Stress and Myasthenia Gravis (MG)

UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION AND FINDING HEALTHY WAYS TO COPE

A guide from the Myasthenia Gravis Association

myasthenia gravis association
MGA
established 1960

Prepared by the Myasthenia Gravis Association **Revised** 2026

Does Stress Affect MG?

Many people with myasthenia gravis notice that their symptoms feel worse during periods of emotional stress, illness, lack of sleep, or major life changes. Stress does not cause MG, but it can contribute to increased fatigue, muscle tension, difficulty sleeping, and reduced ability to cope with symptoms.

Research in chronic autoimmune diseases suggests that stress can influence the body's immune and nervous systems. In MG, stress is considered a potential symptom trigger, but the degree to which it affects each person varies.

You may notice increased:

- Fatigue
- Eyelid drooping
- Double vision
- Difficulty speaking clearly
- Generalized weakness
- Shortness of breath

during periods of stress

It can be helpful to think of stress as one factor among many that may influence how you feel, rather than something you are expected to eliminate completely.

The goal is not to avoid all stress.

Life naturally includes stress. Some stress can even be positive, such as:

- Starting a new job
- Celebrating a wedding or graduation
- Traveling
- Taking on a meaningful challenge
- Learning a new skill

The goal is not to remove all stress from your life, but to develop coping strategies that help you respond to stress in ways that protect your health and conserve energy.

Common Sources of Stress for People with MG

Managing symptoms

It can be frustrating when your body cannot do what you want it to do. Many people experience stress when symptoms interfere with:

- Work
- Household tasks
- Driving
- Exercise
- Hobbies
- Social activities

Uncertainty

MG can fluctuate from day to day, which may lead to worries such as:

- "Will I be able to keep my plans?"
- "What if my symptoms get worse?"
- "Could I have a myasthenic crisis?"
- "Will this treatment continue to work?"

These concerns are common and understandable.

Medication concerns

People may feel anxious about:

- Starting a new medication
- Potential side effects
- Long-term steroid use
- Infusion or injection treatments
- Remembering medication schedules

Discussing concerns openly with your healthcare team can often reduce anxiety and help you feel more prepared.

Changes in identity or routine

MG may require adjustments in work, caregiving responsibilities, exercise routines, or other activities that are closely tied to your sense of identity.

It is normal to grieve these changes. Grief is not a sign of weakness—it is a natural response to loss or change.

Relationships

Chronic illness can affect family and social relationships. Loved ones may not understand why symptoms fluctuate or why you sometimes need to cancel plans at the last minute.

Open communication can help reduce misunderstandings and resentment.

Healthy Ways to Reduce Stress

Acknowledge your feelings

Give yourself permission to feel frustrated, scared, angry, or sad at times. Trying to ignore difficult emotions often increases stress.

You can accept that MG is part of your life without giving up hope or allowing it to define you.

Pace yourself

Overexertion can increase both physical and emotional stress.

Try to:

- Break tasks into smaller steps
- Schedule rest breaks
- Alternate activity with recovery time
- Prioritize the most important tasks
- Ask for help when needed

Think of your energy as a limited resource that needs to be spent wisely.

Prioritize Sleep

Poor sleep is one of the most common triggers for increased MG symptoms.

Aim for:

- A consistent bedtime and wake time
- A cool, comfortable sleep environment
- Limiting caffeine late in the day
- Avoiding screens right before bed when possible

If you snore loudly, wake up gasping, or remain excessively sleepy despite adequate sleep, discuss possible sleep disorders with your healthcare provider.

Stay physically active within your limits

Appropriate physical activity can improve mood, sleep, and overall health.

Many people with MG benefit from:

- Walking
- Gentle strengthening exercises
- Stretching
- Water-based exercise (if heat is tolerated)
- Yoga or tai chi

Exercise should be individualized. Stop and rest if you experience significant worsening of weakness, shortness of breath, or prolonged fatigue.

Evidence-Based Stress Management Techniques

Deep breathing

Slow, controlled breathing can help calm the nervous system.

Try this:

- Inhale through your nose for 4 seconds.
- Hold for 2 seconds.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds.
- Repeat for 1–2 minutes.

Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness involves paying attention to the present moment without judgment.

Studies in people with chronic illnesses have shown that mindfulness practices may help reduce:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Perceived stress
- Sleep difficulties

Even 5–10 minutes a day can be beneficial.

Progressive muscle relaxation

This technique involves gently tensing and relaxing different muscle groups. Because MG affects voluntary muscles, use very gentle tension and avoid straining.

If you are unsure whether this technique is appropriate for you, ask your healthcare provider.

Yoga and tai chi

Gentle forms of yoga and tai chi combine movement, breathing, and relaxation. Research suggests they may improve balance, flexibility, and emotional well-being in many chronic conditions.

Avoid classes that are overly strenuous or performed in very hot environments.

Practice Relaxation Techniques

In addition to the strategies above, many people find stress relief through:

- Breathing exercises
- Prayer or spiritual practices
- Guided imagery
- Journaling

Not every technique works for everyone. Experiment and find what feels helpful for you.

Staying Connected

Stress often feels worse when you feel isolated.

Consider:

- Talking with trusted friends or family members
- Joining an MG support group

- Participating in virtual support meetings
- Connecting with others through MGA programs
- Speaking with a counselor or therapist

Many people find that talking with someone who understands MG is one of the most effective stress relievers.

Continue Activities You Enjoy!

Stress management is not only about reducing problems.

It's also about increasing joy.

Make time for:

- Reading
- Music
- Art
- Gardening
- Crafts
- Volunteering
- Spending time with loved ones
- Time in nature

Enjoyable activities can improve emotional well-being and help restore balance.

When to Seek Professional Help

Contact a healthcare professional if you experience:

- Persistent sadness lasting more than two weeks
- Loss of interest in activities you usually enjoy
- Severe anxiety or panic attacks
- Difficulty functioning at work or home
- Thoughts of hopelessness
- Thoughts of self-harm

Mental health conditions are treatable, and getting help is an important part of caring for your overall health.

A Daily Stress Check-In

Ask yourself:

How is my body feeling?

- Am I unusually fatigued?
- Am I having more weakness than usual?
- Have I been sleeping well?

How is my emotional health?

- What is causing me the most stress today?
- Is there something I can postpone, delegate, or simplify?
- Have I taken any time to rest or do something enjoyable?

What support do I need?

- Do I need help with a task?
- Do I need to contact my healthcare team?
- Do I need to talk with someone I trust?

Remember

You are not expected to handle MG perfectly.

There will be stressful days, and there may be times when symptoms worsen despite your best efforts. That is not a personal failure.

Managing stress is about building resilience, conserving energy, staying connected, and giving yourself the same compassion you would offer someone you love.

Small changes—such as better sleep, pacing activities, practicing relaxation techniques, and reaching out for support—can make a meaningful difference over time.

Helpful Resources

Myasthenia Gravis Association (MGA)

The Myasthenia Gravis Association provides:

- Support groups
- Educational webinars
  - Video Library of previous webinars
- Patient education
- Resource library
- Advocacy opportunities
- Connections to others living with MG

Website: https://mgassociation.org

Crisis Resources

If you are experiencing thoughts of self-harm or are in emotional crisis, call or text **988** in the United States for immediate support.

- Licensed mental health professionals
  - Give an Hour

Scientific Sources and Clinical References

This guide was informed by current clinical and research literature, including:

- MGFA Patient Education Materials. Myasthenia Gravis Foundation of America
- Cleveland Clinic. Myasthenia Gravis (MG): Symptoms, Causes & Treatment
- Mayo Clinic. Myasthenia gravis - Symptoms and causes
- National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS). Myasthenia Gravis
- Research on stress, coping, and quality of life in autoimmune and neuromuscular disorders published in peer-reviewed neurology and behavioral medicine journals.