

Managing the Strain of Stress

FACT SHEET

2024 Annual Lesson Series



Introduction

Everyone experiences stress, and everyone experiences stress differently. What causes stress in one person may not cause it in another, and stress can have a variety of effects on people. For example, some people might experience more physical symptoms, such as a rapid heart rate or muscle tightness. In contrast, others may experience more emotional and behavioral symptoms, such as aggression and overeating. Stress is a personal experience, and many factors influence how people perceive and respond to it. Some of these factors include an individual's overall health, background, environment, mindset, and resources.

What is Stress?

Stress can interfere with how you function in your daily life. It is the way in which your mind and body respond to certain experiences or events. The events and situations that cause stress in people are known as stressors. Anything could be a stressor, depending on how an individual perceives it. Some examples of common stressors include conflict with others, unpaid debts, deadlines at work or school, getting married, the death of a loved one, not getting enough sleep, or being ill.

Positive and negative stress

When thinking about stress, most people would associate it negatively, but in small doses, stress can actually be beneficial. There are two types of stress: distress and eustress.

Distress is what most people are familiar with. It is the negative stress that causes anxiety, decreases performance, and can negatively impact mental health. Distress occurs when stressors become severe and prolonged, negatively impacting one's daily life, relationships, and general health.

Eustress, or positive stress, is the type of stress that can benefit you; it is considered "good" stress. Eustress is often the result of stressors that challenge or motivate you to excel. These stressors are usually acute or short-lived and can make you feel euphoric. Examples of eustress would be the feeling you get from riding a rollercoaster, going on a first date, the feeling after a workout, or giving a presentation to a group.

PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL/SOCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> Heart races	<input type="checkbox"/> Easily angered	<input type="checkbox"/> Under-eating
<input type="checkbox"/> Shortness of breath	<input type="checkbox"/> Nervous	<input type="checkbox"/> Increase smoking
<input type="checkbox"/> Increased appetite	<input type="checkbox"/> Crying	<input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping to escape
<input type="checkbox"/> Decreased appetite	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling depressed	<input type="checkbox"/> Overeating
<input type="checkbox"/> High blood pressure	<input type="checkbox"/> Trouble making decisions	<input type="checkbox"/> Taking drugs
<input type="checkbox"/> Dizziness	<input type="checkbox"/> Restlessness	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdraw from people
<input type="checkbox"/> Tapping fingers	<input type="checkbox"/> Lower sex drive	<input type="checkbox"/> Yelling
<input type="checkbox"/> Sweaty palms	<input type="checkbox"/> Irritable	<input type="checkbox"/> Arguing
<input type="checkbox"/> Neck stiffness	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling bored	<input type="checkbox"/> Drinking
<input type="checkbox"/> Muscle tightness	<input type="checkbox"/> Exhausted	<input type="checkbox"/> Breaking things
<input type="checkbox"/> Legs feel shaky	<input type="checkbox"/> Cynical	<input type="checkbox"/> Stop doing things I like to do
<input type="checkbox"/> Backache	<input type="checkbox"/> Can't turn off your mind	<input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing burnout
<input type="checkbox"/> Tightness of chest	<input type="checkbox"/> Can't concentrate	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty getting along with others
<input type="checkbox"/> Upset stomach	<input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive	<input type="checkbox"/> Inability to balance work, family, and personal interests
<input type="checkbox"/> Grind teeth		
<input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue		
<input type="checkbox"/> Headache		
<input type="checkbox"/> Nausea		
<input type="checkbox"/> Feel like you are in a fog		
<input type="checkbox"/> Face feels hot		
<input type="checkbox"/> Dry mouth		

The Biology of Stress

The effects of stress can be physical, emotional, and behavioral/social. Although everyone experiences stress, few people know how it affects their bodies. At the onset of stress, the body engages in a response that involves communicating with the brain to evaluate a threat based on your senses. The hypothalamus, a region at the front of the brain, is activated when a threat is perceived (stress occurs). When activated, your body decides whether to fight (face the stressor head-on), flee (run away from the stressor), or freeze (become numb to the stressor).

Many reactions occur within the body during an attempt to deal with the stressor. Some of these reactions include an increase in adrenaline, an increased release of cortisol (the stress hormone), the senses being enhanced, and the digestive system and urine production slowing to redirect blood to more critical areas. Although these are the common events that happen while someone is under stress, it's important to remember that different stressors cause different reactions in different people. Two people may experience the same stressor, yet their bodies may respond in completely different ways.

Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Everyone experiences stress differently. Here is a list of the possible physical, emotional, and behavioral/social signs and symptoms one might experience when stressed.

(Mark the ones you experience when you are stressed. Feel free to write in additional ones that are not listed.)

Spectrum of Stress

There are different types of stress that people may experience, and each has a different range of severity. The stress spectrum includes acute stress, chronic stress, distress, eustress, and post-traumatic stress (PTS).

Acute stress occurs right after a stressful event and typically lasts no longer than one month. This type of stress results from things like performances, interviews, or breakups.

Chronic Stress can develop after a stressful event. This stress is chronic, ongoing, and persistent. This type of stress is caused by experiencing extremely stressful situations like losing a loved one, poverty, or racism. Chronic stress can lead to major health problems if it is not managed, so it is crucial for people experiencing this type of stress to seek professional treatment.

Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) is a common response to a traumatic or distressing occurrence. Common events, like car accidents, can cause PTS. Uncommon events, such as experiencing a war, can also result in the development of post-traumatic stress. Common symptoms include shaky hands, a rapid heart

rate, sweating, nervousness, nightmares, and caution when participating in activities that remind you of the distressing event. PTS is not a mental health disorder; its effects usually diminish over time. If you feel like it interferes with how you function in your daily life, contact a mental health professional to get the support you need.

How to Manage Stress

There isn't a way to totally eliminate stress; however, it can be managed in a healthy manner. Here are some techniques to help you start managing your stress:

1. Begin by recognizing or pinpointing the specific stressors that you experience in your life.
2. Determine the underlying source of your distress. It can be helpful to keep a log of when you are feeling anxious and categorize the reasons behind it. Over time, you will be able to recognize a list of common stressors that you experience in your life.
3. Once you have recognized specific stressors and determined their sources, it is time to alter your thoughts about them. Try to categorize them into things you can and cannot change.

Changeable Stressors

For stressors that you are able to control or change, attempt to make modifications in your life to reduce or completely eliminate them. For example, if the behavior of your friend is causing you stress, set up boundaries to limit the amount of time you will spend with that friend. It may be necessary to remove that person from your daily life.

Unchangeable Stressors

Some stressors cannot be avoided: for example, the financial state of the world, a sudden illness, or a natural disaster. These situations are not things you can directly change. To address this type of stress, you could accept it for what it is and move on, or you could adapt to the situation. An example of adapting to these specific stressors would be to help others financially or by volunteering in the community after a natural disaster like a tornado or wildfire.

4. Determine whether the stressor can be changed or adapted. Ask yourself:
“What are things I can change or control that will reduce my stress?”
“What are the things I cannot control, and how might I adapt to make the situation more manageable and less stressful?”

5. Find a stress management tool or technique that will work for you.

Stress Management Tools and Techniques

Not everyone experiences stress in the same way, so the ways to manage it will be different, too. The best tool and technique will be the one you use and put into practice.

Exercise and a healthy diet

Any type of exercise such as walking, yoga, weights, jogging, or tai chi can help refocus your attention onto something other than your stress and keep you in better physical health to manage stressful times. Exercise causes your body to release endorphins, which are chemicals in your brain that relieve pain and stress. Exercise can also lower the levels of stress hormones in your body, including cortisol and adrenaline.

A balanced diet provides the necessary energy needed for proper daily functioning. Reducing caffeine, sugary foods and drinks, and limiting your alcohol intake can improve your response to stress. Incorporating healthy fats, vitamins, and protein into your diet can increase blood flow to your brain and improve concentration, which can help during stressful times. The burgeoning field of nutritional psychiatry is beginning to discover the connection between mood and food. Your brain functions best when it gets only premium fuel, just like an expensive car. Try eating a clean diet for 2 to 3 weeks and see how you feel. A clean diet means cutting out processed foods and sugar and adding whole foods, including vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, legumes, whole grains, and lean protein. The Mediterranean eating style has been shown to improve mental health, and sample recipes may be found at [medinsteadofmeds.com/category/recipes/](https://www.medinsteadofmeds.com/category/recipes/).



Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a type of meditation where you focus intensely on how you are feeling and the things you can pick up with your senses. Mindfulness can be done anywhere and anytime, which makes it a convenient and useful stress management technique for anyone. Practicing mindfulness allows you to focus on your emotions and understand them better. It also helps with coping skills, breathing, improved concentration, increased energy, and improved work/school performance.

Journaling

Journaling is one of the best stress management tools. Journaling can range from writing in a diary every day to writing a thought down on a sticky note sporadically. Writing down one's thoughts and feelings allows for reflection.

Deep breathing

The purpose of deep breathing is to calm your body and mind. Deep breathing sends a message to your brain that you are calm, and then your brain sends that message to the rest of the body, which in turn helps reduce your heart rate and allows your body to get out of the fight or flight response. There are many deep breathing exercises, including belly, counted, and guided breathing.

Meditation

Meditation is an ancient method of reducing stress and anxiety. Meditation connects the mind and body, which can produce a deep state of relaxation and a tranquil, calm mind. There are many meditation and relaxation techniques with meditation components, including guided meditation, mantra meditation, and yoga.

Guided (imagery) meditation allows one to form mental images of places or situations one finds relaxing. In this process, the individual should use as many senses as possible.

Mantra meditation is silent and involves repeating a calming word or phrase to prevent distracting thoughts.

Yoga is a common technique using a series of postures and breathing exercises to help one focus on the moment.

It is important not to judge your meditation skills because there is no right or wrong way to meditate.

Practice the art of gratitude

While practicing gratitude feels good, it also impacts your mental, emotional, and physical health. "Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good

experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships. Gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness," according to an article published by Harvard Medical School (www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier).

Professional help

If your distress becomes long-lasting, starts to affect your daily life and relationships, or if you are experiencing PTS that could result in PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), which is a treatable disorder, you may need to seek professional help. Professional help is provided by a medical or mental health provider and can include therapy, counseling, and medication.

If you are uncertain where to begin, a good place to start is with an appointment with your primary care physician or a call to your local Community Mental Health Center. A list of the Community Mental Health Centers for the state of Kansas can be found on the Association of Community Mental Health Centers website at acmhck.org/about-us/cmhc-directory or by calling 785-234-4773.

If stress has become too much for you, a loved one, or a friend, please seek immediate help by calling, texting, or chatting with the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988.

Self-care

Self-care is the ongoing act of caring for your mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health with the resources that are available to you. Below are some ways in which you can engage in each category of self-care.

Mental

One portion of self-care is taking care of your mind. This includes taking the initiative in managing any mental health issues you may have, such as anxiety or depression. You can do this by practicing mindfulness, attending therapy, or taking medication.

Physical

Physical self-care involves doing what you can to keep your body safe and healthy. You can take care of your body by eating a nutritious diet, exercising regularly, and avoiding unhealthy habits like smoking or excessive alcohol consumption.

Social

Making time to meet your social needs is an example of self-care. Spending time with loved ones, participating in community service, and volunteering are all ways to engage in social self-care.

Spiritual

This type of self-care can include many activities, such as attending church, visiting a temple, mosque, or synagogue, or traveling to sacred or ancient places. Engaging in self-reflection activities is another way to engage in spiritual self-care.

Resiliency

Resiliency is defined as the ability to adapt to adversity, which can include stress or other challenging experiences. Being resilient is a mindset that can be developed through continuous hard work and support.

How can it help you?

While it is beneficial to have knowledge and information on how to deal with stress, it is also beneficial to know how to reduce stress and make connections in order to build your resiliency. You can benefit yourselves, your families, your friends, and your communities by reducing stress and fostering resiliency.

Ways to Build Resiliency

Building resiliency is like growing your muscles: it takes time, dedication, and intention. It is important to understand that building resiliency does not ensure that you will not face challenging situations or experience stress. Instead, you will be equipped to deal with such experiences. Below are some strategies for increasing your resiliency to help you get through difficult circumstances.

Create connections

Connecting with others who are understanding and caring can help you through challenging situations and bring comfort. It helps to build resiliency when your feelings are heard and supported by those around you.

Practice wellness

There are numerous methods to incorporate wellness into your daily life. Engaging in mental, physical, and social self-care are some strategies to do this. Practicing mindfulness is also an important aspect of developing resiliency. Yoga and journaling are two ways to practice mindfulness, but be sure to reflect on the positive aspects of your life while performing these activities. These kinds of activities can help renew hope and prepare you to deal with situations that require resiliency.

Maintain healthy thoughts

Your thoughts influence how you feel and how resilient you are in the midst of difficult circumstances. Maintaining a positive outlook on life, knowing that change is inevitable and okay, keeping hope, and learning from your mistakes are all things you can do to keep your thinking in line and develop resiliency.

Seek help

Using the strategies listed above can help you build your resiliency, but you may occasionally encounter a point where it is difficult to make progress. If you are unable to function and cope as well as you would like during stressful times in your life, mental health professionals can help you. Remember, you cannot control everything that happens in your life, but you can do better by concentrating on what you can control with the help of mental health professionals and your loved ones.



Resources

Stress and the Family System, Fact Sheet ksre-learn.com/MF3486

Everyday Mindfulness, Fact Sheet ksre-learn.com/MF3424

Giving Thanks can Make You Happier, www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier

Eustress and Distress: Neither Good nor Bad, but Rather the Same? onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/bies.201900238

Meditation: A simple, fast way to reduce stress www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858

What is Self Care? www.selfcarefederation.org/what-is-self-care

Resilience www.apa.org/topics/resilience

Kansas Mental Health Center Directory acmhck.org/about-us/cmhc-directory

MED instead of Meds: Recipes medinsteadofmeds.com/category/recipes/

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline 988lifeline.org

What Are the Differences Between PTS and PTSD? www.brainline.org/article/what-are-differences-between-pts-and-ptsd

Selye H. *The Stress of Life*. New York: McGraw-Hill; 1956

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