

Stress Management: Strategies for Individuals¹

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What is Stress?

Stress! What does it mean to you? Traffic jams, deadlines, eating on the run, problems at home, bills to pay, job changes, endless housework, chores and errands—demands, demands, demands.

Stress is the *tension* you feel when there are more demands than you can handle. These pressures may be from your work, relationships, or other responsibilities. Stress is like an out-of-balance scale—the pressures on one side of the scale outweigh the coping resources on the other.

Types of Stress

It seems surprising but some stress has good outcomes. Positive or good stress (also called **eustress**) happens in pleasant or rewarding situations. This healthy stress can energize an athlete to win a competition. It can animate an actor to give a stirring performance. Stress may fire up a sales person for a speech that closes an important business deal.

Another kind of stress is negative stress or **distress**. When people talk about stress, they are usually speaking of distress. Stress may be acute or chronic. **Acute stress** is intense stress but disappears after the event is over. For example, imagine you are pulled over by the police for a traffic violation. Your heart races, you sweat, your breathing gets faster.

Chronic stress is less intense than this, but lasts for a longer period of time. For instance, imagine the pressure from a large credit card debt or the conflict from a poor relationship with a work supervisor. You may notice headaches, sleepless nights, and flare-ups of anger. These physical changes take a toll on your health and well-being.

Either too much or too little stress can be harmful. Too much causes health and relationship problems. Too little causes boredom, lack of performance, and carelessness. The key is finding the stress level that is "optimal" for you.

What Causes Stress?

Any demand you see as a problem or issue can cause you stress. These demands are called **stressors**. The possible list of stressors is endless. Most stressors fall into one of these categories:

- Social or Family: major life events such as a divorce or retirement
- Occupational: job-related problems like fear of losing a job or deadlines
- Educational: pressures from attending school including homework and exams
- Health: illness, health problems, or pain
- Financial: money problems like chronic debt or inability to meet expenses
- Environmental: External conditions such as hurricanes or poor air quality

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What Does Stress Do to the Body?

Stress causes your body to make physical and chemical changes. When you are under stress, your body's first reactions are a rise in blood pressure, quicker breathing, increased perspiration, quicker heartbeat, and dilated (enlarged) pupils. All your senses go on high alert.

Physiological changes are part of the **fight-or-flight response**. This reaction is instinctive—it protects us from threats to our survival.

Scientists believe that the fight-or-flight response is an ancient survival mechanism. It is probably left over from times when animals, including humans, were often threatened by physical dangers. In the fight reaction, the body gets ready to attack an intruder. The flight response probably is a reaction to fear, and the body gets ready to run away or hide.

In today's world we are more likely to experience threats to our emotional and mental well being than our physical safety. Still, the body reacts in the same way—it speeds up to produce energy and get ready to move. The body stays keyed up until the danger passes. Then it returns to a state of calmness. However, if high levels of stress continue, the body stays activated. This can be a problem. When the body no longer has the energy to adapt, it becomes exhausted. This damages the body's organs and can even cause death.

Stress has been associated with many **health problems**. Some of these are high blood pressure, heart trouble, asthma, fatigue, and muscle pain. If stress is not relieved, it can cause emotional problems, such as anxiety or depression. Stress can also hurt your relationships with friends, family, and coworkers.

New research lead by psychologist Shelley Taylor at UCLA shows that females of many species may have a different way of coping with stress. Females seem to react with the **tend-and-befriend** response. In stressful situations, women tend the young and seek out support from others to deal with stress.

The hormone oxytocin is secreted by women and men as a response to stress. When oxytocin is combined with other female hormones, like estrogen, it works *against* stress. Oxytocin has a calming effect, reduces fear, and decreases the physiological signs of stress in the fight-or-flight reaction. The tend-and-befriend response may have developed because women are the ones who usually are responsible for nurturing and caring for their offspring. Women are also more likely than men to look for support from others in all types of stressful situations, from work hassles to relationship problems. This does not mean that women are immune to stress, or that they never experience the fight-or-flight response. It does mean that women may respond to stress by reaching out to others.

Signs of Stress

Major problems can be avoided if symptoms are identified early. You probably already know some of them—headaches, tense muscles, knotted stomach, sweaty palms. Symptoms may also be psychological and interpersonal, like feeling grouchy or moody, having trouble concentrating or remembering things, or arguing with a spouse or child.

Some of the signs of serious problems are:

- persistent, intense depression
- chronic sleeping problems (too much or too little)
- over-eating or persistent weight problems
- sexual problems
- frequent illness
- mental confusion
- outbursts of violence
- persistent family conflict
- excessive drinking or drug use

What Can You Do about Stress?

You may have seen stress rating scales that ask you how many stressors you have had in the past year. They give you a stress score by the type and number of stressful events you experienced. These scales can help you to identify **major life events** that could affect your health (e.g., the death of a spouse or family member, divorce or separation, marriage or getting back together after being separated, being fired, or retirement.)

Many other events can also be stressful and happen to most people sometime in their lives—pregnancy, addition of a family member, a change in work, or beginning or ending school. If you can spread out these events over time you may be able to manage stress better.

Some stressors in life are not major changes, but they do occur from time to time. These are **hassles**, like getting stuck in a traffic jam on the way to work, or having a baby sitter cancel at the last minute.

Many major life events and hassles are out of your control. Sometimes the only thing you *do* control is how you react to these stressors.

How a person deals with stress is very important. How you react to stress is *more* important than the number or type of demands you face. **Coping** is what you do to deal with stress.

Even if major life events or hassles are out of your control, you *can* take charge of how you react. It is most important that you:

- **Stay strong and healthy.** A healthy lifestyle helps you prevent stress.
- **Use stress management practices.** Certain tools can help you cope with stress when it does happen.

These guidelines are covered in more detail in the other Stress Management publications in this series.

Conclusion

In this publication we reviewed basic information about stress—what it, what causes it, and what it does to your body. Understanding stress is the first step in preventing and managing it so it does not take a toll on your physical and emotional health and relationships. Other publications in this series cover ways to prevent and manage stress in more detail. For more information see your county Extension Agent and related publications in the Stress Management series: FCS2071A, FCS2077B, FCS2078, FCS2080, FCS2081A, and FCS2081B

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