

MENTAL HEALTH MINUTE

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Recognizing Good and Bad Stress

Every April, National Stress Awareness Month offers a timely reminder to check in with yourself and understand how stress shows up in your life. Stress is a natural part of being human, but it doesn't always feel the same. Learning to tell the difference between "good" and "bad" stress can help you stay energized, productive and mentally well.

Good stress, or eustress, is what you feel when you're excited or challenged in a positive way. Think about starting a new job or preparing for a work presentation you're passionate about. Your heart may race, and your adrenaline may spike, but the experience feels energizing rather than overwhelming. This kind of stress enhances performance, builds confidence and often leads to a sense of accomplishment. Eustress is typically short-term, manageable and directly connected to goals that matter to you.

Bad stress, or distress, is very different. It arises when demands exceed your capacity, when situations feel beyond your control, or when pressures persist without relief. Signs of bad stress can include trouble sleeping, irritability, headaches, loss of focus, decreased motivation or feeling emotionally drained. Over time, chronic distress can weaken the immune system, harm mental health and increase the risk of burnout.

Managing stress effectively starts with awareness. Taking breaks, prioritizing important tasks, reaching out to others when you need help and setting realistic expectations can prevent stress from tipping into harmful territory. By understanding how your body responds to stress and paying attention to the signals, you can harness the benefits of positive challenges while protecting your well-being.

Recognizing the difference between good and bad stress is essential to maintaining a healthy, productive life. Eustress can be a powerful motivator, driving you to achieve your goals and grow as an individual. By embracing eustress and managing distress, you can find the balance you need to thrive across various aspects of your life. Contact a mental health professional for further information about stress.

The Mental Health Benefits of Hobbies

In a culture where being busy often becomes a badge of honor, hobbies can feel like indulgences reserved for people with extra time. Nevertheless, research consistently shows that engaging in meaningful pastimes isn't just fun; it can be beneficial for mental health. Hobbies can provide structure, creativity, social connection and stress relief, all of which support one's emotional well-being. As such, engaging in hobbies can have the following mental health benefits:

- **Reduced stress and emotional balance**—Hobbies can serve as a powerful form of stress relief by providing a break from daily responsibilities. Creative activities have been shown to lower cortisol levels, even for people without prior experience.
- **Improved mood and cognitive function**—Engaging in hobbies can stimulate the brain through learning and creativity. Research shows that when people try new activities, the brain often forms new synapses and releases dopamine, which can enhance mood and cognitive resilience. Creative hobbies, such as writing or painting, can also improve subjective well-being by fostering self-expression and mastery.
- **Increased social connection and community support**—Group-based hobbies, such as book clubs, sports leagues and craft groups, can decrease loneliness and build support networks. Community-based hobbies can be especially valuable for bonding with others and relieving stress.
- **Reduced anxiety and depression**—Research provides consistent links between hobby participation and lower levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Hobbies can foster relaxation, pleasure and overall life satisfaction.

Making time for hobbies isn't self-indulgent; it's essential. Hobbies can help enhance emotional well-being and balance the demands of modern adult life. If you're finding it hard to enjoy activities you once liked or have little interest in doing any hobbies, consider reaching out to your health care provider. For additional guidance on building your mental wellness, a doctor or mental health professional can help.