



Talking with Patients About Stress

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Chronic stress leads to or exacerbates chronic conditions such as elevated blood pressure or poor glucose control in patients with diabetes. Utilize this four-step approach to talk with patients about stress in order to help them better understand its effects. It is important to suggest patient-specific approaches to manage stress and minimize its negative impact on health.

- 1 Ask & Listen
- 2 Talk & Screen
- 3 Offer Suggestions
- 4 Assess and Adjust

1 Ask & Listen

Research shows that clinicians who listen to their patients foster relationships based on respect and trust. This positive relationship may help patients get to the root causes of their problems faster. Good listening skills develop important two-way communication between patients and clinicians.^{1,2} Use the following practices when talking to your patients about stress.



Ask About Daily Stressors

Help patients identify what they find most stressful in their lives. Family commitments? Work? Health issues? By inquiring about patients' concerns, you can more effectively offer individualized, healthy stress reduction techniques.

Practice Active Listening

Active listening is a skill clinicians should develop and readily employ. It involves giving free and undivided attention to the speaker and listening with interest and without interrupting.³

Assess for Chronic Stress

Everyone experiences stress at different times. However, it is chronic stress and the development of unhealthy behaviors to cope with stress that become important for clinicians to assess and address with patients.

2 Talk & Screen

Many patients underestimate the effect stress has on their bodies. The American Heart Association emphasizes that unhealthy responses to stress can lead to health problems over time.^{4,5}



Talk to Your Patients About the Effects of Stress

Chronic stress and unhealthy coping mechanisms can lead to tangible, long-term effects on patients' health. Explaining this to patients may help them become open to healthy stress reduction strategies that may benefit them over time. Those under stress may turn to alcohol, unhealthy eating behaviors, unhealthy relationship behaviors, smoking, or vaping to cope. Discuss with your patients how feelings such as anger, fear, or helplessness are normal responses to stress, and that clinicians are here to help them.

Consider Screening for Comorbidities

Using additional screening tools may alert you to other comorbidities or health problems patients may experience related to chronic stress. Consider using valid and reliable screening tools such as:

- » **Alcohol use and abuse** - The CAGE [Cut (down) - Annoyed (by drinking) - (felt) Guilty - Eye (opener)] questionnaire utilizes four screening questions to assess for the presence of alcohol dependence.
<https://www.mdcalc.com/cage-questions-alcohol-use>
- » **Sleep disorders** - The Sleep Hygiene Index is a 13 point scale that can screen for sleep disorders.
<https://sensible-sleep.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Check-you-sleep-hygiene-Sleep-Hygiene-Index.pdf>
- » **Depression** - The Patient Health Questionnaire-2 is a two-item screening tool to assess for the presence of depression.
https://cde.drugabuse.gov/sites/nida_cde/files/PatientHealthQuestionnaire-2_v1.0_2014Jul2.pdf
- » **Anxiety** - The Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale-2, a screening tool for generalized and other anxiety disorders, asks two questions to assess for anxiety over the past two weeks.
<https://reference.medscape.com/calculator/570/generalized-anxiety-disorder-2-gad-2>
- » **Suicidal ideation** - There is always the possibility that stress can cause suicidal thoughts. If a patient's stress is extreme, chronic, or is impairing the ability to function, consider asking the question, "Do you sometimes/recently feel so stressed that you have had thoughts that life is not worth living?" If the patient endorses this, ask about active suicidal ideas or intent and follow up as appropriate.

Screening tools like those above may aid clinicians in more effectively identifying the root causes of chronic stress with patients and opening the conversation.

3 Offer Suggestions for Stress Reduction



After listening to patients' concerns, outlining how stress can affect the body, and screening for unhealthy stress coping mechanisms or other health conditions, offer suggestions to help patients manage stress in a healthy way.

- » Recommend ways to mitigate or, if possible, remove the stressors in their lives.
- » Encourage patients to think ahead and plan how they will manage stressful situations.
- » **Help patients identify healthy ways they can cope with stress.** These suggestions may help patients understand that reducing stress in healthy ways can be as easy as taking some time for oneself.
- » Treat and manage comorbidities if they are discovered.
- » Refer patients to behavioral health specialists if their stress is uncontrolled or they are using unhealthy coping mechanisms.

4 Assess & Adjust

It is important to have regular check-ins with patients about their stress. Stressors and coping mechanisms can evolve and change over time. Partnering with patients and providing continued support can help them more effectively learn to manage their stress over time and take healthier approaches to coping.



More information on stress is available at cardi-oh.org/best-practices/lifestyle and on Twitter [@cardi_OH](https://twitter.com/cardioh).

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