



COPING WITH STRESS

Stress is an unavoidable condition of life. It is not necessarily harmful. A certain amount of stress can be motivational. We prepare for tests or performances because we are driven to do well. But all people respond differently to stress. The amount of stress that optimally motivates one person can overwhelm another.

Stress is a physiological response that beautifully demonstrates the mind/body connection. The psychological stress of wanting to do well in a presentation at work triggers the release of hormones that in turn affect the heart, lungs, circulation, metabolism, immune system and skin. Brain neurotransmitters are also released, which impacts one's emotional reactions and state of readiness to react. High levels of stress over a long period of time can overwhelm adaptive resources and compromise our health, both physical and mental. The release of stress hormones can disrupt normal levels of serotonin, interfering with feelings of well-being and risking the development of anxiety and/or depression.

Stress can occur in response to both internal and external factors. Internal factors can include: impossibly high self-expectations; poorly developed social skills; or pre-existing illness. External stress factors can include: intense professional or academic expectations or demands; various social pressures; the move to a new school or community; the illness or death of a family member; relationship turmoil or breakup; or financial worries.

Signs that stress has overwhelmed one's ability to cope ("stress overload") can include: becoming overly emotional; anxiety; withdrawal; sadness; anger; feelings of physical illness, including stomach upset and headaches; and the overuse of alcohol or drugs as a way of trying to cope with to deal with stress. Prolonged stress overload can also result in significant physical illnesses that affect our entire beings, such as high blood pressure, heart attack, or major depression.

Healthy habits can minimize the negative impact of stress. Eating well and getting sufficient sleep strengthen our resilience to stress. Regular physical exercise can discharge excess stress and increases the release of endorphins that contribute to feelings of well-being. Excessive caffeine intake may increase feelings of anxiety. It is also important to avoid alcohol or drug use in response to stress which will cause additional problems.

SKILLS FOR COPING WITH STRESS:

- Identify the sources of stress.
- Set reasonable goals—don't overwhelm yourself with unrealistic demands or expectations.
- Give yourself "permission" to choose to accept/reject the stress of non-essential activities.
- Set priorities to accomplish tasks, checking off tasks as completed.
- Reject excessive perfectionism. Set goals for competence instead of perfection.
- Practice deep breathing to relax. Take exercise breaks. These will help to clear your thinking.
- Limit work sessions to avoid non-productivity and exhaustion.
- Be aware of and eliminate negative self-talk. (Change, "I'll never get this done." to "I've made a great start. It's going to feel so good when this is done.")
- Spend time with positive, affirming people who will help you cope.
- Keep your perspective. Focus on positive outcomes.
- Consider some short-term, solution-focused counseling sessions if your best efforts don't keep stress reactions to manageable levels.

