



# Osteoarthritis and Stress

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## The Impact of Emotional Stress on OA

Your osteoarthritis and stress are connected, whether you realize it or not. There are a number of forms of stress that influence osteoarthritis. Physical stress, like running, lifting weights or other repetitive motions, causes wear and tear on the joints and therefore worsen pain. At the cellular level, there is oxidative stress – a physiological stress on the body caused by the accumulation of free radicals that are not neutralized properly by antioxidants. Osteoarthritis and many other age related conditions are linked with free radicals. Mental/emotional stress also affects osteoarthritis, yet this type of stress often goes unrecognized, and therefore untreated. Let's look at how emotional, day-to-day stress impacts the health of your joints.

## How Stress Impacts OA

There are a few reasons emotional stress can lead to worse OA symptoms. When stress isn't dealt with and builds up in a person – whether they have arthritis or not – it has a negative impact on the body. Sore, aching or tense muscles and joints can occur in a healthy person who is stressed, and in someone with OA these physical symptoms of stress compound the OA symptoms already being experienced. Since OA causes stress in many people, it's common for a cycle to develop: your OA symptoms cause stress, which causes your OA symptoms to worsen, which causes more stress, etc.

Stress can also make it difficult to get to sleep and to stay asleep. A poor night's sleep can make you feel irritable and tired the next day, and as a result, be more sensitive to pain. Additionally, lack of sleep often leads to overeating or unhealthy eating, which leads to weight gain, which puts more physical stress on your joints, making your pain worse.

There is a strong link between mental health, pain and disability associated with OA, indicates a 2010 study featured in *Clinical Rheumatology*. According to this research paper, as many as 40.7% of the participants (all diagnosed with OA) showed signs of clinically significant anxiety and depression. Another study found that OA sufferers who are depressed had much worse pain and other symptoms that would be expected based on x-rays of the knee.

## Tips to Overcome Stress

- **Recognize stress** – One reason why stress is often left untreated is because we don't recognize it. Do you suffer from frequent colds and flu? Do you experience sore muscles, upset stomach, diarrhea, dry mouth or difficulty swallowing for no apparent reason? Are you easily irritated or frustrated? It may be an underlying stress. Changes in behavior like increased use of alcohol, drugs and cigarettes, procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities, nail biting, fidgeting and changes in appetite may all also be signs of stress.
- **Talk to your doctor** – All the symptoms mentioned above may be triggered by other medical conditions, and some can be serious. If you experience symptoms, talk to your doctor to rule out other diseases.
- **Exercise** – Exercising is a great way to reduce stress. Not only does it release endorphins in your brain

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that make you feel good, it also serves as a distraction from the things that are causing you stress. There are plenty of exercises you can do with osteoarthritis that will help improve your mood and reduce stress.

- **Anti-stress techniques** – There is a variety of anti-stress techniques that can be done in the comfort of your home, like yoga, meditation and deep breathing exercises.
- **Talk to someone** – Remember that there are stress specialists you can talk to – therapists. Don't hesitate to book an appointment with someone if you feel you need professional help to get past your stress.