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## Stress: How to cope better with life's challenges

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### Abstract

Stress is the body's reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. The body reacts to these changes with physical, mental, and emotional responses. Stress is a normal part of life. You can experience stress from your environment, your body, and your thoughts.

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. 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 a car accident. Stress can also help you rise to meet challenges. It's 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, mood, productivity, relationships, and your quality of life.

**Keywords:** arousal, acute stress, chronic stress

### Introduction

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

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

### What is stress?

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When we 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-or-freeze” reaction, or the *stress response*.

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

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

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**Types of stress**

**1. Acute stress**

Acute stress is the most common type of stress. It's your body's immediate reaction to a new challenge, event, or demand, and it triggers your fight-or-flight response. As the pressures of a near-miss automobile accident, an argument with a family member, or a costly mistake at work sink in, your body turns on this biological response.

Acute stress isn't always negative. It's also the experience you have when riding a rollercoaster or having a person jump out at you in a haunted house. Isolated episodes of acute stress should not have any lingering health effects. In fact, they might actually be healthy for you, as these stressful situations give your body and brain practice in developing the best response to future stressful situations. Severe acute stress such as stress suffered as the victim of a crime or life-threatening situation can lead to mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or acute stress disorder.

**2. Episodic acute stress**

When acute stress happens frequently, it's called episodic acute stress. People who always seem to be having a crisis tend to have episodic acute stress. They are often short-tempered, irritable, and anxious. People who are "worry warts" or pessimistic or who tend to see the negative side of everything also tend to have episodic acute stress.

Negative health effects are persistent in people with episodic acute stress. It may be hard for people with this type of stress to change their lifestyle, as they accept stress as a part of life.

**3. Chronic stress**

If acute stress isn't resolved and begins to increase or lasts for long periods of time, it becomes chronic stress. This stress is constant and doesn't go away. It can stem from such things as:

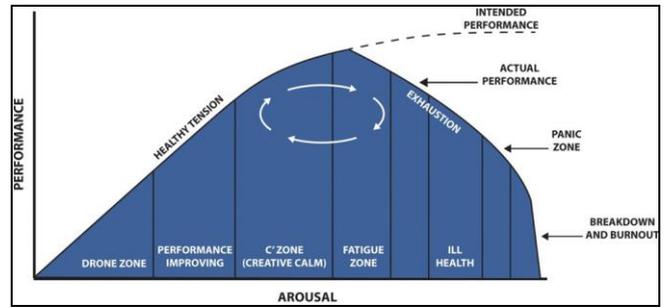
- poverty
- a dysfunctional family
- an unhappy marriage
- a bad job

Chronic stress can be detrimental to your health, as it can contribute to several serious diseases or health risks, such as:

- heart disease
- cancer
- lung disease
- accidents
- cirrhosis of the liver
- suicide

Human Function Curve, originally developed by Peter Nixon, says there are different levels of stress that we may experience and our stress level affects our level of performance. He calls any state where we are awake and reacting to stimuli an arousal state, such as being at work. If we compare the amount of stress to our performance, our performance actually improves when we experience eustress. However, according to this model, there is a point where chronic stress can impede our performance.

Looking at Figure 3.1 "The Human Function Curve", you can see in the drone zone, for example, that our performance is low. We may be bored and not have enough positive stress for us to perform at a higher level. In the C zone, for example, we may experience eustress, which raises our performance. However, when we reach the fatigue zone, we could be experiencing chronic stress, which impedes our performance.



**Fig 1:** The Human Function Curve

As you can see, performance is actually improved with a certain amount of stress, but once that stress becomes episodic or chronic, our performance actually goes down.

**The body's stress response**

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

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

**What causes stress?**

Feelings of stress are caused by the body's instinct to defend itself. This instinct is good in emergencies, such as getting out of the way of a speeding car. But stress can cause unhealthy physical symptoms if it goes on for too long, such as in response to life's daily challenges and changes.

When this happens, it's as though our body gets ready to jump out of the way of the car, but we are sitting still. Our body is working overtime, with no place to put all the extra energy. This can make us feel anxious, afraid, worried and uptight.

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 us forces us 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 we worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

**Table 1:** Common external causes of stress

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

**Table 2:** Common internal causes of stress

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

**Effects of chronic stress**

The body doesn't distinguish between physical and psychological threats. When we're stressed over a busy schedule, an argument with a friend, a traffic jam, or a mountain of bills, our body reacts just as strongly as if we were facing a life-or-death situation. If we have a lot of

responsibilities and worries, our emergency stress response may be “on” most of the time. The more our 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.

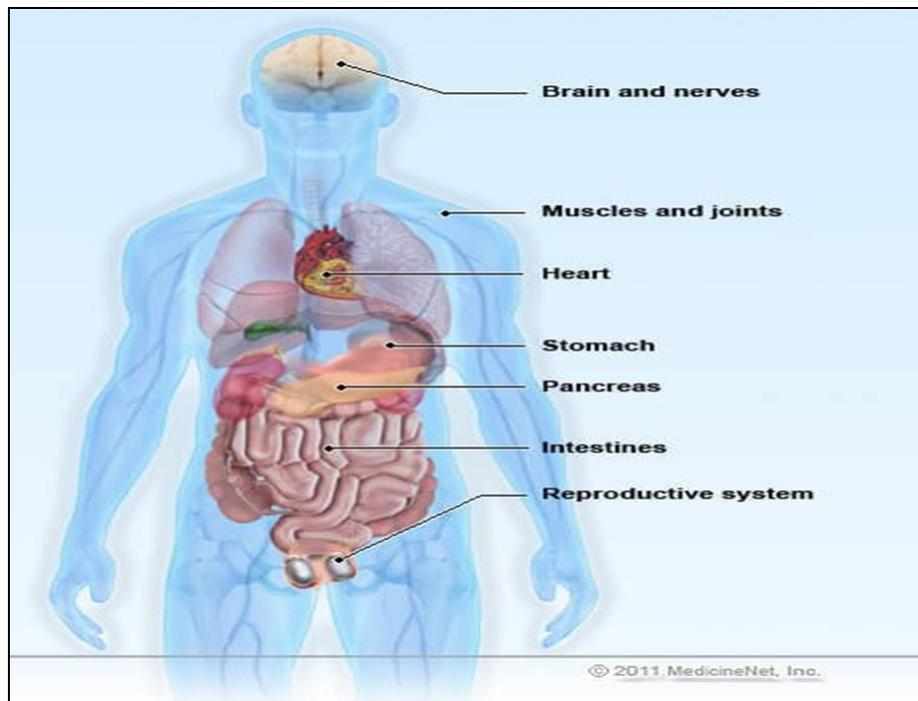
Your nervous system isn’t very good at distinguishing between emotional and physical threats. If you’re super stressed over an argument with a friend, a work deadline, or a mountain of bills, your body can react just as strongly as if you’re facing a true life-or-death situation. And the more your emergency stress system is activated, the easier it becomes to trigger, making it harder to shut off.

If you tend to get stressed out frequently, like many of us in today’s demanding world, your body may exist in a heightened state of stress most of the time. And that can lead

to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can suppress your immune system, upset your digestive and reproductive systems, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, and speed up the aging process. It can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.

**Health problems caused or exacerbated by stress include:  
Depression and anxiety**

1. Pain of any kind
2. Sleep problems
3. Autoimmune diseases
4. Digestive problems
5. Skin conditions, such as eczema
6. Heart disease
7. Weight problems
8. Reproductive issues
9. Thinking and memory problems



**Fig 2:** Areas of the body affected by stress

**Possible signs of stress**

- Anxiety
- Back pain
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Trouble sleeping or insomnia
- Problems with relationships
- Shortness of breath
- Stiff neck or jaw
- Upset stomach
- Weight gain or loss

**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)

### What can i do to manage my stress?

The first step is to learn to recognize when we're feeling stressed. Early warning signs of stress include tension in our shoulders and neck, or clenching our hands into fists.

The next step is to choose a way to deal with our stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to stress--but often this is not possible. A second way is to change how we react to stress. This is often the more practical way.

### Tips for dealing with stress

- Don't worry about things we can't control, such as the weather.
- Solve the little problems. This can help us gain a feeling of control.
- Prepare to the best of our ability for events we know may be stressful, such as a job interview.
- Try to look at change as a positive challenge, not as a threat.
- Work to resolve conflicts with other people.
- Talk with a trusted friend, family member or counselor.
- Set realistic goals at home and at work. Avoid over scheduling.
- Exercise on a regular basis.
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals and get enough sleep.
- Meditate.
- Participate in something we don't find stressful, such as sports, social events or hobbies.

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

- Avoid unnecessary stress.
- Alter the situation.
- Adapt to the stressor.
- Accept the things you can't change.
- We 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.

### Stress management strategies

- Avoid unnecessary stress Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.
- Learn how to say "no" – Know your limits and stick to

them. Whether in your personal or professional life, refuse to accept added responsibilities when you're close to reaching them. Taking on more than you can handle is a surefire recipe for stress.

- Avoid people who stress you out – If someone consistently causes stress in your life and you can't turn the relationship around, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.
- Take control of your environment – If the evening news makes you anxious, turn the TV off. If traffic's got you tense, take a longer but less-traveled route. If going to the market is an unpleasant chore, do your grocery shopping online.
- Avoid hot-button topics – If you get upset over religion or politics, cross them off your conversation list. If you repeatedly argue about the same subject with the same people, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.
- Pare down your to-do list – Analyze your schedule, responsibilities, and daily tasks. If you've got too much on your plate, distinguish between the "should" and the "musts." Drop tasks that aren't truly necessary to the bottom of the list or eliminate them entirely.
- Alter the situation If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the problem doesn't present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.
- Express your feelings instead of bottling them up. If something or someone is bothering you, communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way. If you don't voice your feelings, resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.
- Be willing to compromise. When you ask someone to change their behavior, be willing to do the same. If you both are willing to bend at least a little, you'll have a good chance of finding a happy middle ground. Be more assertive. Don't take a backseat in your own life. Deal with problems head on, doing your best to anticipate and prevent them. If you've got an exam to study for and your chatty roommate just got home, say up front that you only have five minutes to talk.
- Manage your time better. Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. But if you plan ahead and make sure you don't overextend yourself, you can alter the amount of stress you're under.
- Adapt to the stressor If you can't change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude. Reframe problems. Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, listen to your favorite radio station, or enjoy some alone time.
- Look at the big picture. Take perspective of the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere. Adjust your standards. Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with "good enough."
- Focus on the positive. When stress is getting you down,

take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help you keep things in perspective.

- Accept the things you can't change Academic Success Center, Oregon State University, 2011, Adapted from: [http://helpguide.org/mental/stress\\_management\\_relief\\_coping.htm](http://helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm) some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can't prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change. Don't try to control the uncontrollable. Many things in life are beyond our control— particularly the behavior of other people. Rather than stressing out over them, focus on the things you can control such as the way you choose to react to problems.
- Look for the upside. As the saying goes, "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. If your own poor choices contributed to a stressful situation, reflect on them and learn from your mistakes.
- Share your feelings. Talk to a trusted friend or make an appointment with a therapist. Expressing what you're going through can be very cathartic, even if there's nothing you can do to alter the stressful situation. Learn to forgive.
- Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and that people make mistakes. Let go of anger and resentments.
- Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on. #5: Make time for fun and relaxation Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors when they inevitably come.
- Set aside relaxation time. Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Don't allow other obligations to encroach. This is your time to take a break from all responsibilities and recharge your batteries.
- Exercise regularly. Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week. 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, so be mindful of what you eat. Start your day right with breakfast, and keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day. Reduce caffeine and sugar. The temporary "highs" caffeine and sugar provide often end in with a crash in mood and energy. By reducing the amount of coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugar snacks in your diet, you'll feel more relaxed and you'll sleep better. Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs.
- Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide an easy escape from stress, but the relief is only temporary. Don't avoid or mask the issue at hand; deal with problems head on and with a clear mind. Get enough sleep. Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally.

## Summary

Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. 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."

Acute stress is the most common type of stress. It's your body's immediate reaction to a new challenge, event, or demand, and it triggers your fight-or-flight response.

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 us forces us 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 we worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life. 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. Depression and anxiety, Pain of any kind, Sleep problems, autoimmune diseases, Digestive problems, and Skin conditions, such as eczema, Heart disease, and Weight problems.

## Dealing with stress

Don't worry about things we can't control, such as the weather. Solve the little problems. This can help us gain a feeling of control. Prepare to the best of our ability for events we know may be stressful, such as a job interview. Try to look at change as a positive challenge, not as a threat. Work to resolve conflicts with other people. Talk with a trusted friend, family member or counselor. Set realistic goals at home and at work. Avoid over scheduling. Exercise on a regular basis. Eat regular, well-balanced meals and get enough sleep. Meditate. Participate in something we don't find stressful, such as sports, social events or hobbies.

Avoid unnecessary stress Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

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