

Stress and Your Health

Stress is a fact of life. You just can't avoid it. Every single day, you experience some degree of stress. You're probably aware of a few things that create stress in your life, but chances are good that other stressors slip in under your radar. And, if you're like most people, your understanding is limited as to how the stress you experience every day, whether you're aware of it or not, impacts your health.

What causes your stress?

One of the first steps in reducing stress and maintaining your health is becoming aware of the factors in your life that create stress. These come from four basic sources:

- **Your physical environment.** Inclement weather, noise pollution, and heavy traffic may seem like temporary or even trivial factors, but they contribute to your daily stress burden.
- **Your social system.** Your relationships with others are huge sources of potential pressure. Deadlines at work, arguments with friends or family, the death of a loved one, and financial problems all create stress.
- **Your physiology.** Physical factors like illness, aging, menopause, and inadequate exercise or sleep create stress. In addition, your physical responses to stress itself—things like headaches, stomachaches, and muscle tension—make it even harder to cope during stressful periods.
- **Your thoughts.** Irrational thoughts can dramatically magnify your stress. A merely irritating experience can become a disaster, depending on how you interpret it. For instance, getting chewed out at work is stressful to begin with. But if you interpret the experience as a warning that you're about to lose your job, your stress level skyrockets.

You recognize certain experiences as stressful—an accident, an unexpected bill, or a divorce, for instance. But even pleasant events, like a wedding or a much-anticipated award, create stress. This good stress, called 'eustress,' can help you rise to a challenge—like an exam or a 5K road race—but stress that is intense or prolonged can have a significant harmful effect on your health.

Stress and illness

While stress isn't the primary cause of any illness, its harmful impact can be felt in almost any system of the body. Menstrual changes, decreased fertility, impotence, decreased libido, increased susceptibility to infection, chronic pain, and depression are just a few of the ways that stress can impact your health.

Stress can also contribute to many other medical conditions. It can worsen headaches, heartburn, eczema, irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia, depression, infertility, high blood pressure, chronic pain, obesity, heart disease, asthma, and other conditions.

How, exactly, does stress harm your body?

"Fight or flight"

Your body responds to stress with a series of biochemical changes that prepare you to deal with

danger. This is called the “fight or flight” response. This deeply rooted response originates in the days of saber-toothed tigers. Back then, the need to physically defend oneself or run away from imminent danger was very real. The threats you face now are less savage, but your body responds in the same way.

Here's how the 'fight or flight' response works. The thinking part of the brain, the cerebral cortex, interprets signals from the environment and sends an alarm to the hypothalamus, an almond-sized, very complex structure deep within the brain. The hypothalamus controls an immense number of bodily functions and is the brain's main switch for stress responses. The hypothalamus stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, preparing your body for physical activity. The effects of the sympathetic nervous system are beyond conscious control and include:

- Increases in heart rate, respiratory rate, muscle tension, blood pressure, and metabolism
- Shifting of blood away from extremities and digestive system and into muscles. This shift accounts for typical stress-related experiences of cold hands and feet and an upset stomach.
- Dilated pupils and more acute hearing to increase your sensory perception.
- Your adrenal glands (located above your kidneys) secrete chemicals that inhibit digestion, reproduction, tissue repair and immune system functioning.

Taken together, these changes prepare your body to move quickly in defense or retreat.

This basic response also results from non-physical threats. An argument with your spouse or being cut off in traffic invokes the same cascade of reactions as does encountering a thug in a dark alley. When you can't run or fight, the physical and chemical changes in your body don't burn off. Over time, they contribute to illness. Stress-related illness can result from one large incident or a series of smaller ones when you aren't able to recover in between.

How do you experience stress?

Stress can manifest as subjective feelings—anxiety or worry, fatigue, irritability, or a sense of being overwhelmed. Even when you're trying to rest, stress can make it hard for you to fall asleep or stay asleep—or bring nightmares when you're finally able to doze off.

Stress can also appear as a wide range of physical symptoms: chest pain, dizziness, headaches, shortness of breath, tightness in your chest, itching, stomachache, nausea, diarrhea, memory problems, or pain in a variety of locations: your shoulders, neck, back, jaw, or eyes. People under stress tend to express it in a particular body system. For instance, if you focus stress in your musculoskeletal system, you'll experience muscle tension, fatigue, and/or headaches. If your 'system of choice' is cardiovascular, stress might cause high blood pressure. If pressure comes home to roost in your gut, you're likely to experience it as ulcers or diarrhea.

Reducing stress

Stress reduction isn't about avoiding stress altogether—that's an impossible task. The goal of stress reduction is learning how to respond to life's challenges so that they don't impact your health for the worse.

Learning to deal with stress in a healthy way doesn't happen overnight. It's a lifelong journey to

develop coping strategies that work for you. To create a stress management plan, start by understanding your particular sources of stress and experiment with a variety of ways to minimize their impact on your life and health until you find strategies that work consistently for you. Try to be patient with yourself as you learn new skills.

Even when you have coping strategies in place, remember to be compassionate towards yourself if stress still overwhelms you from time to time. This can happen, because no stress management plan can prevent stress from occurring. It does something far more important: reducing the impact of stress on your health and improving the quality of your life. By recognizing and addressing stress proactively, you'll feel better and enjoy life more.

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