

What Is Stress?

Stress is the emotional and physical strain caused by the response to pressure from the outside world. Individuals react differently to stress.

What Are Some Common Myths Surrounding Stress?

Myth: Stress is the same for everyone.

Stress is different for everyone. What is stressful for one person may or may not be stressful for another. Each person may respond to stress in an entirely different way.

Myth: Stress is always bad.

According to this view, zero stress makes us happy and healthy. This is wrong—stress is a normal part of life. Stress can be the kiss of death or the spice of life. The issue is how to manage it. Managed stress makes people productive and happy. Mismanaged stress hurts and even kills.

Myth: Stress is everywhere, so nothing can be done about it.

Not so. Life can be planned so that stress does not become overwhelming.

Myth: The most popular techniques for reducing stress are the best ones.

No universally effective stress reduction techniques exist, because each individual reacts differently.

Myth: No symptoms, stress.

Absence of symptoms does not mean the absence of stress. In fact, camouflaging symptoms with medication may deprive a person of the signals needed for reducing the strain on physiological and psychological systems.

Myth: Only major symptoms of stress require attention.

This myth assumes that minor symptoms, such as headaches or stomach acid, may be safely ignored. Minor symptoms of stress are the early warnings that life is getting out of hand and stress needs to be better managed.

Adapted from American Psychological Association, 2008

Common Stressors

- **Financial issues**—81 percent of Americans worry about this topic
- **Work and job stability**—67 percent of Americans worry about this topic
- **The Nation’s economy**—80 percent of Americans worry about this topic
- **Health concerns (family and personal)**—64 percent of Americans worry about this topic
- **Relationships**—62 percent of Americans worry about this topic
- **Personal safety**—48 percent of Americans worry about this topic
- **Loss**—72 percent of Americans worry about this topic

Data from American Psychological Association, 2008

What Are the Warning Signs of Stress?

One of the important aids for combating and dealing with stress is to first recognize it. Stress affects minds, bodies, and behaviors in many ways, and everyone experiences stress differently. A body’s stress warning signs alert a person that something is not right, much like the glowing “check engine” light on a car’s dashboard.

Warning Signs of Stress

Cognitive Signs

- Memory problems
- Inability to concentrate
- Poor judgment
- Negativity
- Anxious or racing thoughts
- Constant worrying

Emotional Signs

- Moodiness
- Irritability or short temper
- Agitation, inability to relax
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Sense of loneliness and isolation
- Depression or general unhappiness

Physical Signs	Behavioral Signs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aches and pains • Headaches • Diarrhea or constipation • Nausea, dizziness • Chest pain, rapid heartbeat • Loss of sex drive • Frequent colds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating more or less • Sleeping too much or too little • Isolating oneself from others • Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities • Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax • Nervous habits (e.g., nail biting, pacing)

Adapted from Mental Health America, 2007

Can Stress Be Prevented?

Stressful situations in life cannot be prevented. However, they can be prepared for in a way that allows a positive response. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from a stressful situation. It is a proactive mechanism to manage stress.

How Can Stress Be Managed?

Managing stress can include simple ideas, such as recognizing signs of stress, learning breathing techniques, and engaging in spiritual communities. Developing and maintaining healthy habits are important to managing stress. These include: getting adequate rest; having a strong network of social supports; good nutrition and exercise. Take time to engage in activities you enjoy.

Uncontrolled stress can lead to many problems. Simple headaches, tight muscles, problems with sleeping, or a bad mood can be a prelude to much more severe symptoms. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they all require change: either changing the situation or changing reactions to the situation. If stress is affecting a person's ability to work or find pleasure in life, help should be sought from a doctor, mental health provider, or other professional.

(This information was taken from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Disaster Technical Assistance Center's Disaster Behavioral Health Information Series at www.samhsa.gov/dtac/)

