



Stress: is it sabotaging your life? What stress is, and how to manage it.

Life is normally full of ups and down, and it is more than likely that we have all felt stressed during some point in our life. During periods of stress we may feel overwhelmed or start to feel burned out. We may experience headaches or migraines, have stomach problems or feel tired before the week has barely begun. Feeling stressed can be unsettling, difficult and sometimes even debilitating.

The good news is, that how stressed we get or how often this happens, are two things that we can have an enormous influence over. Without smart habits for dealing with stressful situations, life can be a whole lot more difficult than it needs to be. Effective stress maintenance involves managing what we eat, how we think, the manner we treat our body, what actions we take on a regular basis and how we deal with social interactions. These key factors of stress management are the foundational blocks that help build harmony with ourselves, others and our immediate environment. If we cultivate these factors and apply them to our daily routine, we will find bliss where others find havoc and mayhem.



What is stress?

Stress is our body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When we feel threatened our nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which arouse the body for emergency action. This triggers the heart to pound faster, the breath to quicken, the muscles to tighten, blood pressure to rise, and our senses to become sharper. These physical changes increase our strength and stamina, speeding up our reaction time, and enhancing our focus. This is known as the “fight, flight, freeze, flop or friend response” (Lodrick, 2007) and is our body's way of protecting it. The nervous system rouses for emergency action—preparing us to either fight, flee, freeze, flop or befriend the danger at hand.

When stress is within our comfort zone, it can help us to stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save our life - giving us extra strength to defend ourselves or to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. Stress can also help us to meet challenges and keep us on our toes to achieve the best we can. But beyond our comfort zone, stress stops being helpful and can start causing major damage to our mind and body.



The effects of Chronic Stress

The body's nervous system sometimes finds it difficult to distinguish between daily stressors and life-threatening events. For example, if we are stressed over an argument with a friend, a traffic jam on a commute, or a mountain of bills, our bodies can still react as if we are facing a life-or-death situation.

When we repeatedly experience the fight, flight, freeze, flop or friend response in our daily lives, it can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in our bodies. It can shut down our immune system, upset our digestive and reproductive systems, raise blood pressure, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, speed up the aging process and leave us vulnerable to many mental and physical health problems.

Health Problems caused or exacerbated by stress include:

- Depression and anxiety
- Weight problems
- Auto immune diseases
- Skin conditions, such as eczema



- Reproductive issues
- Pain of any kind
- Heart disease
- Digestive problems
- Sleep problems
- Cognitive and memory problems

Signs and symptoms of chronic stress or stress overload

The following table lists some of the common warning signs and symptoms of chronic stress. The more signs and symptoms you notice in yourself, the closer you may be to stress overload.

Stress Warning Signs and Symptoms	
Cognitive Symptoms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Memory problems ■ Inability to concentrate ■ Poor judgment ■ Seeing only the negative ■ Anxious or racing thoughts ■ Constant worrying 	Emotional Symptoms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Moodiness ■ Irritability or short temper ■ Agitation, inability to relax ■ Feeling overwhelmed ■ Sense of loneliness and isolation ■ Depression or general unhappiness
Physical Symptoms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aches and pains ■ Diarrhea or constipation ■ Nausea, dizziness ■ Chest pain, rapid heartbeat ■ Loss of sex drive ■ Frequent colds 	Behavioral Symptoms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 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)



Causes of stress

We usually think of stressors (situations and pressures that cause stress) as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on us 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 internal or self-generated, when we worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life. Below, I have listed some common external and internal causes of stress:

Common external causes of stress

- Major life changes
- Work or school
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial problems
- Being too busy
- Children and family



Common internal causes of stress

- Chronic worry
- Pessimism
- Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations/Perfectionism
- All-or-nothing attitude

Other factors that influence our stress tolerance

Our sense of control – It is easier to manage stress if we have confidence in our ability to influence events and persevere through challenges. Therefore, hardship or persistent money worries can be major stressors for so many of us. If we feel like things are out of our control, we are more likely to have less tolerance for stress.

Our attitude and outlook – Hopeful people are more often more resilient. These kinds of people tend to embrace challenges, have a stronger sense of humor, and accept change as an inevitable part of life.

Our knowledge and preparation – The more we know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope.



convenience food, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress. Whilst eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and healthy fats, especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help us better cope with life's ups and downs.

Get your rest - Feeling tired and not getting enough sleep can increase stress. At the same time, chronic stress can disrupt sleep. There are many ways in which to improve sleep. You can download my Improving sleep guide in the resource section for some further ideas to improve sleep.

Practice mindfulness – Mindfulness practice is a way of being present in the here and now and has been described by Jon Kabat-Zinn as, “paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally”. Research shows there are huge psychological and physical health benefits such as a reduction in stress and anxiety, when mindfulness is practiced over an eight-week period. You can read more about mindfulness in my blog [Anyone for Mindfulness?](#)

Conclusion

Research suggests that stress (especially long-term stress) can cause long term health issues (Cohen, S., et al. 2012). Cohen, a professor of psychology at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh says:

