

STRESS

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Understanding Stress: Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Effects We all face different challenges and obstacles, and sometimes the pressure is hard to handle. When we feel overwhelmed or unsure how to meet the demands placed on us, we experience stress. In small doses, stress can be a good thing. It can give you the push you need, motivating you to do your best and to stay focused and alert. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work or drives you to study for your exam when you'd rather be watching TV. But when the going gets too tough and life's demands exceed your ability to cope, stress becomes a threat to both your physical and emotional well-being.



The Body's Stress Response The “fight-or-flight” stress response involves a cascade of biological changes that prepare us for emergency action. When danger is sensed, a small part of the brain called the hypothalamus sets off a chemical alarm. Stress hormone races through the bloodstream, readying us to either flee the scene or battle it out. Heart rate and blood flow to the large muscles increase so we can run faster and fight harder. Blood vessels under the skin constrict to prevent blood loss in case of injury, pupils dilate so we can see better, and our blood sugar ramps up, giving us an energy boost and speeding up reaction time.



At the same time, body processes not essential to immediate survival are suppressed. The digestive and reproductive systems slow down, growth hormones are switched off, and the immune response is inhibited. The biological stress response is meant to protect and support us. It's what helped our ancestors survive the life-or-death situations they commonly faced.



But in the modern world, most of the stress we feel is in response to psychological rather than physical threats. Whether we're stressed over a looming deadline, an argument with a friend, or a mountain of bills, the warning bells ring. And just like a caveman confronting a sabre-tooth tiger, we go into automatic overdrive.

If you have a lot of responsibilities and worries, you may be running on stress a good portion of the time—launching into emergency mode with every traffic jam, phone call from the in-laws, or segment of the evening news. But the problem with the stress response is that the more it's activated, the harder it is to shut off. Instead of leveling off once the crisis has passed, your stress hormones, heart rate, and blood pressure remain elevated. Furthermore, extended or repeated activation of the stress response takes a heavy toll on the body. Prolonged exposure to stress increases your risk of everything from heart disease, obesity, and infection to anxiety, depression, and memory problems. Because of the widespread damage it can cause, it's essential to learn how to deal with stress in a more positive way and reduce its impact on your daily life.

Signs and Symptoms of Stress To get a handle on stress, you first need to learn how to recognize it in yourself. Stress affects the mind, body, and behavior in many ways— all directly tied to the physiological changes of the fight-or-flight response. The specific signs and symptoms of stress vary widely from person to person. Some people primarily experience physical symptoms, such as low back pain, stomach problems, and skin outbreaks. In others, the stress pattern centers on emotional symptoms, such as crying or hypersensitivity. For still others, changes in the way they think or behave predominates. The following table lists some of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress. Use it to identify the symptoms you typically experience when you're under stress. If you know your red flags, you can take early steps to deal with the stressful situation before it—or your emotions— spiral out of control.



Stress Warning Signs and Symptoms Cognitive

Symptoms Emotional Symptoms

- Memory problems
 - Indecisiveness
 - Inability to concentrate
 - Trouble thinking clearly
 - Poor judgment
 - Seeing only the negative
 - Anxious or racing thoughts
 - Constant worrying
 - Loss of objectivity
 - Fearful anticipation
 - Moodiness
 - Agitation
 - Restlessness
 - Short temper
 - Irritability, impatience
 - Inability to relax
 - Feeling tense and “on edge”
 - Feeling overwhelmed
 - Sense of loneliness and isolation
 - Depression or general unhappiness
- ### Physical Symptoms Behavioral Symptoms
- Headaches or backaches

- Muscle tension and stiffness
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness
- Insomnia
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Weight gain or loss
- Skin breakouts (hives, eczema)
- Frequent colds
- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastination, neglecting responsibilities



Causes of Stress

Major Life Changes Major life events are stressors. Whether it be a divorce, a child leaving home, a planned pregnancy, a move to a new town, a career change, graduating from college, or a diagnosis of cancer, the faster or more dramatic the change, the greater the strain. Furthermore, the more major life changes you're dealing with at any one time, the more stress you'll feel.

Daily Hassles and Demands While major life changes are stressful, they are also relative rarities. After all, it's not every day that you file for divorce or have a baby. However, you may battle traffic, argue with your family members, or worry about your finances on a daily basis. Because these small upsets occur so regularly, they end up affecting us the most. Daily causes of stress include:



Environmental stressors – Your physical surroundings can set off the stress response. Examples of environmental stressors include an unsafe neighborhood, pollution, noise (sirens keeping you up at night, a barking dog next door), and uncomfortable living conditions. For people living in crime-ridden areas or war-torn regions, the stress may be unrelenting.

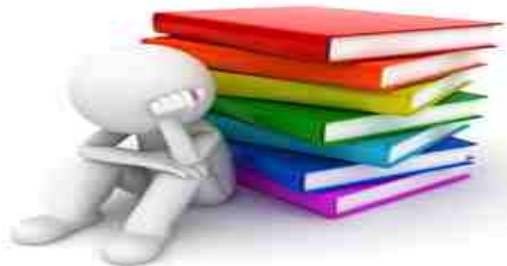
Family and relationship stressors – Problems with friends, romantic partners, and family members are common daily stressors. Marital disagreements, dysfunctional relationships, rebellious teens, or caring for a chronically-ill family member or a child with special needs can all send stress levels skyrocketing.



● **Work stressors** – In our career-driven society, work can be an ever-present source of stress. Work stress is caused by things such as job dissatisfaction, an exhausting workload, insufficient pay, office politics, and conflicts with your boss or co-workers.

● **Social stressors** – Your social situation can cause stress. For example, poverty, financial pressures, racial and sexual discrimination or harassment, unemployment, isolation, and a lack of social support all take a toll on daily quality of life.

Internal Causes of Stress Not all stress is caused by external pressures and demands. Your stress can also be self-generated. Internal causes of stress include: ● Uncertainty or worries ● Pessimistic attitude ● Self-criticism ● Unrealistic expectations or beliefs ● Perfectionism ● Low self-esteem ● Excessive or unexpressed anger ● Lack of assertiveness.



Risk Factors for Stress The presence of a stressor doesn't automatically result in disabling stress symptoms. The degree to which any stressful situation or event impacts your daily functioning depends partly on the nature of the stressor itself and partly on your own personal and external resources.



Stress: How vulnerable are you? The nature of the stressor Stressors that involve central aspects of your life (your marriage, your job) or are chronic issues (a physical handicap, living from paycheck to paycheck) are more likely to cause severe distress. A crisis experience Sudden, intense crisis situations (being raped, robbed at gunpoint, or attacked by a dog) are understandably overwhelming. Without immediate intervention and treatment, debilitating stress symptoms are common. Multiple stressors or life changes Stressors are cumulative, so the more life changes or daily hassles you're dealing with at any one time, the more intense the symptoms of stress.



Effects of Chronic Stress Chronic stress wears you down day after day and year after year, with no visible escape. Under sustained or severe stress, even the well-adjusted person loses the ability to adapt. When stress overwhelms our coping resources, our bodies and minds suffer.

Health Effects Recent research suggests that anywhere from 60 to 90 percent of illness is stress-related. The physical wear and tear of stress includes damage to the cardiovascular system and immune system suppression. Stress compromises your ability to fight off disease and infection, throws your digestive system off balance, and makes it difficult to conceive a baby, and can even stunt growth in children.



Stress and Your Health Many medical conditions are caused or exacerbated by stress, including: • Chronic pain • Migraines • Ulcers • Heartburn • High blood pressure • Heart disease • Diabetes • Asthma • PMS • Obesity • Infertility • Autoimmune diseases • Irritable bowel syndrome • Skin problems.

Emotional Effects Chronic stress grinds away at your mental health, causing emotional damage in addition to physical ailments. Long-term stress can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to everyday pressures and less able to cope. Over time, stress can lead to mental health problems such as: • anxiety • depression • eating disorders, and • substance abuse.





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