
Why stress happens and how to manage it

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Stress, in everyday terms, is a feeling that people have when they are overloaded and struggling to cope with demands.

These demands can be related to finances, work, relationships, and other situations, but anything that poses a real or perceived challenge or threat to a person's well-being can cause stress.

Stress can be a motivator. It can be essential to survival. The "fight-or-flight" mechanism can tell us when and how to respond to danger. However, if this mechanism is triggered too easily, or when there are too many stressors at one time, it can undermine a person's mental and physical health and become harmful.

According to the annual stress survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), average stress levels in the United States (U.S.) rose from 4.9 to 5.1 on a scale from 1 to 10 in 2015. The main reasons given are employment and money.

Fast facts on stress:

Here are some key points about stress. More detail is in the main article.

- Stress helps the body prepare to face danger.
- The symptoms can be both physical and psychological.
- Short-term stress can be helpful, but long-term stress is linked to various health conditions.
- We can prepare for stress by learning some self-management tips.

What is stress?

Stress is the body's natural defense against predators and danger. It flushes the body with hormones to prepare systems to evade or confront danger. This is known as the "fight-or-flight" mechanism.

When we are faced with a challenge, part of our response is physical. The body activates resources to protect us by preparing us either to stay and fight or to get away as fast as possible.



Each person responds to stress in a different way, but too much stress can lead to health problems.

The body produces larger quantities of the chemicals cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline. These trigger an increased heart rate, heightened muscle preparedness, sweating, and alertness. All these factors improve the ability to respond to a hazardous or challenging situation.

Factors of the environment that trigger this reaction are called stressors. Examples include noises, aggressive behavior, a speeding car, scary moments in movies, or even going out on a first date. The more stressors we experience, the more stressed we tend to feel.

Changes to the body

Stress slows normal bodily functions, such as the digestive and immune systems. All resources can then be concentrated on rapid breathing, blood flow, alertness, and muscle use.

The body changes in the following ways during stress:

- blood pressure and pulse rate rise
- breathing is faster
- the digestive system slows down
- immune activity decreases
- the muscles become tense
- a heightened state of alertness prevents sleep

How we react to a difficult situation will affect how stress affects us and our health. A person who feels they do not have enough resources to cope will be more likely to have a stronger reaction, and one that can trigger health problems. Stressors affect individuals in different ways.

Some experiences that are generally considered positive can lead to stress, such as having a baby, going on a trip, moving to a nicer house, and being promoted.

This is because they often involve a major change, extra effort, new responsibilities, and a need for adaptation. They are also steps into the unknown. The person wonders if they will cope.

A persistently negative response to challenges can have a detrimental effect on health and happiness. However, being aware of how you react to stressors can help reduce the negative feelings and effects of stress, and to manage it more effectively.

Types

The APA recognizes three different types of stress that require different levels of management.

Acute stress

This type of stress is short-term and is the most common way that stress occurs. Acute stress is often caused by thinking about the pressures of events that have recently occurred, or upcoming demands in the near future.

For example, if you have recently been involved in an argument that has caused upset or have an upcoming deadline, you may feel stress about these triggers. However, the stress will be reduced or removed once these are resolved.

It does not cause the same amount of damage as long-term, chronic stress. Short-term effects include tension headaches and an upset stomach, as well as a moderate amount of distress.

However, repeated instances of acute stress over a long period can become chronic and harmful.

Episodic acute stress

People who frequently experience acute stress, or whose lives present frequent triggers of stress, have episodic acute stress.

A person with too many commitments and poor organization can find themselves displaying episodic stress symptoms. These include a tendency to be irritable and tense, and this irritability can affect relationships. Individuals that worry too much on a constant basis can also find themselves facing this type of stress.

This type of stress can also lead to high blood pressure and heart disease.

Chronic stress

This is the most harmful type of stress and grinds away over a long period.

Ongoing poverty, a dysfunctional family, or an unhappy marriage can cause chronic stress. It occurs when a person never sees an escape from the cause of stress and stops seeking solutions. Sometimes, it can be caused by a traumatic experience early in life.

Chronic stress can continue unnoticed, as people can become used to it, unlike acute stress that is new and often has an immediate solution. It can become part of an individual's personality, making them constantly prone to the effects of stress regardless of the scenarios they come up against.

People with chronic stress are likely to have a final breakdown that can lead to suicide, violent actions, heart attacks, and strokes.

Causes

We all react differently to stressful situations. What is stressful to one person may not be stressful to another. Almost anything can cause stress. For some people, just thinking about something or several small things can cause stress.

Common major life events that can trigger stress include:

- job issues or retirement
- lack of time or money
- bereavement
- family problems
- illness
- moving home
- relationships, marriage, and divorce

Other commonly reported causes of stress are:

- abortion or miscarriage
- driving in heavy traffic or fear of an accident
- fear of crime or problems with neighbors
- pregnancy and becoming a parent
- excessive noise, overcrowding, and pollution
- uncertainty or waiting for an important outcome



Different situations can trigger stress for different people.

Some situations will affect some people and not others. Past experience can impact how a person will react.

Sometimes, there is no identifiable cause. Mental health issues, such as depression, or an accumulated sense of frustration and anxiety, can make some people feel stressed more easily than others.

Some people experience ongoing stress after a traumatic event, such as an accident or some kind of abuse. This is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Those who work in stressful jobs, such as the military or the emergency services, will have a debriefing session following a major incident, and they will be monitored for PTSD.

Symptoms

The physical effects of stress include:

- sweating
- pain in the back or chest
- cramps or muscle spasms
- erectile dysfunction and loss of libido
- fainting
- headache

- heart disease
- high blood pressure
- lower immunity against diseases
- muscular aches
- nervous twitches
- pins and needles
- sleeping difficulties
- stomach upset

A 2012 study suggested that the stressors experienced by parents, such as financial troubles or managing a single-parent household, can lead to obesity in their children.

Emotional reactions can include:

- anger
- anxiety
- burnout
- concentration issues
- depression
- fatigue
- a feeling of insecurity
- forgetfulness
- irritability
- nail biting
- restlessness
- sadness

Behaviors linked to stress include:

- food cravings and eating too much or too little
- sudden angry outbursts
- drug and alcohol abuse
- higher tobacco consumption
- social withdrawal
- frequent crying
- relationship problems

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Diagnosis

A doctor will normally diagnose stress by asking the patient about symptoms and life events.

Diagnosis is complex. It depends on many factors. Questionnaires, biochemical measures, and physiological techniques have been used, but these may not be objective or effective.

The most direct way to diagnose stress and its effects on a person is through a comprehensive, stress-oriented, face-to-face interview.

Treatment

Treatment includes self-help and, in instances where the stress is caused by an underlying condition, certain medications.

Therapies that may help to induce relaxation include aromatherapy or reflexology.

Some insurance providers cover this type of treatment, but be sure to check before pursuing this treatment.

Medicines

Doctors will not usually prescribe medications for coping with stress, unless the patient has an underlying illness, such as depression or a type of anxiety.

In that case, the doctor is treating a mental illness and not the stress.

In such cases, an antidepressant may be prescribed. However, there is a risk that the medication will only mask the stress, rather than help you deal and cope with it. Antidepressants can also have adverse effects.

Developing some coping strategies before stress hits can help an individual manage new situations and maintain physical and mental health. If you are already experiencing overwhelming stress, seek medical help.

Management

Here are a few lifestyle choices you can take to manage or prevent the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Exercise: Studies have shown that exercise can benefit a person's mental and physical state.

Reducing intake of alcohol, drugs, and caffeine: These substances will not help prevent stress, and they can make it worse. They should be cut out or reduced.

Nutrition: A healthy, balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables helps maintain the immune system at times of stress. A poor diet will lead to ill health and additional stress.



Massage, yoga, or listening to music can help destress or prevent stress from building up.

Prioritizing: Spend a little time organizing your to-do list to see what is most important. Then focus of what you have completed or accomplished for the day, rather than what you are yet to finish.

Time: Set aside some time each day just for yourself. Use it to organize your life, relax, and pursue your own interests.

Breathing and relaxation: Meditation, massage, and yoga can help. Breathing and relaxation techniques can slow down the system and help you relax. Breathing is also a central part of mindfulness meditation.

Talking: Talking to family, friends, work colleagues, and your boss about your thoughts and worries will help you "let off steam." You may be comforted to find that you are "not the only one." You may even find there is an easy solution that you had not thought of.

Acknowledging the signs: A person can be so anxious about the problem that is causing the stress that they do not notice the effects on their body.

Noticing symptoms is the first step to taking action. People who experience work stress due to long hours may need to "take a step back." It may be time to review their own working practice or to talk to a supervisor about reducing the load.

Find your own destressor: Most people have something that helps them relax, such as reading a book, going for a walk, listening to music, or spending time with a friend or a pet. Joining a choir or a gym helps some people.

Establishing support networks: The APA encourage people to develop networks of social support, for example, by talking to neighbors and others in the local community, or joining a club, charity, or religious organization.

Even if you are not feeling stressed now, being part of a group can prevent stress from developing and provide support and practical help when hard times come.

Online social networking can help, as long as it does not replace face-to-face contact. It can allow you to stay in touch with friends and family who are far away, and this can reduce anxiety.

If the stress is affecting your daily life, you should seek professional help. A doctor or psychiatric specialist can often help, for example, through stress management training.

Stress management techniques

Stress management can help to:

- remove or change the source of stress
- alter the way you view a stressful event
- lower the impact that stress might have on your body
- learn alternative ways of coping

Stress management therapy pursues one or more of these approaches.

Techniques for stress management can be gained from self-help books, online resources, or by attending a stress management course. A counselor or psychotherapist can connect an individual who has stress with personal development courses or individual and group therapy sessions.

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Additional information

Article last updated by Adam Felman on Tue 28 November 2017.

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