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Stress: How to cope better with life's challenges

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Abstract

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But when you're constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price. You can protect yourself by recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects. To manage stress, The first step is to learn to recognize and The next step is to choose a way to deal with our stress.

Keywords: Stress, Life's challenges

Introduction

What can I do to manage my stress?

The first step is to learn to recognize when we're feeling stressed. Early warning signs of stress include tension in our shoulders and neck, or clenching our hands into fists. The next step is to choose a way to deal with our stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to stress—but often this is not possible. A second way is to change how we react to stress. This is often the more practical way.

What is stress?

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When we sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the “fight-or-flight-or-freeze” reaction, or the *stress response*.

The stress response is the body's way of protecting us. When working properly, it helps us stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save our life—giving us extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring us to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident.

The stress response also helps us rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps us on our toes during a presentation at work, sharpens our concentration when we are attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives us to study for an exam when we'd rather be watching TV.

But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to our health, our mood, our productivity, our relationships, and our quality of life.

The Body's Stress Response

When we perceive a threat, our nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones arouse the body for emergency action.

Our heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and our senses become sharper. These physical changes increase our strength and stamina, speed our reaction time, and enhance our focus—preparing us to either fight or flee from the danger at hand.

What causes stress?

Feelings of stress are caused by the body's instinct to defend itself. This instinct is good in emergencies, such as getting out of the way of a speeding car. But stress can cause unhealthy physical symptoms if it goes on for too long, such as in response to life's daily challenges and changes.

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When this happens, it's as though our body gets ready to jump out of the way of the car, but we are sitting still. Our body is working overtime, with no place to put all the extra energy. This can make us feel anxious, afraid, worried and uptight.

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on us forces us to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be self-generated, for example, when we worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

What causes stress depends, at least in part, on our perception of it. Something that's stressful to us may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. For example, our morning commute may make us anxious and tense because we worry that traffic will make us late. Others, however, may find the trip relaxing because they allow more than enough time and enjoy listening to music while they drive.

Common external causes of stress

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Major life changes • Work or school • Relationship difficulties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial problems • Being too busy • Children and family
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Common internal causes of stress

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic worry • Pessimism • Negative self-talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unrealistic expectations/Perfectionism • Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility • All-or-nothing attitude
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Effects of chronic stress

The body doesn't distinguish between physical and psychological threats. When we're stressed over a busy schedule, an argument with a friend, a traffic jam, or a mountain of bills, our body reacts just as strongly as if we were facing a life-or-death situation. If we have a lot of responsibilities and worries, our emergency stress response may be "on" most of the time. The more our body's stress system is activated, the harder it is to shut off.

Long-term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, contribute to infertility, and speed up the aging process. Long-term stress can even rewire the brain, leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Many health problems are caused or exacerbated by stress, including

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain of any kind • Heart disease • Digestive problems • Sleep problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression • Weight problems • Autoimmune diseases • Skin conditions, such as eczema
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What changes may be stressful?

Any sort of change can make us feel stressed, even good change. It's not just the change or event itself, but also how

we react to it that matters. What's stressful is different for each person. For example, one person may feel stressed by retiring from work, while someone else may not.

Other things that may be stressful include being laid off from our job, our child leaving or returning home, the death of our spouse, divorce or marriage, an illness, an injury, a job promotion, money problems, moving, or having a baby.

Can stress hurt my health?

Stress can cause health problems or make health problems worse. Talk to your family doctor if you think some of our symptoms are caused by stress. It's important to make sure that our symptoms aren't caused by other health problems.

Possible signs of stress

- Anxiety
- Back pain
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Trouble sleeping or insomnia
- Problems with relationships
- Shortness of breath
- Stiff neck or jaw
- Upset stomach
- Weight gain or loss

Cognitive Symptoms

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Seeing only the negative
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

Emotional Symptoms

- Moodiness
- Irritability or short temper
- Agitation, inability to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Depression or general unhappiness

Physical Symptoms

- Aches and pains
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Nausea, dizziness
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Loss of sex drive
- Frequent colds

Behavioral Symptoms

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Isolating yourself from others
- Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
- Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

What can I do to manage my stress?

The first step is to learn to recognize when we're feeling stressed. Early warning signs of stress include tension in our shoulders and neck, or clenching our hands into fists.

The next step is to choose a way to deal with our stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to stress--but often this is not possible. A second way is to change how we react to stress. This is often the more practical way.

Tips for dealing with stress

- Don't worry about things we can't control, such as the weather.
- Solve the little problems. This can help us gain a feeling of control.
- Prepare to the best of our ability for events we know may be stressful, such as a job interview.
- Try to look at change as a positive challenge, not as a threat.
- Work to resolve conflicts with other people.
- Talk with a trusted friend, family member or counselor.
- Set realistic goals at home and at work. Avoid overscheduling.
- Exercise on a regular basis.
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals and get enough sleep.
- Meditate.
- Participate in something we don't find stressful, such as sports, social events or hobbies.

Remember the four As: avoid, alter, adapt, or accept.

- Avoid unnecessary stress.
- Alter the situation.
- Adapt to the stressor.
- Accept the things you can't change.

We can also better cope with the symptoms of stress by strengthening your physical health.

- **Set aside relaxation time:** Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the stress response.
- **Exercise regularly:** Physical activity plays a key role in reducing and preventing the effects of stress. Nothing beats aerobic exercise for releasing pent-up stress and tension.
- **Eat a healthy diet:** Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress. Start your day with a healthy breakfast, reduce your caffeine and sugar intake, and cut back on alcohol and nicotine.
- **Get plenty of sleep:** Feeling tired can increase stress by causing you to think irrationally. Keep your cool by getting a good night's sleep.

Why is exercise useful?

Exercise is a good way to deal with stress because it's a healthy way to relieve your pent-up energy and tension. Exercise is known to release feel-good brain chemicals. It also helps you get in better shape, which makes you feel better overall.

What is meditation?

Meditation is a form of guided thought. It can take many forms. You can do it with exercise that uses the same motions over and over, like walking or swimming. You can

meditate by practicing relaxation training, by stretching or by breathing deeply.

Relaxation training is simple. Start with one muscle. Hold it tight for a few seconds then relax the muscle. Do this with each of your muscles, beginning with the toes and feet and working your way up through the rest of your body, one muscle group at a time.

Stretching can also help relieve tension. Roll your head in a gentle circle. Reach toward the ceiling and bend side to side slowly. Roll your shoulders.

Deep, relaxed breathing by itself may help relieve stress (see the box to the right). This helps you get plenty of oxygen and activates the relaxation response, the body's antidote to stress.

If you want more help treating stress symptoms, ask your family doctor for advice.

Steps to deep breathing

- Lie down on a flat surface.
- Place a hand on your stomach, just above your navel. Place the other hand on your chest.
- Breathe in slowly and try to make your stomach rise a little.
- Hold your breath for a second.
- Breathe out slowly and let your stomach go back down.

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