

# What is Stress

The American Institute of Stress calls stress “America’s leading health problem.” In many cases, the stress Americans experience today is a response to psychological threats. Some of these threats might be losing a job or looking for employment, the death of a loved one, or relationship issues.

Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that: “Demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”

In small doses, stress is not all bad. Stress can help you perform under pressure, it can motivate you to do better and try your best. Although when you are constantly under stress, you become overwhelmed and your mind and body can pay the price.

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of threat. It does not matter if the threat is real or imagined; when your body senses the threat, it reacts. An automatic response process known as fight-or-flight or the stress response kicks in and your body does things whether you want to or not. This stress response is your body's way of protecting itself. When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones. Adrenaline and cortisol are released, which jump-starts the body into action. Your heart beats faster, your muscles tighten, your blood pressure rises, your breathing quickens and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina; they speed up your reaction times and enhance your focus. All this prepares you to deal with the danger at hand.

The stress response is a natural way for your body to protect itself. When this system is working properly, it will help you stay focused, energetic and alert. When dangerous or emergency situations arise, stress can save your life, it can give you extra strength to protect yourself. Stress can also help you rise up to meet a challenge.

Stress can be a very helpful force in our lives, but there is a point where it stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health. It can affect your mood, reduce your productivity, harm your relationships and affect your quality of life.

## THE EFFECTS OF CHRONIC STRESS

Your nervous system cannot tell the difference between emotional or physical threats. If you are stressed over and argument with a friend, you are worried about a deadline at work, you are stressed by a pile of bills on your desk, your body reacts just the same as when you are facing a life or death situation. The more often the stress response is activated, the easier it becomes to activate it, and the harder it is to turn off.

If you get stressed out frequently, your body may remain in a heightened state of stress most of the time. Being in a continuous state of high stress can lead to serious health problems. This chronic stress causes problems in just about every system in your body. Chronic stress can suppress your immune system; it can upset your digestive and reproductive systems. Chronic stress will increase your risk of heart attacks and strokes. Chronic stress will speed up the aging process, and can even rewire your brain. When your brain gets rewired you will be more vulnerable to anxiety, depression and other mental health problems.

A little stress every now and then is not something to be concerned about. Ongoing, chronic stress, however, can cause or exacerbate many serious health problems, including:

- Mental health problems
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - personality disorders
  - insomnia
- Cardiovascular disease
  - including heart disease
  - high blood pressure
  - abnormal heart rhythms
  - heart attacks
  - stroke
- Obesity and other eating disorders
- Menstrual problems
- Sexual dysfunction
  - impotence
  - premature ejaculation
  - loss of sexual desire
- Skin and hair problems
  - Acne
  - Psoriasis
  - Eczema
  - permanent hair loss
- Gastrointestinal problems
  - GERD
  - Gastritis
  - ulcerative colitis
  - irritable colon

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Stress creeps up on you. It is a slow and maniacal monster. Stress is dangerous because it slowly sneaks in on you. You begin to feel a little stress, and it becomes familiar, as you get used to the stress more sneaks in and it becomes normal. You don't even notice how much the stress is affecting you, before you know it, you are overwhelmed and the world feels like it is crashing down on you. This is why it is so important to know and understand the warning signs and symptoms of stress.

### COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS

- Memory problems
- Poor judgment
- Anxious
- Constant worry
- Inability to concentrate / focus
- Seeing only the negative
- Racing thoughts
- 'Brain Fog'
- Indecision
- Starting many tasks but achieving little
- Self-doubt
- Forgetfulness and disorganization
- Poor judgment
- Being pessimistic or seeing only the negative side

### EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Moodiness
- Anger
- Loneliness
- General unhappiness
- Agitation
- Irritability
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Isolation
- Fatalistic Thinking
- Panic
- Cynicism
- Frustration
- Argumentative
- Sadness
- Having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind
- Low self-esteem

## PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

- Aches and pains
- Nausea
- Chest pain
- Loss of sex drive
- Diarrhea / Constipation
- Dizziness
- Rapid heart rate
- Frequent colds or flus
- Skin Complaints
- Indigestion
- High Blood Pressure
- Fatigue
- Change in appetite
- Headaches
- Low energy
- Insomnia
- Nervousness and shaking
- Ringing in the ear
- Cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth

## BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS

- Eating more or less
- Withdrawing from others
- Neglecting responsibilities
- Nervous habits (biting nails, pacing)
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine or drugs to relax
- Isolating Yourself from Others
- Loss of sense of humor
- Indifference
- Reduced work performance
- Increased absenteeism
- Procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities
- Exhibiting more nervous behaviors, such as nail biting, fidgeting, and pacing

## WHAT CAUSES STRESS?

Stressors are what we call the situations and pressures that cause stress. Most of the time we think of stressors as being negative things, things such as a bad relationship, being overworked, too many bills, etc. In reality though, anything that puts high demands on you can be a stressor. Even positive things such as getting married, having a baby, buying a house, getting a new job or going to college can be a stressor.

Not everything that causes stress is external, there are many causes of stress that are internal. These internal stressors are things you generate yourself. Internal stressors could be things like worrying too much about something that may or may not happen, or maybe you have

irrational pessimistic thoughts about life. Your perception has a lot to do with whether something is stressful to you or not. Perception is a huge part of how stressful or not something is. You may feel something is extremely stressful and another person may not even be bothered by it at all. The way we look at things plays a large role in how things affect us.

Stress is not always caused by a negative event. Some positive life experiences can be just as stress inducing as negative ones.

## COMMON STRESSORS

- Losing a job or starting a new job
- Getting divorced or going through a breakup
- Getting married
- Being discriminated against
- Experiencing a change in financial status
- Following the news or politics
- Having a child
- Moving
- Beginning or ending school
- Experiencing a loss
- Being diagnosed with a serious illness

## COMMON EXTERNAL CAUSES OF STRESS

- Major life changes
- School
- Financial problems
- Children
- Work
- Relationship difficulties
- Being too busy
- Family

## COMMON INTERNAL CAUSES OF STRESS

- Pessimism
- Ridged thinking
- Negative self-talk
- Perfectionism
- Low self-esteem
- Inability to accept uncertainty
- Lack of flexibility
- Unrealistic expectations
- All-or-nothing attitude

## TOP 10 STRESSFUL LIFE EVENTS

1. Death of a spouse
2. Marriage separation
3. Death of a family member
4. Marriage
5. Marriage reconciliation
6. Divorce
7. Imprisonment
8. Injury or illness
9. Job loss
10. Retirement

## HOW STRESS AFFECTS PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Few people will deny they have been stressed at least once in their life. But for many, stress can be ongoing and unbearable. Chronic stress can contribute to numerous mental health and physical health issues. Research has linked high stress levels to:

- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Feeling more or less hungry than usual
- Self-soothing with drugs or alcohol
- Changes in mood or mental health
- Less productivity and enjoyment at work
- Intimacy problems
- Migraine headaches
- Chronic pain
- Anger issues
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Loss of enjoyment in social activities
- Heart attack and stroke

## UNHEALTHY COPING SKILLS FOR STRESS

People develop methods for coping with stress. A coping skill is something a person uses to help deal with an overwhelming external force, like stress. Some coping skills work as healthy tools for managing stress. Many others are unhealthy and can magnify the negative effects of stress instead of reducing them.

### A FEW EXAMPLES OF POTENTIALLY HARMFUL COPING SKILLS FOR STRESS INCLUDE:

- Drinking alcohol to excess
- Smoking
- Emotional eating
- Illicit drug use
- Gambling
- Shopping
- Self-harm

Therapy can help people identify an unhealthy coping skill for stress and develop a healthy one to use instead. If a person uses an unhealthy coping skill for dealing with long-term stress, they can end up developing a mental health issue.

## TOO MUCH STRESS?

Stress can cause so much damage, because of this, it is important to know what our stress limit is. The question is how much stress is too much. Well the answer to that question differs from person to person. Some people are able to "roll with the punches", while others seem to collapse at the slightest amount of stress. There are even people who seem to thrive on the high-stress lifestyle.

Not only does stress effect your mood and behaviors, but it has a **negative impact** on the various systems of your body as well.

**Nervous system** - Stress both physical and psychological has an impact on your body as it shifts resources to engage the flight-or-flight response. During this stress response your sympathetic nervous system tells the adrenal glands to produce adrenaline and cortisol. The release of these hormones makes your heart beat faster, it makes your blood pressure rise, and it slows down your digestive system and boosts the glucose levels in your blood stream.

**Musculoskeletal system** - When you are stressed your muscles tighten up. If your muscles remain tight for extended periods of time, you may get tension headaches and migraines.

**Respiratory system** - When you get stressed you can hyperventilate, which is rapid breathing. When you are breathing harder and hyperventilating you may trigger a panic attack.

**Cardiovascular system** - Stress can cause your heart rate to increase and your heart muscle to work harder. The blood vessels that take the blood to your large muscles and back to your heart dilate, which allow more blood to flow to these areas. The repetition of this process can cause inflammation of the coronary arteries, which may lead to a heart attack.

**Endocrine system** - A system made up of the adrenal glands and the liver, which work together to produce the chemicals needed for your body to react to the fight-or-flight response. When you get stressed, the brain sends signals from the hypothalamus, causing the adrenal cortex to produce cortisol, and adrenal medulla to produce epinephrine. These are referred to as the "stress hormones. When cortisol and epinephrine are released, the liver jumps in and begins to produce glucose. Glucose is a blood sugar that give you energy.

**Gastrointestinal system** - A system made up of your esophagus, stomach and bowels. When you are stressed you may eat more or less than you regularly do. If you change your eating habits, increase your use of tobacco, or alcohol, there is a good chance you will experience heartburn. Stress can affect your stomach by giving you "the butterflies", you may get some stomach pains or nausea. If the stress is high enough you might even vomit. Stress can have an effect on your system changing the way nutrients are absorbed by your intestines. You may even experience diarrhea or constipation.

**Reproductive system** - The stress response creates cortisol in our body, too much cortisol in men for extended periods of time can affect the normal functioning of the reproductive system. Chronic stress can impair testosterone and sperm production. In women, stress can cause the menstrual cycle to be irregular or even be absent, it may cause more-painful periods. Stress can also reduce sexual desire in women.

## STRESS TOLERANCE LEVEL

There are multiple ways to increase your ability to tolerate stress. These things can help you to not feel so overwhelmed by stressors and to be able to deal with stressful situations more easily.

**Your support network** - By having people in your life who you can rely on for support, strength and guidance, you can reduce life's pressures. Having a strong support network will help you not feel so overwhelmed by the stressors of life.

**Your sense of control** - Having confidence in yourself and your abilities to influence events will make stress less of a burden. When you understand that you have control over your life, stress has less of a control over you and you can persevere through challenges.

**Your perception** - Your attitude and the way you look at life make a huge difference in your ability to handle stress. If you are generally a positive and hopeful person, you will be less vulnerable to stress. Change is an inevitable part of life, embracing this, having a good sense of humor and believing in a higher purpose will help you to fight off the stressors of life.

**Your ability to deal with your emotions** - Stress and agitation in your life can be overcome when you learn how to calm yourself. Having the ability to identify your emotions and appropriately deal with them will help you to handle stress.

**Knowledge and preparation** - The more you know about stressful situations, the easier it is to cope with the stress. When you are faced with the unknown, stress factors increase. By learning as much as you can and preparing for the things you can prepare for, you will be better able to deal with a stressful situation.

## IMPROVE YOUR ABILITY TO HANDLE STRESS

**Become more active** - The easiest thing to do to begin to reduce stress is simply to get moving. Increasing your activity changes the chemistry in your brain. It helps to burn off the cortisol and reduce the stress hormones. Getting regular exercise can lift your mood and get your mind on something besides the stressor. Exercises that are rhythmic are very effective in reducing stress, these exercises are activities such as: walking, running, swimming or dancing.

**Connection with others** - Just by talking face to face with another person, your body will release hormones that help fight stress. Even simple smiles or short exchanges of words from a friendly person will calm your nervous system. In this day of Facebook and other forms of social media we tend to not spend time in the real world interacting with real people. Remember the original social media outlets: the park, a restaurant, school, the mall, etc. Take time and engage with real people in real life, your stress level will decrease and you will feel better.



**Use all your senses** - Engaging one or more of your senses is a fast way to relieve stress. Sight, sound, taste, smell, touch and movements are all ways your body perceives the world around you. You may have to experiment some to find which sense or senses that work best to help you relieve stress. Try different things like listening to music, smelling the flowers, petting an animal, or going for a walk in nature, to see what works for you.

**Relaxation** - Stress cannot be completely eliminated, but you can learn to control its effects on you. Relaxation techniques will help you to calm yourself and regain control over the stress in your life. Deep breathing is something you can do no matter where you are. Meditation is s form of centering yourself by concentrating on a thought and letting everything else go for a moment. Yoga helps to relieve stress in multiple ways, centering your mind, stretching your muscles, strengthening your core, are just some of the benefits of yoga. Find a healthy way for you to relax and relieve the stress in your life.

**Healthy eating** - Your diet will have a huge effect on how you handle stress, what your mood is like and how you cope with stressors. Fast foods, sugary snacks, processed and convince foods can make symptoms of stress worse. A diet of vegetables, fresh fruits, high quality proteins and healthy fats will help you deal with stress better, as well as make you feel so much better.

**Sleep** - When you do not get enough sleep you will begin to think irrationally and stress will increase. When you are dealing with chronic stress your sleep will suffer as well. By learning better sleep hygiene you will be able to enjoy less stress in your life.

## HELP IS AVAILABLE FOR STRESS

Stress is a part of life. What matters most is how you handle it. The best thing you can do to prevent stress overload and the health consequences that come with it is to know your stress symptoms.

If you or a loved one is feeling overwhelmed by stress, talk to your doctor. Many symptoms of stress can also be signs of other health problems. Your doctor can evaluate your symptoms and rule out other conditions. If stress is to blame, your doctor can recommend a therapist or counselor to help you better handle your stress.

When stress begins to overwhelm your life and you find that you need some help to overcome it reach out, "It is ok to ask for help". Contact a trained professional and begin the process of de-stressing your life.

Individual and classes available at [Psychift.net](http://Psychift.net)