

Talking With Patients About Stress

Contributing authors on behalf of Team Best Practices:

Rosellen Roche, MD, PhD, Ohio University

Kate Gawlik, DNP, RN, APRN-CNP, The Ohio State University

Eileen Seeholzer, MD, MS, Case Western Reserve University

Chronic stress leads to or exacerbates chronic conditions such as elevated blood pressure or poor glucose control in patients with diabetes. Use 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 & Adjust

1. Ask & Listen

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 that 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 from time to time. However, it is important for clinicians, with their patients, to assess and address chronic stress and the development of unhealthy behaviors to cope with that stress.



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 and Other Conditions

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 Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test-C (AUDIT-C) questionnaire is a three-item screening tool to assess for unhealthy alcohol use. There is also a 10-item version (AUDIT) available for use.
reference.medscape.com/calculator/470/alcohol-use-disorders-identification-test-concise-audit-c
- **Sleep Health** - The American Heart Association's Life's Essential 8™ incorporates the average number of hours of sleep per night, assigning a score based on the patient's age.
ahajournals.org/doi/10.1161/CIR.0000000000001078
- **Depression** - The Patient Health Questionnaire-2 is a two-item screening tool to assess for the presence of depression.
reference.medscape.com/calculator/458/patient-health-questionnaire-2-phq-2
- **Anxiety** - The Generalized Anxiety Disorder two questions scale is a screening tool for generalized and other anxiety disorders, assessing for anxiety over the past two weeks.
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

Partnering with patients and providing continued support can help them learn to more effectively manage their stress over time and take healthier approaches to cope. 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.



For more information, access Cardi-OH's resources on [stress](#).

References

1. Cox C. Practical aspects of stress management. *Br J Occup Ther*. 1988;51(2):44-47. doi:10.1177/030802268805100204.
2. Awdish RLA, Berry LL. Harvard Business Review. Making Time to Really Listen to Your Patients. <https://hbr.org/2017/10/making-time-to-really-listen-to-your-patients>. Published October 9, 2017. Accessed March 5, 2025.
3. Robertson K. Active listening: more than just paying attention. *Aust Fam Physician*. 2005;34(12):1053-1055.
4. American Heart Association. How Can I Manage Stress? <https://www.heart.org/-/media/files/health-topics/answers-by-heart/how-to-manage-stress.pdf>. Published 2015. Accessed March 5, 2025.
5. American Heart Association. Stress and Heart Health. <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/stress-and-heart-health>. Reviewed February 8, 2024. Accessed March 5, 2025.

Partners



CASE WESTERN RESERVE
UNIVERSITY
School of Medicine

In partnership with



The Ohio Cardiovascular & Diabetes Health Collaborative is funded by the Ohio Department of Medicaid and administered by the Ohio Colleges of Medicine Government Resource Center. The views expressed in this document are solely those of the authors and do not represent the views of the state of Ohio or federal Medicaid programs.