

Trusted guide to mental, emotional & social health

## Stress Symptoms, Signs, and Causes

### Understanding Stress, its Harmful Effects, and the Best Ways to Cope

Modern life is full of frustrations, deadlines, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad, though. Stress within your comfort zone can help you perform under pressure, motivate you to do your best, even keep you safe when danger looms. But when stress becomes overwhelming, it can damage your health, mood, relationships, and quality of life.

You can protect yourself by understanding how the body's stress response works, recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress overload, and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

#### What is stress?

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Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol, which rouse the body for emergency action. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus.

This is known as the "fight or flight" stress response and is your body's way of protecting you. When working properly, stress helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident.

Stress can also help you rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV.

But beyond your comfort zone, stress stops being helpful and can start causing major damage to your mind and body.

#### How do you respond to stress?

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The latest research into the brain shows that we, as mammals, have three ways of regulating our nervous systems and responding to stress:

- **Social engagement** is our most evolved strategy for keeping ourselves feeling calm and safe. Since the vagus nerve connects the brain to sensory receptors in the ear, eye, face and heart, socially interacting with another person—making eye contact, listening in an

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attentive way, feeling understood—can calm you down and put the brakes on defensive responses like “fight-or-flight.” When using social engagement, you can think and feel clearly, and body functions such as blood pressure, heartbeat, digestion, and the immune system continue to work uninterrupted.

- **Mobilization**, otherwise known as the fight-or-flight response. When social engagement isn’t an appropriate response and we need (or *think* we need) to either defend ourselves or run away from danger, the body prepares for mobilization. It releases chemicals to provide the energy you need to protect yourself. At the same time, body functions not needed for fight or flight—such as the digestive and immune systems—stop working. Once the danger has passed, your nervous system calms the body, slowing heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and winding back down to its normal balance.
- **Immobilization**. This is the least evolved response to stress and used by the body only when social engagement and mobilization have failed. You may find yourself [traumatized](#) or “stuck” in an angry, panic-stricken or otherwise dysfunctional state, unable to move on. In extreme, life-threatening situations, you may even lose consciousness, enabling you to survive high levels of physical pain. However, until you’re able to arouse your body to a mobilization response, your nervous system may be unable to return to its pre-stress state of balance.

While it’s not always possible to respond to stress using social engagement, many of us have become conditioned to responding to every minor stressor by immediately resorting to fight or flight. Since this response interrupts other body functions and clouds judgment and feeling, over time it can cause stress overload and have a detrimental effect on both your physical and mental health.

### Effects of stress overload

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The body’s autonomic nervous system often does a poor job of distinguishing between daily stressors and life-threatening events. If you’re stressed over an argument with a friend, a traffic jam on your commute to work, or a mountain of bills, for example, your body can still react as if you’re facing a life-or-death situation.

When you repeatedly experience the fight or flight stress response in your daily life, it can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, speed up the aging process and leave you vulnerable to a host of mental and emotional problems.

### Many health problems are caused or exacerbated by stress, including:

- Pain of any kind
- Depression

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- Heart disease
- Digestive problems
- Sleep problems
- Weight problems
- Auto immune diseases
- Skin conditions, such as eczema

### Signs and symptoms of stress overload

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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.

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

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- 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)

Keep in mind that the signs and symptoms of stress overload can also be caused by other psychological or medical problems. If you're experiencing any of the warning signs of stress, it's important to see a doctor to help determine if your symptoms are stress-related.

## The causes of stress

### Isolation and stress

Since social engagement appears to be our best defense against stress, isolation or a lack of positive, consistent human interaction can be both a stressor in itself and exacerbate other causes of stress.

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 you or forces you 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 you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

### Common external causes of stress

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

### Common internal causes of stress

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

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

### Everyone experiences stress differently

**Karen** is terrified of getting up in front of people to perform or speak, while her best friend, **Nin**, lives for the spotlight.

**Phil** thrives under pressure and performs best when he has a tight deadline, while his co-worker, **Matt**, shuts down when work demands escalate.

**Anita** enjoys helping her elderly parents. Her sister, **Constance**, helps out as well but finds the demands of caretaking very stressful.

**Richard** doesn't hesitate to send food back or complain about bad service when eating out,

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### Everyone experiences stress differently

while his wife, **Miranda**, finds it much too stressful to complain.

### What determines your ability to manage stress?

We're all different. Some people seem to be able to roll with life's punches, while others tend to crumble in the face of far smaller obstacles or frustrations. Some people even seem to thrive on the excitement and challenge of a high-stress lifestyle.

Your ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including the quality of your relationships and support network, your life experiences, your emotional intelligence, and genetics.

### Factors that influence your stress tolerance

- **Your support network** – Social engagement is the body's most evolved strategy for responding to stress so it's no surprise that people with a strong network of supportive friends and family members are better able to cope with life's stressors. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the less opportunity you have to utilize social engagement and the greater your vulnerability to stress.
- **Your exercise levels.** Your physical and mental health are intrinsically linked, so the better you take care of your body, the greater resilience you'll have against the symptoms of stress. [Exercising regularly](#) (for 30 minutes or more on most days) can lift your mood and help relieve stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration. It can also serve as a distraction to your worries, allowing you to find some quiet time and break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress and anxiety.
- **Your diet.** The food you eat can also have a profound effect on your mood and how well you cope with life's stressors. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience food, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress while eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and [healthy fats](#), especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with life's ups and downs.
- **Your sense of control** – It may be easier to take stress in your stride if you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges. If you feel like things are out of your control, you're likely to have less tolerance for stress.
- **Your attitude and outlook** – Optimistic people are often more stress-hardy. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, and accept that change is a part of life.

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- **Your ability to deal with your emotions** – You're extremely vulnerable to stress if you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or overwhelmed by a situation. The ability to bring your [emotions into balance](#) helps you bounce back from adversity and is a skill that can be learned at any age.
- **Your knowledge and preparation** – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

### Dealing with stress and its symptoms

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While unchecked stress is undeniably damaging, you have more control than you might think. Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that only compound the problem. They drink too much to unwind at the end of a stressful day, fill up on comfort food, zone out in front of the TV or computer for hours, use pills to relax, or lash out at other people. However, there are many healthier ways to cope with stress and its symptoms.

#### Learn how to manage stress

You may feel like the stress in your life is out of your control, but you can always control the way you respond. [Stress management](#) can teach you healthier ways to cope with stress, help you reduce its harmful effects, and prevent stress from spiraling out of control again in the future.

- **Engage socially.** The simple act of talking face to face with another human being can release hormones that reduce stress even if you're still unable to alter the stressful situation. Opening up to someone is not a sign of weakness and it won't make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your bond.
- **Get moving.** Physical activity plays a key role in managing stress. Activities that require moving both your arms and your legs are particularly effective. Walking, running, swimming, dancing, and aerobic classes are good choices, especially if you exercise mindfully (focusing your attention on the physical sensations you experience as you move). Focused movement helps to get your nervous system back into balance. If you've been traumatized or experienced the immobilization stress response, getting active can help you to become "unstuck."

#### Lifestyle changes to deal with the symptoms of stress

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

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- **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 fight or flight stress response.
- **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, add plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, 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 in stressful situations by [getting a good night's sleep](#).