cigarette right now.”

“I just want to drink until I feel relaxed.”

Do any of these sound familiar?

People often think that having a few drinks or using illegal drugs will help them beat stress – but the truth is, drugs and alcohol often have the exact opposite effect. In most cases, people who abuse drugs and alcohol end up with more problems.

Everyone gets a little stressed out sometimes, but there are lots of safe ways to deal with it besides using drugs and alcohol. Keep reading to learn more about the causes of stress, and some healthy things you can do the next time you feel stressed out.

