

Overview: Stress

Stress is a common part of life but sometimes we don't recognize its effects on us. Stress can cause misdirected anger, mood, and behavior changes. Stress impacts people in different ways and can have both physical and emotional effects. Stress can be a good thing but too much of a good thing can become unhealthy.

The impact of stress

Too much stress can build up or last too long which may have long term impact on physical and emotional well-being. Built up stress can interfere with everyday things including; a job, relationships, sleep, and overall happiness.

Causes of stress

Stressors are usually assumed to be negative—such as an overloaded schedule or a relationship that is in turmoil, but anything that adds more demand on someone either positive or negative can be stressful. Positive things such as getting married, buying a home or having a baby are all joyful events, but they can also become a stressor.

Stress can be caused by internal factors such as excessive worrying, negative or pessimistic thoughts about a situation or life, or increased anxiety over uncontrollable events. The cause of stress is dependent on one's perception of it. Something that causes stress to one may not cause stress to someone else. Stress is a physical and emotional response to something happening within ones life.

External causes of stress:

- Life changes such as a baby, new home, new job
- Work or school changes
- Physical health or medical issues
- Relationship challenges
- Financial changes
- Schedule or workload changes
- Children and family commitments and responsibilities

Internal causes of stress:

- Excessive worrying
- Negative or pessimistic outlook
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations
- Lack of flexibility
- All-or-nothing attitude

Stress can cause tension headaches, high blood pressure, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite and increased anxiety. These symptoms are how the body deals with stress and can give us signs of possible problems to come.

Stressors trigger the body to release chemicals and hormones within the body causing an increased heart rate, muscle tightening, and rapid breathing. The brain is on high alert and prepares to react to what's causing stress. This physical change allows for a flight or fight response. If the physical change isn't released and is held within the body, it will be processed in a different way. When physical change continues during multiple occurrences, the body will fatigue and begin to suffer from physical toll—causing chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, exhaustion and other conditions.

Types of stress

There are different types of stress which can impact people differently. The three different types of stress include:

- Short term stress (acute)
- Long term stress (chronic)
- Traumatic stress

Short term stress (acute): The most common type of stress experienced is short term stress. Short term stress is harmless in small amounts; however, too much short term stress can cause feelings of exhaustion, worry and tension. Some examples of short term stress include:

- Being stuck in traffic
- Speaking in front of a group of people
- Interviewing for a job
- Arguing with a friend or loved one
- Getting married
- Short term health issues, such as a need for more medical testing
- Buying a home
- Having a baby

Long term stress (chronic): Most people will experience some type of long term stress in their life. This type of stress involves something more substantial than short term stress and can be damaging. Some examples of long term stress include:

- Financial difficulty
- Loss of a job or unemployment
- Unhappy relationship or marriage
- Caring for a sick or aging loved one
- Personal health issues that require lifestyle change
- Work-life balance challenges

Traumatic stress: People who experience a disaster or violent encounter may experience traumatic stress. For some, a trauma may cause tremendous emotional harm causing feelings of fear, panic, and anxiety, even when the danger is gone. This is called post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and is a type of anxiety disorder that some may have after experiencing a trauma. Some examples of traumatic stress include:

- Living through a car accident
- Returning from armed services deployment
- Experiencing a robbery
- Natural disasters such as wild fires, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornados and floods
- Workplace or domestic violence
- Violent attack

Signs and symptoms of stress

- Upset stomach
- Headache
- Muscle tension
- Neck or back pain
- Chest pain
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling sad or crying
- Unable to focus
- Nail biting
- Unhealthy diet
- Increased amount of alcohol or abusing drugs
- Skin outbreaks
- Crankiness

Health problems linked to stress

Researchers suggest that stress can lead to health problems such as heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Although secondary illnesses do not always occur, stress can have an impact to the overall health of a person.

Researchers are finding out that nearly all health problems are impacted by stress, but here are some of the most common illnesses:

- **Heart disease.** Researchers have long suspected that someone who is consistently stressed-out may have a higher risk of high blood pressure and heart problems. It is not exactly known why however, researchers say stress might have a direct effect on the heart and blood vessels. Another reason is because it is possible that stress is related to other problems—an increased likelihood of smoking or obesity—that indirectly increase the heart risks. Doctors know that sudden emotional stress can be a trigger for serious cardiac problems, including heart attacks. People with chronic heart problems should try to avoid acute stress as much as possible.
- **Obesity.** Excess fat in the belly seems to pose greater health risks than fat on the legs or hips—and unfortunately, that's just where people with high stress seem to store it. It is proven that stress causes a high level of the hormone cortisol which can increase the amount of fat that is deposited in the abdomen area.
- **Diabetes.** Stress can have a negative impact on someone with diabetes in two ways. First, it increases the likelihood of unhealthy eating and excessive drinking which could lead to diabetes. Second, stress seems to raise the glucose levels of people with type 2 diabetes.
- **Headaches.** Stress is considered one of the most common triggers for headaches, both tension headaches and migraines.
- **Depression and anxiety.** Chronic stress is connected with higher rates of depression and anxiety. Continuous stress can impact overall emotions and cause increased anxiety and/or depression.

Stress—a good thing or a bad thing?

Some stress can be a good thing. It can be a way to stay focused on a task and offers an increased level of pressure to get something completed. Stress can also be a good distracter to life and may provide purpose and a sense of accomplishment. Some people find they work best when under a certain level of stress or pressure.

Too much stress can have a negative impact on emotional and physical well-being. Chronic stress which continues for an extended period of time can lead to other conditions such as anxiety, depression heart disease, and obesity.

Every person is different and tolerates stress levels differently. Knowing what your threshold of tolerance for stress is will help maintain a balance of good stress versus overloading and ending up with too much stress.

Long term effects of stress

Some of the long term effects of stress can cause physical and emotional health problems. These problems may include:

- Emotional wellness issues such as depression, anxiety and personality disorders.
- Heart disease, high blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythms and increased risk of stroke or heart attack.
- Eating disorders including over eating, or anorexia.
- Menstrual problems with women.
- Skin and hair problems such as acne, psoriasis, eczema, and permanent hair loss.
- Gastrointestinal problems such as ulcers, colitis and irritable colon.



How stressed are you?

Here are a few questions to ask yourself when evaluating your stress levels:

- *Is the stress continuous?* Stress that occurs because of a pressing project at work, a tight deadline, or juggling multiple priorities at once often happens. Once the event or work is complete, you should feel a sense of relief and accomplishment. If the stress continues and doesn't seem to decrease after completing a task, then this might be a sign of chronic stress which will end up making you feel more overwhelmed and overworked.
- *Are you sleeping?* Stressful events can cause disrupted sleep, but over a period of time normal sleep patterns should resume. If sleep issues persist, this might be a sign that you are over stressed, which can negatively impact your emotional and physical health.
- *Do you have constant headaches?* Tension headaches occur from too much stress. These headaches should go away after taking a break or resting. If you suffer from continuous headaches for an extended period of time you are probably over stressed.

What you can do

Identifying the signs and symptoms of stress is the first step. Once you realize you under too much stress, take these steps to take care of yourself:

- **Increase exercise or physical activity:** Add to your normal work out routine, or start one if you don't currently exercise on a regular basis.
- **Decrease alcohol use:** Although it may help you relax at the time, there is often a rebound effect when drinking too much that actually adds to the overall physical stress you are currently experiencing.
- **Eat a healthier diet:** When stressed we often don't have time for a full meal. Avoid fast-food and grab a quick salad or other convenient foods that don't have too much fat or sodium.
- **Relax:** Doing deep breathing exercises for even just a minute or two gives your muscles a rest from the tension.
- **Seek counseling:** Professional therapists can help you to identify coping strategies for your current situation and determine if your reaction to stress is more serious requiring medical intervention.

69% of people claim that money is the main cause of stress in their life.

APA 2012 *Impact of Stress*, www.apa.org



Employee Assistance Program

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