

Understanding Stress

What Is Stress?

Stress, by definition, is the inability to cope with a threat (real or imagined) to your well-being, which results in a series of responses and adaptations by our bodies. You may respond to a traffic jam on the office commute with anger and frustration. Someone else may view the situation as a time to relax and get away from it all and might listen to music.

A co-worker may thrive on deadlines, but maybe you think of them as “deadlines.” Therefore, stress can be good stress (eustress) or bad stress (distress). Good stress can take place during happy, exciting times such as

a marriage, a promotion, new job, or birth of a child. Most of us are familiar with the bad stress events such as death of a family member or friend, divorce, financial problems, working with and for difficult people.

Are You Running On Empty?

“You often hear that there’s no room in the workplace for emotions, yet many people live in a pool of negative emotions, drowning in anger at the boss, irritation at co-workers, anxiety over downsizing, and worry about family concerns,” says Jerry Kaiser, director of health services for the Institute of HeartMath.

Ever been to a stress management class? Did it work? Not really.

“The reason most well-intended self-help books and stress management programs don’t work,” says Kaiser, “is that people get a lot of information that sounds good (and they know what to do to be healthy), but then they walk out the door and the ‘noise’ of life becomes louder than the information, and life goes back to its baseline of low-grade frustration or worry.”

Feelings—not information—change behavior. Here’s an example: Try to recall something that made you feel angry whether it was 10 minutes ago or 10 years ago. BOOM! The pumping efficiency of your heart has just decreased up to 10 percent, according to one researcher. And these recalled feelings of anger can produce a weakening effect on your heart. But now picture a moment when the boss unexpectedly recognizes something important you’ve done at a company meeting. You feel a boost of energy and clarity. Life feels good.





Shift Your Emotional Gears

“When there’s an angry customer on the phone,” Kaiser explains, “or you’re angry at your boss, you can’t wait four hours to get to the gym to work out your anger.” The key is to shift your emotional gears out of reverse and at least into neutral at the moment.

“Everyone has a picture of their family or a favorite place or their pet Labrador on their desk or wall, in their locker or in their wallet or purse. Simply using that picture to recall the good feeling you associate with it,” Kaiser points out, “can have a powerful effect. Freeze-frame the moment, push the pause button on your inner movie, and find yourself transported for a moment to a more pleasant emotional place.”

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Symptoms Of Stress

- >> Fatigue or exhaustion
- >> Tight neck and shoulder muscles
- >> Feelings of anger
- >> Feelings of anxiety
- >> Insomnia
- >> Headaches or migraines
- >> Sadness or depression
- >> Feelings of hopelessness
- >> Colds or congestion
- >> Indigestion
- >> Diarrhea, spastic colon or intestinal disorder
- >> Symptoms of ulcers
- >> Sore jaw muscles
- >> Poor appetite
- >> Bronchitis, pneumonia or asthma

Causes Of Stress

Long-Term Stress Is Bad For Your Health

Some experts think that stress may cause 50% of all disease. Stress contributes to the first and second leading causes of death—heart disease and cancer. It's also a factor in migraines, digestive problems, mental illness, chronic insomnia, fatigue, high blood pressure, asthma, allergies, ulcers, tooth decay, and the common cold.

We're not talking about one incident. It's chronic stress—day in, day out—which can harm your immune system, making you more prone to accidents, illness, and plain old unhappiness.

Many of us have come to accept stress as normal—doesn't everyone complain about how busy they are? That doesn't make it okay. Take a look at your stress levels, what causes your stress, and what you can do about it.



Me? Stressed?

Driving home from work with 18 minutes to get to the school program, and traffic has slowed to a crawl.

Thoughts are racing:

"What do we have for dinner? I've got to call Mel. . . AND get the laundry started or I'll be up late tonight!"

What did she mean by "that new procedure" was going to be a challenge? Does she think I can't do it?

They say it may freeze. Are the hoses disconnected?"

The driver is experiencing stress from several sources:

- ✓ **Environment**—Traffic, pollution, noise, and weather
- ✓ **Social**—Job pressures, family demands, social obligations
- ✓ **Physical**—Lack of sleep, possible poor diet
- ✓ **Mental**—Interpretation of the supervisor's comment, worry over being late

We all experience stress every day, but people vary in how they handle it. Some people thrive on change, getting a new job, moving or additional responsibilities. Others are upset by changes in their routines. But everyone can benefit by learning stress-reduction techniques and using them in their daily lives.

Some Get Sick, Some Don't

Ever wonder why some people catch all the colds that go around, and others don't? In one study, researchers took 276 healthy volunteers and measured their stress levels, then put cold viruses in their noses.

- ✓ People who had been under severe stress for 1 to 6 months were twice as likely to get sick.
- ✓ Those with more than two years of stress were four times more likely to develop colds.
- ✓ Those with the most relationships—family, friends, and community—were the least likely to catch the cold.
- ✓ Stress about intimate relationships doubled cold risk.
- ✓ Stress from unemployment or underemployment made sufferers three and a half times more likely to start sniffing.

Stress Symptoms

Physical

- ✓ upset stomach
- ✓ trouble sleeping
- ✓ accidents and injuries
- ✓ tight chest or throat
- ✓ backaches
- ✓ constipation
- ✓ headaches
- ✓ exhaustion

Mental

- ✓ trouble concentrating
- ✓ difficulty making decisions
- ✓ forgetfulness
- ✓ scary thoughts
- ✓ making errors
- ✓ repetitive thoughts

Emotional

- ✓ grumpy
- ✓ tense
- ✓ impatient
- ✓ hopeless
- ✓ hostile
- ✓ easily upset
- ✓ no pleasure in pastimes
- ✓ lonely
- ✓ depressed

Behavioral

- ✓ excessive drinking
- ✓ poor eating habits
- ✓ driving too fast
- ✓ drug use
- ✓ getting into arguments
- ✓ becoming a loner
- ✓ working too much
- ✓ criticizing others a lot

Stressors

- ✓ financial problems
- ✓ too much driving
- ✓ worry about children
- ✓ health problems
- ✓ pressure at work
- ✓ not enough exercise
- ✓ lousy diet
- ✓ personal relationship issues
- ✓ overweight
- ✓ working too many hours
- ✓ caretaking an elder
- ✓ no quiet time
- ✓ conflict with co-worker
- ✓ bored with routine
- ✓ conflict with family member
- ✓ noisy environment
- ✓ sexual problems
- ✓ nobody to talk to

Review the list above. Are there problems you can solve, simply eliminating them? Others may be beyond your control—except that if you change your attitude about them, they may bother you less. As you read through the stress management skills on the following pages, think about which skills might help you deal with your stressors.

