

# Understanding Stress

## Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Effects

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.

If you frequently find yourself feeling frazzled and overwhelmed, it's time to take action to bring your nervous system back into balance. You can protect yourself by learning how to recognize 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 defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the “fight-or-flight” 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.

## 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 easier it is to trip and 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
- Obesity
- Autoimmune diseases
- Skin conditions, such as eczema

## 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. Some people roll with the punches, while others crumble at the slightest obstacle or frustration. 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 is 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** – If you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, it's easier to take stress in stride. People who are vulnerable to stress tend to feel like things are out of their control.
- **Your attitude and outlook** – Stress-hardy people have an optimistic attitude. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, accept that change is a part of life, and believe in a higher power or purpose.
- **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 afraid. The ability to bring your emotions into balance helps you bounce back from adversity.

- **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.

### **Am I in control of stress or is stress controlling me?**

- When I feel agitated, do I know how to quickly calm and soothe myself?
- Can I easily let go of my anger?
- Can I turn to others at work to help me calm down and feel better?
- When I come home at night, do I walk in the door feeling alert and relaxed?
- Am I seldom distracted or moody?
- Am I able to recognize upsets that others seem to be experiencing?
- Do I easily turn to friends or family members for a calming influence?
- When my energy is low, do I know how to boost it?

If you can answer yes to most of these questions, you're probably in control of stress.

**Source:** *The Language of Emotional Intelligence* by [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

## **Causes of stress**

### **Top Ten Stressful Life Events**

1. Spouse's death
2. Divorce
3. Marriage separation
4. Jail term
5. Death of a close relative
6. Injury or illness
7. Marriage
8. Fired from job
9. Marriage reconciliation
10. Retirement

The potential causes of stress are numerous and highly individual. 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.

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.

### **Common external causes of stress**

Not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be self-generated:

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

### **Common internal causes of stress**

Not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be self-generated:

- Inability to accept uncertainty
- Pessimism
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations, perfectionism

## **Signs and symptoms of stress overload**

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 behavior in many ways, and everyone experiences stress differently.

### **How do you respond to stress?**

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

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

### Behavioral 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 and 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.

## Dealing with stress and its symptoms

While unchecked stress is undeniably damaging, there are many things you can do to reduce its impact and cope with symptoms.

### 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.

### Strengthen your relationships

A strong support network is your greatest protection against stress. When you have trusted friends and family members you know you can count on, life's pressures don't seem as overwhelming. So spend time with the people you love and don't let your responsibilities keep you from having a social life. If you don't have any close relationships, or your relationships *are* the source of your stress, make it a priority to build stronger and more satisfying connections.

Tips for reaching out and building relationships:

- Help someone else by volunteering.
- Have lunch or coffee with a co-worker.
- Call or email an old friend.
- Go for a walk with a workout buddy.
- Schedule a weekly dinner date
- Take a class or join a club.

## **Learn how to relax**

You can't completely eliminate stress from your life, but you can control how much it affects you. 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. When practiced regularly, these activities lead to a reduction in your everyday stress levels and a boost in your feelings of joy and serenity. They also increase your ability to stay calm and collected under pressure.

## **Invest in your emotional health**

Most people ignore their emotional health until there's a problem. But just as it requires time and energy to build or maintain your physical health, so it is with your emotional well-being. The more you put in to it, the stronger it will be. People with good emotional health have an ability to bounce back from stress and adversity. This ability is called resilience. They remain focused, flexible, and positive in bad times as well as good. The good news is that there are many steps you can take to build your resilience and your overall emotional health.