

STRESS LESS



With the pace of life in America today, stress is virtually unavoidable. But it's not always a bad thing - and it often comes down to how you handle it. We're here to help.

So, just what is stress?

Stress is an external and usually temporary cause of physical or mental strain and suffering. For a situation to be stressful, it must matter to the person and be a situation that he or she cannot easily handle. A stressful situation is often closely linked to perception - how one looks at the situation.

When we are in a balanced state of stress - not too much, not too little - we are in a place where we can thrive. We actually need some stress to be motivated and challenged. Life would be dull without challenges. In fact, an uneventful life could itself be considered a stressor.

Types of stress¹

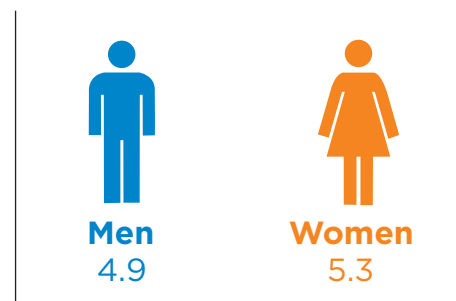
- › Eustress is considered "good" stress; it allows us to strive to do our best. Examples are the birth of a child or a job promotion.
- › Distress is "bad" stress, and it implies an external and usually temporary cause of great physical or mental strain. Examples of distress include the loss of a job or a car accident.

Who experiences stress?²

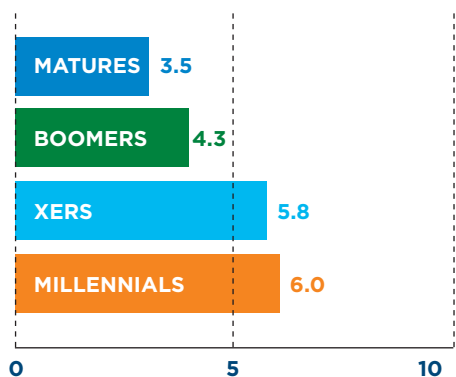
Whether male or female, young or old, stress affects everyone. The following graphs show the average reported stress level of a diverse group of individuals when asked how they would you rate their average level of stress in the last month.

Who experiences stress?

Average stress level by gender on a scale of 1 to 10



Average stress level by generation on a scale of 1 to 10



In response to question: "How would you rate your average level of stress in the last month? 1 = "Little or No Stress to 10 = "a Great Deal of Stress" in the last month?"

Together, all the way.®



Stress response³

During the stress response, our bodies experience a number of physical changes. These changes are triggered by the “fight or flight” response, which includes the following:

- › Stores of sugars and fats are used to provide quick energy
- › Heart rate increases
- › Digestion slows
- › Skin becomes clammy
- › Pupils dilate
- › Muscles tighten

In Chinese, the words “danger” and “opportunity” are closely linked – a great illustration of the choices available when you face a stressful situation. Your mind and body become fully engaged to meet the threat, and your well-being largely depends on how you choose to respond. If the stress is not effectively dealt with or is repeatedly experienced, physical and psychological illness can occur.

Effects of acute stress³

The “fight or flight” reaction we have to acute stress can have an effect on our entire body:

Mental/psychological abilities

- › Increased arousal
- › Heightened senses
- › Decrease in rational thinking
- › Decreased self-awareness

Metabolism

- › Increase in available blood sugar and fatty acids
- › Decreased insulin production
- › Increased ventilation/hyperventilation
- › Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- › Increased sweating

Immune response

- › Increased red and white blood cell counts
- › Increased blood clotting factors



Physical systems

- › Tightening of chest and throat
- › Raised shoulders
- › Bracing of neck
- › Tightening of jaw, face and scalp

Behavior toward others²

- › Lost patience
- › Ignored responsibilities
- › Skipped activities, such as exercise or social plans

Health problems associated with chronic stress

When you encounter a continual source of distress, your body moves from an acute (“fight or flight”) stress response to a long-term, or chronic, stress response. In this case, because you can’t run or fight, your body adapts by conserving energy and waiting for the stressor to go away.

The following health problems are associated with the body’s attempt to conserve energy when stressors don’t cease:

Mental/psychological

- › Irritability
- › Anxiety
- › Depression
- › Moodiness
- › Insomnia

Metabolism

- › Weight gain

Immune response

- › Colds, flu and viruses
- › Chronic infections
- › Asthma
- › Skin rashes

Physical systems

- › Back and neck problems
- › Headaches
- › Nervous ticks
- › Teeth grinding
- › Upset stomach and digestive disorders

Stress and emotional intelligence

Enhancing your emotional intelligence – taking responsibility for and managing your emotions, thoughts and feelings – helps you alleviate stress. Emotional intelligence is a skill that enables you to make better choices and more effectively solve problems. It can help you cope with environmental demands and pressures, such as tight deadlines at work or pressing family needs.

Ways to build your emotional intelligence:

- › Look at stressful situations with your desired outcome in mind and make choices that are aligned with your goals
- › Put your negative feelings into words – by acknowledging and naming them, you're more able to let go of them and move on
- › Choose to respond vs. react

Responding is a healthy reaction in which you readily adapt to what's occurring

Reacting is an instinctive action resulting from feeling fearful or threatened

Resolving the negative emotions that clutter your mind and inhibit your actions frees up your mental and physical resources, thus enabling you to focus on living the life you want.



**Improved
emotional
intelligence
=
increased
resiliency**

Effective coping skills?

Applying healthy coping skills helps you better manage your emotions, giving you a true sense of feeling better. At the other end of the spectrum, though, finding comfort in food, shopping or other forms of “instant gratification” creates a false (and temporary) sense of alleviating your stress.

- › **Preventive coping** – anticipating and preparing for potentially stressful situations to prevent them from escalating.

What can I do if _____ ?

- › **Immediate coping** – “in the moment” solutions in response to both expected and unexpected situations.

What can I do right now to improve the situation?

- › **Restorative coping** – strategies that help restore energy and perspective after a stressful event occurs. Employing these strategies can prevent you from continuing to replay the event once it passes.

What can I do now that _____ ?

Take a few minutes to apply one or more of these concepts to a recurring stressful situation in your own life.

Situation:

What can I do if (this situation) arises again?

What can I do right now to improve the situation?

What can I do now that (the situation) is over?

Stress and emotional eating

When we're under pressure, we often reach for "comfort foods" to help turn off the stress. But the benefits of munching on a favorite (and usually high-calorie) snack – let's say a bag of potato chips – are short-lived. And the bottom line is, once your stomach has been satisfied, you still have to cope with the stressful situation.

Food for thought:

- › Foods high in refined carbohydrates and starches that are quickly converted to sugar are the comfort foods most people instinctively choose to dull the feelings that come from stress. These foods can cause "sugar highs" that are followed by "lows" that then increase cravings – leading to a vicious cycle that can be tough to break.
- › In contrast, eating a complex carbohydrate-rich snack, such as a whole-grain sandwich or crackers or celery with peanut butter, actually helps balance the spike in blood sugar caused by stress.
- › Lastly, relying on caffeine for a mental boost when you're under stress often makes matters worse: Caffeine triggers the release of more adrenaline, which makes it even more difficult to relax.

Ways to deal with stress

Eat a well-balanced diet. Food is fuel for the body. Carbohydrate-rich foods can indirectly increase serotonin levels in the brain, helping to regulate your mood. Your best bets are carbs, like fresh fruits and vegetables, which also contain fiber, vitamins and minerals. (Keep in mind that processed and refined carbohydrates – doughnuts or cookies – typically cause blood sugar highs and lows, which can lead to more cravings.)

Get regular exercise, which strengthens the heart and lungs, helps lower blood pressure and raises your energy level – while giving you a well-deserved break from the demands of the day. Just as important, by causing your body to release "feel good" chemicals called endorphins, physical activity can do wonders for your well-being.

Laugh. Did you know that small children laugh out loud up to 400 times each day, whereas adults laugh an average of 15 times per day?⁵ Laughing causes our bodies to release those all-important endorphins, which help us feel better. To bring more smiles to your face, seek the company of upbeat people, read the "funnies" in the newspaper and gather friends and family to watch some great comedies.

Sharpen your time management skills. Avoid perfectionism and learn to delegate work and/or authority to others. Prioritize tasks, make the most of your calendar and "to-do" lists, and set aside specific times during the day to respond to phone and email messages.

Plan for the unexpected. Being prepared and allowing some buffer time during your day will go a long way toward reducing your stress level. Many people pack their days so full of activities that a single interruption throws the rest of their day off. For each scheduled task, allow a little time for unexpected delays.

Get adequate sleep. Sleep allows you to "turn off" your brain, giving you time to recharge your energies. If your days are packed with one meeting after another or you deal with people all day long, the "alone" time offered by sleep can be great!

Seek social support. Research shows that people who have good social networks live longer. Families who face the stress of caring for young children and elder relatives alike benefit from having a strong community to help them navigate the stressors common in caregiving. Co-workers who share a bond provide support during challenging times at work.

Discover relaxation techniques. There are many different kinds, so find the ones that work for you. A few popular choices include:

- › Deep breathing
- › Progressive muscle relaxation
- › Visualization/Meditation
- › Yoga (slow forms)
- › Massage therapy

Practice mindfulness.⁴ Mindfulness helps us return to the present moment, especially in times when we are racing to complete the laundry list of tasks before us.

This three-part exercise is something you can use on a daily basis to return to the present moment.



- 1. Focus on your breath. Notice your inhale, then your exhale. Stay aware of each inhale and exhale for several breaths.**
- 2. Engage in a task or pleasurable activity slowly with your mind focused on the activity.**
- 3. Notice each sense and savor every sensation as your work through the steps of the activity.⁴**



1. Scott, Elizabeth, MS. July 2016, What Kind of Stress Is Good For You. Retrieved from <https://www.verywell.com/what-kind-of-stress-is-good-for-you-3145055>
2. American Psychological Association (2016). Stress in America: The impact of discrimination. Stress in America™ Survey.
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5. The Mayo Clinic, April 2016, Stress relief from laughter? It's no joke. Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456>



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