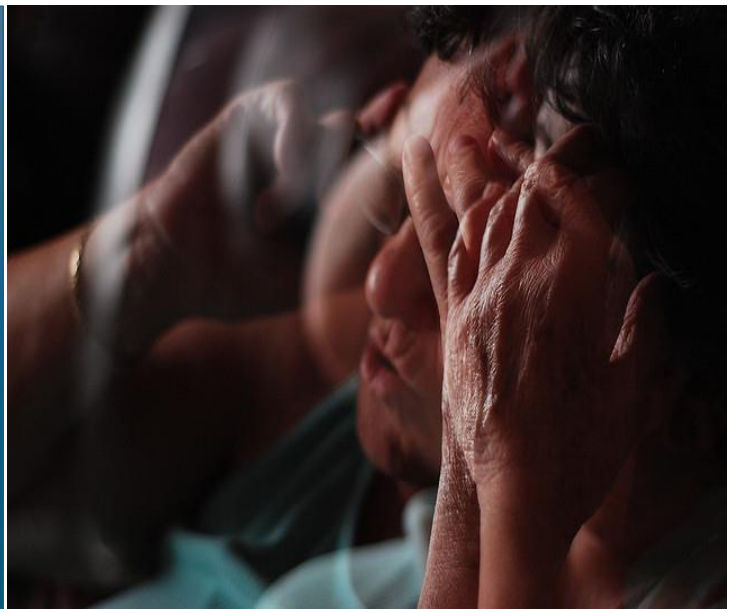
What Is Stress?

Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.

Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives.

Everyone experiences stress to some degree. The way we respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to our overall well-being.



How Does Stress Affect Us?

Stress affects both the mind and the body. A little bit of stress is good and can help us perform daily activities.

Too much stress can cause physical and mental health problems.

Learning how to cope with stress can help us feel less overwhelmed and support our mental and physical well-being.

Considerations

Stress is a normal feeling. There are two main types of stress:

- **Acute stress.** This is short-term stress that goes away quickly. You feel it when you slam on the brakes, have a fight with your partner, or ski down a steep slope. It helps you manage dangerous situations. It also occurs when you do something new or exciting. All people have acute stress at one time or another.

- **Chronic stress.** This is stress that lasts for a longer period of time. You may have chronic stress if you have money problems, an unhappy marriage, trouble at work, or significant health concerns. Any type of stress that goes on for weeks or months is chronic stress. You can become so used to chronic stress that you don't realize it is a problem. If you don't find ways to manage stress, it may lead to health problems.

Causes

The causes of stress are different for each person. You can have stress from good challenges as well as bad ones. Some common sources of stress include:

- Getting married or divorced
- Starting a new job
- The death of a spouse or close family member
- Getting laid off
- Retiring

- Having a baby
- Money problems
- Moving
- Having a serious illness
- Problems at work
- Problems at home

What Are the Signs of Stress?

Stress makes it hard for us to relax and can come with a range of emotions, including anxiety and irritability.

When stressed, we may find it difficult to concentrate.

We may experience headaches or other body pains, an upset stomach or trouble sleeping.

We may find we lose our appetite or eat more than usual.

Chronic stress can worsen pre-existing health problems and may increase our use of alcohol, tobacco and other substances.

Stressful situations can also cause or exacerbate mental health conditions, most commonly anxiety and depression, which require access to health care.

When we suffer from a mental health condition, it may be because our symptoms of stress have become persistent and have started affecting our daily functioning, including at work or school.

Stress Symptoms: Effects on Your Body and Behavior

Stress symptoms may be affecting your health, even though you might not know it.

You may blame sickness for that annoying headache, your sleeping troubles, feeling unwell or your lack of focus at work.

But stress may really be the cause.

Common Effects of Stress

- Stress symptoms can affect your body, your thoughts and feelings, and your behavior.
- Knowing common stress symptoms can help you manage them.
- Stress that's not dealt with can lead to many health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, obesity and diabetes.

Common Effects of Stress

On Your Body	On Your Mood	On Your Behavior
Headache	Anxiety	Overeating or undereating
Muscle tension or pain	Restlessness	Angry outbursts
Chest pain	Lack of motivation or focus	Drug or alcohol misuse
Fatigue	Memory problems	Tobacco use

Common Effects of Stress

On Your Body	On Your Mood	On Your Behavior
Change in sex drive	Feeling overwhelmed	Avoiding friends and staying at home
Stomach upset	Grumpiness or anger	Exercising less often
Sleep problems	Sadness or depression	
Getting sick easier due to a weaker immune system		

Does everyone respond to stress the same way?

No, everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Coping styles and symptoms of stress vary from person to person.

Should we expect to be stressed in difficult situations?

Yes, it is natural to feel stressed in challenging situations such as job interviews, school exams, unrealistic workloads, an insecure job, or conflict with family, friends or colleagues.

For many people stress reduces over time as the situation improves or as they learn to cope emotionally with the situation.

Stress tends to be widespread during events such as major economic crises, disease outbreaks, natural disasters, war, and community violence.

I am feeling stressed, does that mean I cannot work?

Most of us manage stress well and continue to function.

If we have difficulties coping with stress, we should seek help from a trusted health-care provider or from another trusted person in our community.

How Can I Manage Stress?

If you have stress symptoms, taking steps to manage your stress can have many health benefits. Check out many possible stress management tips.

For example:

- Practice relaxation techniques. (Try deep breathing, Meditation, yoga, tai chi or massage.)
- Keep a sense of humor.
- Set aside time for hobbies. (Read a book, listen to music or go for a walk.)
- Write in a journal.
- Stay away from tobacco and alcohol use, and use of illegal substances.
- Keep a daily routine (Having a daily schedule can help us use our time efficiently and feel more in control.)
- Get plenty of sleep (Getting enough sleep is important for both body and mind. Sleep repairs, relaxes and rejuvenates our body and can help reverse the effect of stress.)

Good Sleep Habits (also known as sleep hygiene) Include:

Be consistent. Go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time each morning, including on the weekends.

If possible, make your sleeping area quiet, dark, relaxing and at a comfortable temperature.

Limit your use of electronic devices, such as TVs, computers and smart phones, before sleeping.

Avoid large meals, caffeine and alcohol before bedtime.

Get some exercise. Being physically active during the day can help you fall asleep more easily at night.

- Connect with others (Keep in touch with family and friends and share your concerns and feelings with people you trust. Connecting with others can lift our mood and help us feel less stressed.)
- Eat healthy **(**What we eat, and drink can affect our health. Try to eat a balanced diet and to eat at regular intervals. Drink enough fluids. Eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables if you can.)
- Exercise regularly **(**Regular daily exercise can help to reduce stress. This can include walking, as well as more intensive exercise.)

- Limit time following news (Spending too much time following news on television and social media can increase stress. Limit the time you spend following the news if it increases your stress.)

When to Ask for Help

- ✓ If you're not sure if stress is the cause, or if you've taken steps to control your stress but you keep having symptoms, see your health care provider.
- ✓ Your health care provider may want to check for other potential causes.
- ✓ Or think about seeing a counselor or therapist, who can help you find the sources of your stress and learn new coping tools.
- ✓ Also, get emergency help right away if you have chest pain, especially if you also have shortness of breath; jaw, back, shoulder or arm pain; sweating; dizziness; or nausea.
- ✓ These may be warning signs of a heart attack and not simply stress symptoms.

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