



Fact Sheet

Stress Management



If you try to manage work, family, and community responsibilities, you know the meaning of stress. Stress occurs when you, who should be thoroughly prepared, can't quite get a handle on a report you are supposed to present. Or, when you get a call from a committee chairperson asking if you've confirmed next month's speaker yet, and that person has not returned your many calls.

Learning about stress, its impact on your body, and how to deal with its effects can help you manage all your responsibilities.

What Is Stress?

Medically speaking, stress is the rate of wear and tear on your body caused by living. It is the physical, mental and chemical adjustments that your body makes in accordance to the circumstances of your life.

In other words, stress is a response to what is happening around you. It is the process the body uses to keep balance and sustain life when various demands are made on you.

Some stress is necessary to motivate us and add spice to our lives. But, when the demands of your life exceed your resources, you experience too much stress which may result in damaging effects.

Stress can be good, as well as bad for you. It is like electricity. It can warm you and light up your life, or it can give you a fatal charge. Regardless, stress is always with you.

The important concept is learning how your body responds to the demands of stress. When stress becomes prolonged or particularly frustrating, it becomes harmful — causing distress or “bad stress.”

Recognizing the early signs of distress, and doing something about them, can make an important difference in the quality of your life and your ability to manage your responsibilities and that of the organizations to which you have volunteered your time and energy.

Sources of Stress

Stress comes from a variety of sources, ranging from a sick spouse to an angry co-worker.

The sources of stress can be grouped into four major categories:

1. Customary, anticipated life events. These events represent the changes that take place throughout life: graduating from high school, marriage, returning to work after the birth of a child, telling someone you will chair an important committee, or being tapped to give a talk to a group of people.

These events can be influenced, but not totally controlled, by personal decisions. Normally, they cause a positive and stimulating form of stress. Symptoms of distress may be experienced when several events cluster into a short time period, or when you resist the changes represented by the events.

2. Unexpected life events. These events are the tragedies and “shocks” of life: being involved in an accident, being the victim of a crime, the sudden death of a loved one, etc. An unexpected opportunity can also fall into the “shock” category.

These stressors usually occur to you suddenly, without warning, and are not in your control. The stress symptoms that result are often sudden, and sometimes severe.

Normally, however, such symptoms do not become chronic. With the passage of time, we heal and the symptoms are relieved.

3. Progressive, accumulating events. These represent the everyday strains of life. Especially stressful are the unresolved conflicts in close relationships: ongoing conflicts with a spouse, continuing parent-child friction, long-term care for a disabled relative, boredom with a career path, taking on too many outside activities, constant fighting among factions in an organization to which you belong, etc.

The symptoms of stress exhaustion resulting from these factors develop slowly. And, because they develop over time, the symptoms are not easily relieved. The intensity of these pressures often seems to gain momentum, and the “victims” feel increasingly worn out and unable to cope.

4. Personal trait stress. This is the self-imposed stress that is caused by perfectionism, insecurity, lack of self-confidence, and feelings of jealousy or inadequacy. It is the only source of stress over which you have significant control.

Stress caused by low self-esteem impacts all daily situations and influences all interactions. Sufferers often become anxious worriers and are plagued by feelings of fear and disease.

These symptoms can be chronic and lifelong unless the source of the stress — negative feelings about oneself — is changed.

Health Problems

A single stressful event, even a really upsetting one, usually will not cause a great deal of physical or emotional damage. But when several stressful events occur in a short period of time — called a stress pile-up — any one of a variety of unhealthy effects can be produced.

Damaging stress has been related to asthma, ulcers, cancer, headaches, heart disease and stroke, rheumatoid arthritis — even to the common cold and other infectious diseases.

Learning more about stress and developing ways to manage it are positive health investments. There are many things that you can do to defend yourself against the effects of too much stress.

Steps for Reducing Stress

When stress occurs, it is important to recognize and deal with it. Following are some ways to handle stress. As you begin to understand more about how stress affects you as an individual, you will invent your own ideas about how to help ease tension.

- Turn to physical activity. When you are nervous, angry or upset, release the pressure through exercise or physical activity. Running, walking, tennis, yoga, swimming, or working in your garden are some of the activities you can try. Physical exercise will relieve that “up tight” feeling, relax you, and may turn your frowns into smiles.

Remember, your body and mind work together. A regular routine of physical exercise will help to relieve the daily symptoms of stress.

- Locate the source of your stress. You need to look inside yourself, as well as outside. Remember, spending too much time analyzing your feelings may make them look bigger than they really are. This, in itself, can make you more tense.
- Share your concerns with others. It may help to talk to someone. Perhaps a friend, family member, teacher or counselor can help you see the problem in a different light.

If you feel your problem is serious, you can seek professional help from a psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker. Knowing when to ask for help may avoid more serious problems later.

- Know your limits. If a problem is beyond your control and cannot be changed at the moment, do not fight the situation. Learn to accept what you cannot realistically change.

Sometimes it will be appropriate to take action and remove the stress. But, for other times you may need to change your attitude and live with the situation. Whatever decision you make, do not waste time wondering whether or not you have made the right one.

- Take care of yourself. You are important. Get enough rest and eat well. If you are irritable and tense from lack of sleep, or if you are not eating correctly, you will have less ability to deal with stressful situations. If stress repeatedly keeps you from sleeping or eating, you should ask your doctor for help. Try to:
 - Eat regular meals and snacks.
 - Reduce or eliminate caffeine.
 - Consume more water.
 - Exercise regularly.
 - Limit your intake of alcohol and other addictive drugs.
- Make time for fun. Balance work and community service with recreation by scheduling time strictly for yourself. Do something you really enjoy, whether it is bird watching, fishing, bowling, needlework, woodworking, etc.

You need to participate in some type of recreation that relaxes you and also brings deep enjoyment. This helps you face your daily frustrations more calmly.

Play can be just as important to your well-being as work; you need a break from your daily routine to just relax and have fun.

- Check off your tasks. Trying to take care of everything at once can seem overwhelming. As a result, you may not accomplish anything.

Instead, make a list of what tasks you have to do, and do them one at a time. Remember to do the most important tasks first, and check them off as they are completed.

Also consider delegating tasks that can be done by other people. Remember — **YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE THE ONE TO DO EVERYTHING!!!**

- Don't always insist on being "right." Do other people upset you — particularly when they do not do things your way?
- Try cooperation instead of confrontation. It is better than fighting and insist on getting your own way. A little give and take on both sides will reduce the strain and make everyone feel more comfortable.
- Get away from it for a while. When tensions mount and make you too emotional to think clearly or to make wise decisions, you should take a "time-out."

There are many ways of doing this — going into the next room for a few minutes, counting to fifty, or putting the decision aside until later. Often problems have a way of solving themselves when we leave them for awhile.

- Create a quiet scene. You may not be able to run away, but you can "dream the impossible dream." A quiet scene painted mentally can take you out of the turmoil of a stressful situation. Read a good book or play beautiful music to create a sense of peace and tranquility.
- Avoid self-medication. If you load up on tranquilizers in every stressful situation, you will never be able to solve your problems. Knowing how to handle tension-producing times comes only with practice.

Practice comes only from dealing with the problem, not from taking a pill and ignoring it. Contact your physician if you feel you cannot cope.

- Learn to relax — SMILE! There are times when putting on a happy face, even though you do not feel like it, will ease tension and will begin to make you feel much more relaxed. If the smile can turn into a hearty laugh, tension will fly out of the window.

Part of the secret is to not take ourselves too seriously. The other part is to assume the attitude that, "this too shall pass."

Conclusion

There is nothing you can do to totally eliminate stress from your life — you would not want that. Stress is important when it is under control. It keeps you alert and keeps you from being bored. However, when stress starts to have a negative effect on your life, it is important to determine the source of your stress and consider ways to lessen the impact on you.

Adapted from:

Matthews, Wayne. *The Time-Stress Connection*. Balancing Work and Family Series. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service.

Plain Talk About Handling Stress. Rockville, Maryland: National Institute of Mental Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.