

What Is Stress?

Stress is an unhealthy response which occurs in our bodies in reaction to many different situations. Having too much to do, a conflict between two people, disappointment, criticism, or even compliments can create stress. The situations are stressors, the resulting reaction is stress. A certain level of stress is good for us. For example, stress can be the driving force behind us getting out of bed each morning. Stress in excess, however, can be detrimental.

The stress reaction occurs when our body prepares to “fight” the stressor. Stress creates changes in the body’s hormone levels. Increasing hormones can lead to a variety of symptoms - muscle tightness, headaches, anxiety, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, and rapid breathing. Long term stress can lead to decreased immunity, increased cholesterol levels, increased blood sugars, insomnia, obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and depression.

What Causes Stress?

Often people create their own stress by the meanings they assign to situations. Stress can be experienced from three basic sources:

1. **Your environment:** Home and work demands, weather, noise, crowds, time pressures, and performance standards.
2. **Your body:** Aging, illness, accidents, poor diet, and sleep disturbances all tax the body. Stress has been found to be related to many physical ailments such as headaches, peptic ulcers, arthritis, colitis, diarrhea, asthma, abnormal cardiac rhythms, sexual problems, circulatory problems (cold hands and feet), muscle tension and even cancer.
3. **Your thoughts:** Dwelling on your worries produces tension in your body. This in turn creates the subjective feeling of uneasiness and leads to more anxious thoughts.

Coping With Stress

You cannot always control what happens to you, but you can control how you react in many situations. Examine your lifestyle to determine how you currently cope with stress. Are your methods successful? If not, focus on developing new coping methods. Focus on developing only one new habit at a time. Don’t overwhelm yourself by resolving to break all your old habits overnight. New coping skills take courage and persistence.

Coping Skills

Relaxation techniques – make a conscious effort to relax your mind and body. You may think that taking a few minutes to unwind at the end of the day is all the relaxation you need. Unfortunately a few minutes won’t provide the stress-

reducing benefits of deep relaxation. Practice each technique to determine which works best for you.

- **Imagery** – Pick a quiet place, sit or lie comfortably and close your eyes. Picture yourself in a peaceful environment.
- **Music** – Listen to soothing music; allow your mind and body to float along with the melody.
- **Muscle Relaxation** – become conscious of a muscle group. Tense the muscle momentarily for awareness and identification, and then allow it to relax. Concentrate on that feeling of relaxation in a muscle.
- **Deep Breathing** – Become conscious of your breathing. With your mouth closed and your shoulders relaxed, inhale as slowly and deeply as you can to the count of six. As you do that, push your stomach out. Allow the air to fill your diaphragm. Hold the air in your lungs as you slowly count to four. Exhale. Release the air through pursed lips as you slowly count to six. Repeat three to five times.

Dealing with Stress

Stress management is a decision making process. Your lifestyle choices can help you to build resistance to stress. Lifestyle choices that can reduce your stress level include:

- **Physical** – proper diet; regular aerobic exercise; relaxation techniques
- **Mental** – clarifying goals/values/priorities; taking time for mental health, positive affirmations
- **Social** – invest in relationships, clear communication and intimacy, build and maintain support systems
- **Spiritual** – meditation, prayer, worship, faith, commitment

Alter Stress By:

- Changing how you perceive the situation; “reframing” your view; looking to the positive
- Changing unrealistic expectations
- Building self-esteem and a positive attitude
- Removing the stress by problem-solving, organizing and developing time management skills
- Developing direct communications

Avoid Stress Whenever Possible:

- Remove yourself from the situation, walk away or let go.
- Know your limits and withdraw.
- Learn to say “no” to at least one request each day.
- Delegate to others