

# 10 Unexpected Stressors That Are Wrecking Your Health

By [Katherine Schreiber, Greatist](#)

The big causes of stress in life are easy to ID — major transitions, illnesses and injuries, money issues, a too-busy schedule — the list goes on and on (and on and... ). But they're not the only things eating away at you. And, as a result, messing with your wellbeing. Even mild stressors have been shown to pose long-term impediments to our health, plus they lower tolerance for more severe stressors like pain.

Before you start to feel even more [anxious](#), take a breath — because we've got your back. We rounded up 10 of the sneakiest (and most common) stressors, as well as foolproof ways to outsmart them so they don't bring you (or your body) down.

## 1. Late Bedtimes

Crawling into bed after midnight may bump your stress levels. The later students put off going to sleep in one study, the more likely they were to [suffer from negative thoughts, ruminative worries, and overall low moods](#) than those who achieved lights out on the earlier side.

And regardless of how many hours they sleep, adults and teens who identify as night owls report feeling more tension, pessimism, and depressive symptoms than their early-bird peers. Since anxiety and a brain that won't shut off interfere with relaxation and sleep, researchers still aren't certain whether later bedtimes are the primary cause of these negative emotions or whether they simply reflect a more stressed out, unhappy personality structure.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, the best bet is to start winding down a full two hours before you plan on falling asleep (ideally at a time that allows for at least eight hours of ZZZs.) "It's critical that we set boundaries for when it's time to shut down," says Heidi Hanna, Ph.D., author of *Stressaholic*. So turn off the Netflix, shut down the smartphone, and stem Facebook stalking ASAP after dinner, and feel free to hop in a warm bath or shower to facilitate the relaxation response. "It can also be helpful to set an alarm at least an hour before your intended bedtime," Hanna adds. That way your body is cued to start winding down.

And lest you find yourself stressing about [not being able to fall asleep](#) once you actually get around to it? Try and, well, take the pressure off. "Falling asleep is a spontaneous thing. You can't force yourself to do it," says Sally Winston, Psy.D., co-director of the Anxiety and Stress Disorders Institute of Maryland and co-author of *What Every Therapist Needs to Know About Anxiety Disorders*. "The minute you start telling yourself, 'Oh no; it's 2 a.m. and I can't sleep!' you're done for. Being willing to not sleep is actually what relaxes your body. It's the willingness to lay in a dark room with your eyes closed and allow yourself to just be there that'll do the trick."

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## 2. Lying

From little white fibs to massive deceptions, lying can interfere with our mental and physical health and may even contribute to gastric distress.

But holistic psychotherapist and relationship expert Victoria Lorient-Faibish, M.Ed., author of Find Your “Self Culture,” doesn’t counsel wholesale confession as an antidote to the stress caused by dishonesty. “Many people with a history of lying struggle with fantasies of confession,” she says. “But they often fail to realize that coming clean might make things worse.” Rather than blurting out everything to everyone all at once, Lorient-Faibish recommends first coming clean to a [therapist](#) who can help you assess who else to tell your deep-seeded truths to — and how.

## 3. Caffeine

You know caffeine’s a stimulant — that’s why you rely on it to get you through the week. Unfortunately, in striving to focus and offset fatigue, many of us [exceed the daily 300-milligram limit](#) recommended by Michelle Dudash, R.D., author of Clean Eating for Busy Families.

Regularly O.D.’ing on caffeine chronically elevates anxiety, adrenaline, cortisol, and blood pressure, making us more sensitive to everyday stressors and ultimately interfering with sleep.

To avoid the downsides of too much joe, Dudash recommends avoiding coffee and caffeinated soda after work hours and sticking to no more than two 6-ounce cups in the morning. (That 300 milligram limit, by the way, is equivalent to about four cups of most coffees, one 16-ounce grande at Starbucks, or five 20-ounce bottles of soda.)

And remember: Caffeine doesn’t just come from beverages designed to juice you up. Chocolate, some OTC meds (like Midol and Excedrin), and even coffee-flavored ice creams can add to your daily load.

## 4. Alcohol

Hitting the bottle also stimulates the release of cortisol. And despite its initial sedative effects it can, like caffeine, exacerbate sensitivity to stress. Drinking has also been found to [interfere with the critical REM stage of nightly sleep cycles](#).

But you don’t need to give up Malbec and Manhattans completely. The Department of Health and Human Services recommends limiting alcohol intake to one drink a day if you’re a gal or two per day if you’re a guy. (For reference, one drink means 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of liquor.) More incentive to stick to the limits: Studies show moderate drinking is linked to lower levels of inflammation and may be linked to lower rates of depression and stress. Or you can always ask for seltzer with a splash of cranberry as a happy hour alternative.

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## 5. Exercise

Let's be clear: Moderate exercise is awesome for your health. But because we receive so much positive reinforcement for doing it, many of us fail to realize when we're, well, overdoing it. Regularly pushing ourselves past the brink of what our bodies can handle (including exercising on top of heavy demands at work, relationship or social drama, and other life pressures) skyrockets stress hormones and can mess with our moods.

Signs that you may need to scale back and could have overtraining syndrome include difficulty falling asleep, restless sleep, feeling exhausted all day (no matter how much coffee you down), difficulty focusing, and lack of motivation, says exercise physiologist Mike Bracko.

Before you break, do yourself a favor and take a rest day or opt for lighter workouts when you're feeling frazzled or experience these symptoms. To recharge, Bracko recommends taking three or four days off of your normal routine, switching up your regimen (like opting for a spin class if you normally do weight lifting, or vice versa), or just toning it down (think: walking instead of running or doing squats with just your bodyweight).

“Changing the intensity of your workout or opting for less intense, shorter sessions of active rest exercises will help restore the glycogen in muscles that can become depleted from prolonged activity,” Bracko explains. “A few days of this can have amazing effects on a person's energy.”

## 6. Opening Your Inbox

It's not necessarily the amount of e-mails we receive in any given day, nor is it the thought that our inboxes are steadily expanding faster than the speed of light that makes us feel more nuts. Science says it's actually the number of times we check our e-mail that [skyrockets stress levels](#).

No need for FOMO, just cap yourself to a certain number of e-mail checks per day. (Three times is the golden number, according to the study.) If you work in an office where e-mail is the expected means of communication, apply the limits to home. “Managing your knee-jerk reaction to respond immediately helps free you from that sense of urgency that can make such a mess out of your stress levels,” Winston says.

## 7. Noise

From [car horns to wailing sirens](#) to shrieking babies to that coworker who won't stop rhythmically clearing his throat (ah-ah-hem!), intrusive noises of all types can kick-start the body's cortisol response, elevate stress and anxiety levels, and possibly raise the risk of cardiovascular disease — especially if they're unpredictable or interrupt our concentration. The less control we feel we have over these aural interruptions, the worse they make us feel.

You don't have to put up with that. Noisy neighbors and cacophonies from the street can be mitigated by carpets, rugs, and curtains that absorb sounds rather than reflect them like hardwood

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floors and bare walls do. The larger and heavier the textile, the better: Apparently tufted carpets are best.)

After redecorating, try tuning up calm music. Relaxing beats have been shown to trump silence in stemming stress hormone surges following nerve-wracking events, while nature sounds (even recorded ones) seem to soothe even better. Or try earplugs if the noise is too much.

## 8. Commuting

Here's a reason to start telecommuting: Lengthy daily drives to work topping 10 miles each way may increase the risk for anxiety and depression, and no wonder since the more time we spend in transit, the higher our cortisol levels have been shown to creep.

It doesn't matter if you drive or ride: A survey of more than 21,000 people aged 18 to 65 pegged longer [commutes by all modes of transportation](#), public and private alike, to more health problems, higher fatigue, exhaustion, and even insomnia.

There is hope, though. While biking to work or walking the company parking lot's length before clocking in at the office are great alternatives, Winston says a much better solution lies in reframing our perspective of commuting altogether. "If you see something as stressful, it will be," she explains. Flying into a rage at finding yourself in a bottleneck or sandwiched between strangers on a bus blinds you from the unsuspecting freedom of accepting your powerlessness over the matter. "Being stuck in traffic is when you're off the hook," Winston says. "It's not your fault if you're late."

Instead, consider commuting the perfect opportunity to practice mindfulness. This doesn't mean doing breathing exercises when a fellow commuter's armpit hovers over your face. "It simply means looking around at the other people, listening, and taking note of the sights, smells, and sounds," Winston explains. Even if they're abrasive.

## 9. Processed Foods

Cortisol levels rise naturally whenever we eat, mainly to aid in the breakdown of proteins, carbs, and fats so our bodies can use them.

But the stress hormone also regulates inflammation, which can be caused by processed foods containing high levels of saturated and trans fat, sugar, or chemical additives, Dudash says. From fast food to deceptively unhealthy meal replacement bars, frozen meals, and candy, chronically consuming processed foods cranks cortisol — which is good at some levels — to unhealthy heights in the body, she adds. Over time, this can cause blood sugar imbalances, weight gain, digestive issues, immune system suppression, and even heart disease.

This is yet another reason to eat whole foods. (Dudash encourages ones that aren't found in packages.) When you do purchase something with a label, check the ingredients to be sure there

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are no partially hydrogenated oils (a.k.a. trans fats), and try to keep fast food to a minimum, she recommends.

Even better: Stock up on [foods that buffer sensitivity to stress](#). Walnuts, almonds, and pecans facilitate synthesis of the feel-good hormone serotonin, while omega-3 fatty acids can help reduce inflammation and anxiety, so don't forget to have some fish.

### 10. Dieting

On the flip side, you may think you're being healthy by keeping close tabs on what you eat or making sure your caloric intake doesn't exceed a particular number. But the vigilance dieters often have to exert coupled with the strain of restricting impulses to cheat tends to amplify stress and anxiety.

“Obsessing over labels and ingredients can sometimes be more stressful to our body than eating the occasional Crunch bar,” Winston says. It's fine to strive toward health, but being too controlling in your eating or thinking of foods as “good” or “bad” can completely sap the enjoyment out of food, she adds. So no matter what your goals are, have that brownie or pizza or second (or third) margarita once in a while.

### The Takeaway

The potential stressors in our world seem infinite. But armed with better frames of mind and strategies to not let them get under your skin, you can greatly minimize the amount of cortisol and other stress hormones floating around in your body. Remember not to let these tips add more anxiety to your life — it's impossible to never feel stressed, and being overwhelmed every once in a while is just part of existing in a 24-hour world. Instead, consider this list a primer on what to brace yourself for, as well as a reminder that you have a say in how much stress you expose yourself to. Hang in there! And don't forget to breathe.

**Source:** <http://www.everydayhealth.com/news/10-unexpected-stressors-are-wrecking-your-health/?ncid=txtlnkusaolp00000058>