

Living Well Despite Stress

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What is Stress?

Stress is a normal, physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upsets your balance in some way. Stress is your body's way of responding to any kind of demand. Stress can be caused by both good and bad experiences. When people feel stressed by something going on around them, their bodies react by releasing chemicals into the blood. These chemicals give people more energy and strength, which can be a good thing if their stress is caused by physical danger. However, if the stress is in response to something emotional and there is no outlet for this extra energy and strength can cause problems for the individual. People can experience short term and long term stress. Short-term stress refers to situations that happen every now and then whereas, long-term stress or chronic stress refers to a person constantly under stress all the time.

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 an illness. 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, or receiving a promotion. What causes 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.

Stressors can be either external or internal.

Some examples of external stressors are:

- ~Major life change
- ~Work
- ~Family and children
- ~ Financial problems
- ~ Being too busy
- ~ Relationship difficulties.

Examples of internal stressors are:

- ~ Inability to accept uncertainty
- ~ Pessimism
- ~ Negative self-talk
- ~ Unrealistic expectations
- ~ Perfectionism
- ~ Lack of assertiveness

Other common causes of stress are:

- ~ Bereavement
- ~ Driving in bad traffic
- ~ Losing your job
- ~ Illness
- ~ Fear of crime
- ~ Overcrowding

Symptoms of Stress:

Physical and Mental Symptoms of Short-Term Stress:

Often occurring in quick "bursts" in reaction to something in your environment. Short-term stress can affect your body in many ways. Some examples include:

- ~ Makes your heartbeat and breath faster.
- ~ Makes you sweat more.
- ~ Leaves you with cold hands, feet, or skin.
- ~ Makes you feel sick to your stomach or give you butterflies.
- ~ Tightening of your muscles or make you feel tense.

- ~ Leaves your mouth dry.
- ~ Makes you have to go to the bathroom frequently.
- ~ Increases muscle spasms, headaches, fatigue, ulcers, and shortness of breath.

While this burst of energy may help you in physical situations where your body needs to react quickly, it can have bad effects on your mind and performance if there is no outlet or reason for your stress. These effects may include:

- ~ Interfering with your judgement and causing you to make bad decisions.
- ~ Making you see difficult situations as threatening.
- ~ Reducing your enjoyment and makes you feel bad.
- ~ Making it difficult for you to concentrate or to deal with distraction.
- ~ Leaving you anxious, frustrated or mad.
- ~ Making you feel rejected, unable to laugh, afraid of free time, unable to work, and not willing to discuss your problems.

Physical and Mental Symptoms of Long-term Stress:

Long-term stress or stress that is occurring over long periods of time can have an even greater effect on your body and mind. Long-term stress can affect your body by:

- ~ Changing your appetite (make you eat either less or more).
- ~ Changing your sleep habits (cause you to sleep too much or not letting you sleep).
- ~ Encouraging “nervous” behavior such as twitching, fiddling, talking to much, nail biting, teeth grinding, pacing, and other repetitive habits.
- ~ Resulting in you catching colds or the flu more often and causing other illness such as asthma, headaches, stomach problems, skin problems, and other aches and pains.
- ~ Making you feel constantly tired and worn out.

Long-term stress can also have serious effects on your mental health and behavior. If you are under stress for long periods of time, you may find that you have difficulty thinking clearly, dealing with problems, or even handling day-to-day situations as simple as picking up clothing or arriving somewhere on time. Some mental signs of long-term stress include:

- ~ Worrying and feeling anxious (which can lead to anxiety disorder and panic attacks).
- ~ Feeling out of control, overwhelmed, confused, and/or unable to make decisions.
- ~ Experiencing mood changes such as depression, frustration, anger, helplessness, irritability, defensiveness, irrationality, overreaction, or impatience and restlessness.
- ~ Increasing dependence on food, cigarettes, or alcohol.
- ~ Neglecting important things in life such as work, school and even personal appearance.

What can you do to Reduce Stress:

There are many ways that people can reduce their stress level. One technique that is very common is using a breathing technique. By slowing down and concentrating on your breathing, you are able to get into a state of relaxation, breathing techniques also help raise body temperature. Exercise is also a great stress reducer.

Other ways to help reduce stress are using your five senses, sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. By using your five senses you can help relax your body and begin to de-stress yourself. Some examples for each sense are below but not limited to.

Sight:

Focus on nature, take a scenic walk, focus on the vibrant colors of plants/flowers around you. Watch the birds flying in the sky. You can light a candle and watch the flame flicker, or decorate a room with all your favorite/best things and spend time in there when feeling stressed.

Smell:

Burn incense, spray your favorite perfume, boil cinnamon, smell flowers, bake a cake or anything you choose.

Sound:

Listen to soft music or sing/hum your favorite song, pay attention to the sounds of nature (water, birds, rainfall, leaves rustling).

Taste:(this can be a difficult sensation for individuals to use initially. If one of your symptoms is over/under eating exclude this sense until eating has become less emotionally driven)

Have a soothing drink, have a peppermint, chew gum, treat yourself to foods that you wouldn't usually spend money on.

Touch:

Have a nice warm bubble bath, put on a warm sweater or a silky blouse, apply body lotion, wash your hair with nice smelling products or give someone a hug.

What Can We Learn From Stressful Experiences:

After the stressful event has passed and your emotional levels have subsided you are then in a position to objectively review the situation.

An objective assessment is desirable because the emotions aroused in stressful experiences often fog our judgement, causing us to be irrational. By initiating a hindsight review you are able to gain fresh insights.

1) *Define the event factually* ~ Write a brief, but factual summary of the experience. Try to be objective and itemize the facts as if you were preparing a statement for a meeting or court appearance.

2) *Review the event negatively* ~ Try to imagine various ways in which the event could have been more stressful than it actually was.

3) *Review the event positively* ~ Use your creative imagination to find ways in which you could have dealt with the situation in a less stressful manner.

4) *Review the event from the other person's perspective* ~ Try to imagine the perspective and need of the other person(s) in the situation. Do they have a point of view? What might it be?

5) *Determine future strategies* ~ This review of the stressful event invariably turns up some fresh perspectives. It will assist you to re-evaluate the situation objectively and creatively. Consequently you reach a position where you can determine steps to be taken in the future to deal less stressfully with a similar situation.

* Each member can share a tip that may have helped them during a stressful event

* Provided at the end of the kit is a quiz to determine your stress index, a stress fact sheet and a coping with stress sheet on more ways to manage stress.

Information gathered from:

<http://www.stresstips.com/learning-from-stressful-experiences/>,

<http://www.mtstcil.org/skills/stress-definition-1.html>,

<http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/healthy-ways-of-coping-with-your-emotions>,

Stress Quiz

1) Stress is an abnormal physical response to events that makes you feel threatened or upsets your balance in any way?

True or False

2) Stress can be caused by both good and bad experiences?

True or False

3) Stressors can be external or internal factors?

True or False

4) Situations that happen every now and then are referred to as long-term stress or chronic stress?

True or False

5) Long-term stress can have serious effects on your mental health and behavior?

True or False

6) Exercise is not a great stress reducer?

True or False

7) Using your five senses can help de-stress yourself?

True or False

Stress Quiz Answers

- 1) False ~ Stress is a normal physical response
- 2) True
- 3) True
- 4) False ~ Situations that happen every now and then is considered short-term stress
- 5) True
- 6) False ~ Exercise is a great way to reduce stress
- 7) True