

Newsletter

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Stress Symptoms, Signs, & Causes

The Effects of Stress Overload and What You Can Do About It

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Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But when you're constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price. You can protect yourself by recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

What is stress?

The Body's Stress Response

When you perceive a threat, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones rouse the body for emergency action.

Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus—preparing you to either fight or flee from the danger at hand.

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When you sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—the body's defences kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or-flight-or-freeze" reaction, or the *stress response*.

The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident.

The stress response also helps you rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV.

But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.

How do you respond to stress?

It's important to learn how to recognize when your stress levels are out of control. The most dangerous thing about stress is how easily it can creep up on you. You get used to it. It starts to feel familiar, even normal. You don't notice how much it's affecting you, even as it takes a heavy toll.

The signs and symptoms of stress overload can be almost anything. Stress affects the mind, body, and behaviour in many ways, and everyone experiences stress differently. Not only can overwhelming stress lead to serious mental and physical health problems, it can also take a toll on your relationships at home, work, and school.

Stress doesn't always look stressful

Psychologist Connie Lillas uses a driving analogy to describe the three most common ways people respond when they're overwhelmed by stress:

- **Foot on the gas** – An angry, agitated, or "fight" stress response. You're heated, keyed up, overly emotional, and unable to sit still.
- **Foot on the brake** – A withdrawn, depressed, or "flight" stress response. You shut down, pull away, space out, and show very little energy or emotion.
- **Foot on both** – A tense or "freeze" stress response. You become frozen under pressure and can't do anything. You look paralyzed, but under the surface you're extremely agitated.

Signs and symptoms of stress overload

The following table lists some of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress. The more signs and symptoms you notice in yourself, the closer you may be to stress overload.

Stress Warning Signs and Symptoms

Cognitive Symptoms

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

Emotional Symptoms

- Moodiness
- Irritability or short temper
- Agitation, inability to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Depression or general unhappiness

Physical Symptoms

- Aches and pains
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Loss of sex drive
- Frequent colds

Behavioural Symptoms

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Keep in mind that the signs and symptoms of stress can also be caused by other psychological or medical problems. If you're experiencing any of the warning signs of stress, it's important to see a doctor for a full evaluation. Your doctor can help you determine whether or not your symptoms are stress-related.

How much stress is too much?

Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's important to know your own limit. But just how much stress is "too much" differs from person to person. We're all different. Some people are able to roll with the punches, while others seem to crumble in the face of far smaller obstacles or frustrations. Some people even seem to thrive on the excitement and challenge of a high-stress lifestyle.

Your ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including the quality of your relationships, your general outlook on life, your emotional intelligence, and genetics.

Things that influence your stress tolerance level

- **Your support network** – A strong network of supportive friends and family members can be an enormous buffer against life's stressors. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the greater your vulnerability to stress.
- **Your sense of control** – It may be easier to take stress in your stride if you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges. If you feel like things are out of your control, you're likely to have less tolerance for stress.
- **Your attitude and outlook** – Optimistic people are often more stress-hardy. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humour, and accept that change is a part of life.
- **Your ability to deal with your emotions** – You're extremely vulnerable to stress if you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or overwhelmed by a situation. The ability to bring your emotions into balance helps you bounce back from adversity and is a skill that can be learned at any age.
- **Your knowledge and preparation** – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

Causes of stress

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you or forces you to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be self-generated, for example, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

What causes stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. For example, your morning commute may make you anxious and tense because you worry that traffic will make you late. Others, however, may find the trip relaxing because they allow more than enough time and enjoy listening to music while they drive.

Common external causes of stress

- Major life changes
- Work or school
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial problems
- Being too busy
- Children and family

Common internal causes of stress

- Chronic worry
- Pessimism
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations/Perfectionism
- Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
- All-or-nothing attitude

Effects of chronic stress

The body doesn't distinguish between physical and psychological threats. When you're stressed over a busy schedule, an argument with a friend, a traffic jam, or a mountain of bills, your body reacts just as strongly as if you were facing a life-or-death situation. If you have a lot of responsibilities and worries, your emergency stress response may be "on" most of the time. The more your body's stress system is activated, the harder it is to shut off.

Long-term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of

heart attack and stroke, contribute to infertility, and speed up the aging process. Long-term stress can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Many health problems are caused or exacerbated by stress, including:

- Pain of any kind
- Heart disease
- Digestive problems
- Sleep problems
- Depression
- Weight problems
- Autoimmune diseases
- Skin conditions, such as eczema

Dealing with stress and its symptoms

While unchecked stress is undeniably damaging, you have more control over your stress levels than you might think. Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that only compound the problem. You might drink too much to unwind at the end of a stressful day, fill up on comfort food, zone out in front of the TV or computer for hours, use pills to relax, or relieve stress by lashing out at other people. However, there are many healthier ways to cope with stress and its symptoms.

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no “one size fits all” solution to dealing with it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so experiment with different techniques and strategies. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

Learn how to manage stress

You may feel like the stress in your life is out of your control, but you can always control the way you respond. Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. Stress management involves changing the stressful situation when you can, changing your reaction when you can't, taking care of yourself, and making time for rest and relaxation.

Remember the four As: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

- **Avoid** unnecessary stress. Not all stress can be avoided, but by learning how to say no, distinguishing between “shoulds” and “musts” on your to-do list, and steering clear of people or situations that stress you out, you can eliminate many daily stressors.
- **Alter** the situation. If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Be more assertive and deal with problems head on. Instead of bottling up your feelings and increasing your stress, respectfully let others know about your concerns. Or be more willing to compromise and try meeting others halfway on an issue.
- **Adapt** to the stressor. When you can't change the stressor, try changing yourself. Reframe problems or focus on the positive things in your life. If a task at work has you stressed, focus on the aspects of your job you do enjoy. And always look at the big picture: is this really something worth getting upset about?
- **Accept** the things you can't change. There will always be stressors in life that you can't do anything about. Learn to accept the inevitable rather than rail against a situation and making it even more stressful. Look for the upside in a situation—even the most stressful circumstances can be an opportunity for learning or personal growth. Learn to accept that no one, including you, is ever perfect.

You can also better cope with the symptoms of stress by strengthening your physical health.

- **Set aside relaxation time.** Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the stress response.
- **Exercise regularly.** Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Nothing beats aerobic exercise for releasing pent-up stress and tension.

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress. Start your day with a healthy breakfast, reduce your caffeine and sugar intake, and cut back on alcohol and nicotine.
- **Get plenty of sleep.** Feeling tired can increase stress by causing you to think irrationally. Keep your cool by getting a good night's sleep.

Two core skills for reducing overwhelming stress: quick stress relief and emotional connection.

- **Quick stress relief.** The best way to reduce stress quickly and reliably is by using your senses - what you see, hear, smell, taste, and touch - or through movement. By viewing a favourite photo, smelling a specific scent, listening to a favourite piece of music, tasting a piece of gum, or hugging a pet, for example, you can quickly relax and focus yourself. Of course, not everyone responds to each sensory experience in the same way. Something that relaxes one person may do nothing but irritate someone else. The key is to experiment with your senses and discover the sensory experiences that work best for you.
- **Emotional connection.** Nothing contributes more to chronic stress than emotional disconnection from ourselves and others. Understanding the influence emotions have on your thoughts and actions is vital to managing stress. Life doesn't have to feel like a rollercoaster ride with extreme ups and downs. Once you're aware of your emotions, even the painful ones you normally try to avoid or bottle up, the easier it is to understand your own motivations, stop saying or doing things you later regret, gain renewed energy, and smooth out the ride.

Once you've mastered these core skills you'll have the confidence to face stressful challenges, knowing that you'll always be able to rapidly bring yourself back into balance.