APA Help Center
from the American Psychological Association

Mind/Body Health:Stress

We've probably all felt stress. Sometimes it's brief and highly situational, like being in heavy traffic. Other times, it's more persistent and complex—relationship problems, an ailing family member, a spouse's death. And sometimes, stress can motivate us to accomplish certain tasks.

Dangerous Stress

Stress becomes dangerous when it interferes with your ability to live a normal life for an extended period of time. You may feel "out of control" and have no idea of what to do, even if the cause is relatively minor. This in turn, may cause you to feel continually fatigued, unable to concentrate, or irritable in otherwise relaxed situations. Prolonged stress may also compound any emotional problems stemming from sudden events such traumatic experiences in your past, and increase thoughts of suicide.

Natural reactions

Stress can also affect your physical health because of the human body's built-in response mechanisms. You may have found yourself sweating at the thought of an important date, or felt your heartbeat pick up while watching a scary movie. These reactions are caused by hormones that scientists believe helped our ancestors cope with the threats and uncertainties of their world.

If the cause of your stress is temporary, the physical effects are usually short-term as well. In one study, the pressure of taking exams led to increased severity of acne among college students, regardless of how they ate or slept. The condition diminished after exams were over. Abdominal pain and irregularity have also been linked to situational stress.

The longer your mind feels stressed, however, the longer your physical reaction systems remain activated. This can lead to more serious health issues.

Physical wear and tear

The old saying that stress "ages" a person faster than normal was recently verified in a study of women who had spent many years caring for severely ill and disabled children. Because their bodies were no longer able to fully regenerate blood cells, these women were found to be physically a decade older than their chronological age.

Extended reactions to stress can alter the body's immune system in ways that are associated with other "aging" conditions such as frailty, functional decline, cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, inflammatory arthritis, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.

Research also suggests that stress impairs the brain's ability to block certain toxins and other large, potentially harmful molecules. This condition is also common to patients suffering from Alzheimer's Disease.

Pressure points

Although sudden emotional stress has been linked to severe heart dysfunction in otherwise healthy people, scientists are uncertain whether chronic stress alone causes cardiovascular disease. What is clear is that excessive stress can worsen existing risk factors such as hypertension and high cholesterol levels. Studies also show that people who are quick to anger or who display frequent hostility—a behavior common to those under stress—have an increased risk of heart disease and crying fits.

Feelings of despair that accompany stress can easily worsen into chronic depression, a condition that can lead you to neglect good diet and activity habits. This, in turn, can put you at a greater risk for heart disease, obesity, and kidney dysfunction.

Stress can also complicate your ability to recover from a serious illness or nap. A Swedish study found that women who have suffered heart attacks tend to have poorer chances of recovery if they are also experiencing marital stressors such as infidelity, alcohol abuse, and a spouse's physical or psychiatric illness. On the other hand, stress management training is a proven method for helping speed recovery follow a heart attack.

What you can do

Learning to deal with stress effectively is a worthwhile effort, even if you already consider yourself capable of handling anything life sends your way.

Many of the most common long-term stressors—family illness, recovery after injury, career pressures—often arise without warning and simultaneously. Stress management is particularly valuable if your family has a history of hypertension and other forms
of heart disease.

Identify the cause.You may find that your stress arises from something that's easy to correct. A psychologist can help you define and analyze these stressors, and develop action plans for dealing with them.

Monitor your moods. If you feel stressed during the day, write down what caused it along your thoughts and moods. Again, you may find the cause to be less serious than you first thought.

Make time for yourself at least two or three times a week. Even ten minutes a day of "personal time" can help refresh your mental outlook and slow down your body's stress response systems. Turn off the phone, spend time alone in your room, exercise, or meditate to your favorite music.

Walk away when you're angry.Before you react, take time to mentally regroup by counting to 10. Then look at the situation again. Walking or other physical activities will also help you work off steam.

Analyze your schedule.Assess your priorities and delegate whatever tasks you can (e.g., order out dinner after a busy day, share household responsibilities). Eliminate tasks that are "shoulds" but not "musts."

Set reasonable standards for yourself and others. Don’t expect perfection.

Click here to take the online Stress Smarts quiz

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