



Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes

Improving Your Ability to Handle Stress



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?

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 an 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, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.

Fight-or-flight response: what happens in the body

When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which 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.



The effects of chronic stress

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 is to trip and the harder it is to shut off.

If you tend to get stressed out frequently—as many of us do in today's demanding world—your body may be 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:

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

10. Thinking and memory problems

Signs and symptoms of stress overload

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. That's why it's important to be aware of the common warning signs and symptoms of stress overload.

Cognitive symptoms

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

Emotional symptoms

- Depression or general unhappiness
- Anxiety and agitation
- Moodiness, irritability, or anger
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Loneliness and isolation
- Other mental or emotional health problems

Physical symptoms

- Aches and pains
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness

- Chest pain, rapid heart rate
- Loss of sex drive
- Frequent colds or flu

Behavioral symptoms

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Withdrawing from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

Causes of stress

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 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 internal or self-generated, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

Finally, 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.

Common external causes of stress

- ▶ Major life changes
- ▶ Work or school

- ▶ Relationship difficulties
- ▶ Financial problems
- ▶ Being too busy
- ▶ Children and family

Common internal causes of stress

- ▶ Pessimism
- ▶ Inability to accept uncertainty
- ▶ Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
- ▶ Negative self-talk
- ▶ Unrealistic expectations / perfectionism
- ▶ All-or-nothing attitude

Top 10 stressful life events

According to the widely validated Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale, these are the top ten stressful life events that can contribute to illness:

1. Death of a spouse
2. Divorce
3. Marriage separation
4. Imprisonment
5. Death of a close family member
6. Injury or illness
7. Marriage
8. Job loss
9. Marriage reconciliation
10. Retirement

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 seem to be able to roll with life's punches, while others tend to crumble in the face of small obstacles or frustrations. Some people even thrive on the excitement of a high-stress lifestyle.

Things that influence your stress tolerance level

Your support network - A strong network of supportive friends and family members is an enormous buffer against stress. When you have people you know you can count on, life's pressures don't seem as overwhelming. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the greater your risk of succumbing 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. On the other hand, if you believe that you have little control over your life—that you're at the mercy of your environment and circumstances, with limited ability to make changes—stress is more likely to paralyze you and knock you off course.

Your attitude and outlook - The way you look at life and its inevitable challenges makes a huge difference in your ability to handle stress. If you're generally hopeful and optimistic, you'll be less vulnerable. Stress-hardy people tend to embrace challenges, have a stronger sense of humor, believe in a higher purpose, and accept change as an inevitable part of life.

Your ability to deal with your emotions - If you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or afraid, you're highly likely to become stressed and agitated. Having the ability to [identify and deal appropriately with your emotions](#) (/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/) can increase your tolerance to stress and help 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 stressful than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

What's stressful for you?

Karen is terrified of getting up in front of people to perform or speak, while her best friend, **Nina**, lives for the spotlight.

Phil thrives under pressure and performs best when he has a tight deadline, while his coworker, **Matt**, shuts down when work demands escalate.

Anita enjoys helping her elderly parents. Her sister, **Constance**, helps out as well but find the demands of caretaking very stressful.

Improving your ability to handle stress

Get moving



(</articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm>)

Upping your activity level is something you can do right now to help yourself start to feel better. Regular exercise can lift your mood and serve as a distraction from worries, allowing you to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress. Rhythmic exercises such as walking, running, swimming, and dancing are particularly effective, especially if you exercise mindfully (focusing your attention on the physical sensations you experience as you move). Read: [How to Start Exercising and Stick to It](/articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm) (</articles/healthy-living/how-to-start-exercising-and-stick-to-it.htm>)

Connect to others



(/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm)

The simple act of talking face-to-face with another human can trigger hormones that relieve stress when you're feeling uncomfortable, unsure, or unsafe. Even just a brief exchange of kind words or a friendly look from another human being can help calm and soothe your nervous system. So spend time with people who make you feel good 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. Read: [Making Good Friends](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm)

Engage your senses



(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm)

Another fast way to relieve stress is by engaging one or more of your senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, or movement. The key is to find the sensory input that works for you. Does listening to an uplifting song make you feel calm? Or smelling ground coffee? Or maybe petting an animal works quickly to make you feel centered? Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you. Read: [Quick Stress Relief](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm)

Learn how to relax



(/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm)

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 fight or flight or mobilization 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. Read: [Relaxation Techniques](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm)

Eat a healthy diet



(/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm)

The food you eat can improve or worsen your mood and affect your ability to cope with life's stressors. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience food, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress while eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and [healthy fats](/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm), especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with life's ups and downs. Read: [Healthy Eating](/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm)

Get your rest



(/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm)

Feeling tired can increase stress by causing you to think irrationally. At the same time, chronic stress can disrupt your sleep. Whether you're having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night, there are plenty of ways to improve your sleep so you feel less stressed and more productive and emotionally balanced. Read: [Getting Better Sleep \(/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm\)](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm)

Boost your ability to handle stress

If you're having trouble following through with these self-help tips, HelpGuide's [free emotional intelligence toolkit \(/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/\)](/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/) can help.

More help for stress

[Stress Management: \(/articles/stress/stress-management.htm\)](/articles/stress/stress-management.htm) Using Self-Help Techniques for Dealing with Stress

[Relaxation Techniques: \(/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) Using the Relaxation Response to Relieve Stress

[Quick Stress Relief: \(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) Using Your Senses to Relieve Stress On the Spot

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