

Stress

Stress generally refers to two different things: situations that trigger physical and emotional reactions (stressors) and the reactions themselves (stress response). A stressor could be taking a final exam, going on a date, having a confrontation with your roommate, and/or interviewing for a job. The stress response for any of these stressors could be that you feel nervous, anxious, tense, sweat profusely, or experience other physical reactions.

GENERAL ADAPTATION SYNDROME (GAS)

The body responds to stress by what is called the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). The GAS occurs in three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion.

Alarm: The fight or flight response is the most common type of alarm stage. This is when the sympathetic nervous system releases the chemicals epinephrine and norepinephrine, which prepare the body for action by increasing heart rate, breathing, alertness, and muscle response, and the hormone cortisol, which speeds up the body's metabolism. These actions get the body ready to confront a threat such as an alarming sound (fight) or escape from it (flight).

Resistance: The body usually adapts to a prolonged stressor, such as an upcoming final, by entering the stage of resistance. During resistance, the body's systems return to normal, but remain alert.

Exhaustion: Following resistance, the body enters exhaustion, at which point it can no longer resist the stressor. Repeated exposure to this response can cause mental and physical damage.

CAUSES

Many things can produce stress but what really matters is the individual's reactions to stressors. What for one person might seem to be a catastrophic event may simply be a minor setback for another. Stress causing agents include:

Physical Fears

- Dangerous machinery
- Exposure to toxic chemicals
- Dangerous, congested traffic

Psychological Fears

- Failure
- Phobias
- Inability to manage debts/personal finance
- Pressure from parents to succeed

Uncertainty - Life is filled with uncertainty. It is discomfoting not to know what is going to happen. Uncertainty may cause feelings of being out of control, which can cause stress.

- Going away to college
- Losing your job/professional turmoil
- Starting a new relationship

Attitudes - A positive or negative attitude influences a person's reaction to stressful situations.

- For example, if you feel your major is worthwhile, you may see some of the problems you encounter as challenges. Seen as pluses, the problems or potential problems become motivators.
- If you resent your situation or feel "stuck" in your coursework, similar experiences create stress, a stress that frustrates instead of motivating you.

Perceptions - Past experiences and the resources you feel you have available to meet life's demands will affect the degrees of stress you may experience.

- The degree of stress experienced will be affected by your perception of your ability to meet the particular demands. How you perceive the situation determines if it is or is not stressful.
- Perception can be broken down in the following ways: self image (i.e., confidence, self-esteem) and resources. Resources can be grouped into three categories - *personal resources* (i.e., past experience in handling stress, health), *material resources* (i.e., finances, equipment, storage), and *people resources* (i.e., other people who can assist you, such as friends, classmates, coworkers, family members, professionals)

Change - All change produces stress. Change demands your adjustment to the particular situation, whether you desire the change or not. The following are examples of stress-causing changes:

- *Personal:* Illness or injury, personal achievement or disappointment
- *Social:* Illness or death of close friend, beginning or ending of formal education, change in social activities, involvement in community service
- *Financial:* Major change in financial state, major purchase (car, home), additional family expenses (education, insurance, illness)

CONCERNS

Prolonged or excessive exposure to stress can threaten your health and well-being. Occasional stress is a natural part of life; however, when it gets out of control, it can become harmful. Often a build-up of stress involves a problem that stays with you for months, or even years. Scholastic pressure is a prime example. Other times it might be something beyond your control, like a stretch of bad weather. Still, another time it could be a problem that just seems too big to handle. In all of these cases, you cannot deal with the cause of the stress, at least not quickly enough. As a result, the stress persists.

Stress can take its toll on:

Your health: When you 'gear up' under stress, your body begins to do more of some things and less of others. For example, blood circulation increases, but digestion slows down or even stops. Once the stress ends, your body goes to work to restore the balance. If stress returns too soon, your body will not have time to get back on an even keel. Eventually, this can lead to major health problems. Some, like heart disease and ulcers, can be serious. Others (sleeplessness, headaches, poor digestion) are less acute, but still serious.

Your relations with other people: Under stress, most people become so wrapped up in their own problems that they forget about everyone else. At the same time, they begin to take out their feelings on family and friends. The result can be bad feelings between family members, along with the loss of friends. Stress can become a family problem, not just your own problem.

Your efficiency in your work and school: For a short time, stress can make you a better, more efficient worker. Over the long haul, however, it will gradually wear you down. You will become physically weaker and begin to tire easily. At the same time, you will find it difficult to concentrate and will begin to make poor decisions.

Stress

WARNING SIGNS

Warning signs of stress can be physical and mental/behavioral.

Possible Physical Signs:

- rapid heartbeat
- headache
- stiff neck and/or tight shoulders
- backache or muscle aches
- teeth grinding
- muscle spasms
- cold hands and feet
- skin conditions such as acne and psoriasis
- rapid breathing
- sweating and sweaty palms
- upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea
- ulcers
- recurring colds and minor illness

Possible Mental/Behavioral Signs:

- Overreacting to minor problems
- Inappropriate anger or impatience
- Unusual irritability
- Feel jumpy or exhausted all the time
- Find it hard to concentrate or focus on tasks
- Doubt your ability to do to things
- Imagine negative, worrisome, or terrifying scenes
- Feel you are missing opportunities because you cannot act quickly
- Be more disorganized than normal for you
- Prone to make errors or to be accident prone
- Feel a greater sense of persistent time pressure
- Unable to relax
- Constantly feeling anxious
- Long periods of boredom
- Notice changes in your eating patterns
- Increased use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs
- Problems with sexual activity
- Changes in sleep patterns; taking longer to fall asleep; waking up tired and not well rested

MANAGE YOUR STRESS

- Have a positive attitude. Remind yourself that you are intelligent and fully capable of achieving your goals.
- Schedule extra time into your schedule, just for you! Use that time to do something you really enjoy.
- Don't plan on getting all your work done in a single sitting. Work in small blocks of time, consistently throughout the week.
- Take care of your body. If you get sick, take the time to recover. If necessary, ask for an extension on a paper or project.
- Get enough sleep.
- Eat healthy.
- Find a few activities you enjoy and stick with them. Don't try to do everything at once.
- Keep a journal, write a poem, or compose a letter to yourself or a friend that is never mailed.
- Listen to music - POSITIVE music.
- Monitor your stress levels. Keep track of situations that cause excess tension or stress. This includes people - if you have a friend who completely stresses you out, talk to your friend about a way to maintain the friendship but reduce the associated stress.
- Don't be afraid to say no.

- Reach out to friends, relatives, and roommates for support and guidance. Remember that they care about you and will help you through a rough time.
- Talk with a professional. You could schedule an appointment with your primary care provider and/or a mental health professional. They are trained to help people deal with stress.

TALKING WITH A PROFESSIONAL

Before talking with a professional, you can prepare yourself by thinking about these questions.

1. List the things which cause stress and tension in your life.
2. How does this stress and tension affect you, your family and your job?
3. Can you identify the stress and tensions in your life as short or long term?
4. Do you have a support system of friends/family that will help you make positive changes?
5. What are your biggest obstacles to reducing stress?
6. What are you willing to change or give up for a less stressful and tension-filled life?
7. What have you tried already that did not work for you?
8. If you do not have control of a situation, can you accept it and get on with your life?

CAMPUS RESOURCES

University Counseling Center (UCC) 275-3113

The main office of the University Counseling Center is located on the third floor of the University Health Service Building on UCC also sees students at the UHS Eastman School Office and in the UHS Medical Center Office.

University Health Service (UHS) 275-2662

The University Health Service has offices on the River Campus in the University Health Service Building, in Room 1-2315 in the Medical Center, and in Room 106 in the Student Living Center at the Eastman School of Music.

UHS Health Promotion Office 273-5775

The UHS Health Promotion Office is located on the second floor of the University Health Service Building on the River Campus. The office is staffed by health educators who can provide information and programs on topics related to stress management.

LINKS

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
<http://www.cdc.gov/nasd/docs/d001201-d001300/d001245/d001245.html>

Stress Reduction Techniques
<http://www.intelihealth.com/IH/ihTIH/WSIHW000/24602/24639/289016.html?d=dmContent>

Campus Blues - <http://www.campusblues.com/>

Campus Calm - <http://www.campuscalm.com/banners.html>

Go Ask Alice - <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/Cat4.html>

Stress Management
<http://www.mindtools.com/stress/RelaxationTechniques/IntroPage.htm>

Life Positive - <http://www.lifepositive.com/stress.html>