

# Understanding Stress

Adapted from [www.helpguide.org](http://www.helpguide.org)

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But when you're constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price. You can protect yourself by recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects

## What is stress?

### The Body's Stress Response

When you perceive a threat, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones rouse the body for emergency action.

Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus – preparing you to either fight or flee from the danger at hand.

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When you sense danger – whether it's real or imagined – the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the “fight-or-flight” reaction, or the *stress response*.

The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life – giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident.

The stress response also helps you rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV.



But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.

## How do you respond to stress?

It's important to learn how to recognize when your stress levels are out of control. The most dangerous thing about stress is how easily it can creep up on you. You get used to

it. It starts to feel familiar even normal. You don't notice how much it's affecting you, even as it takes a heavy toll.

The signs and symptoms of stress overload can be almost anything. Stress affects the mind, body, and behavior in many ways, and everyone experiences stress differently.

## Stress doesn't always look stressful

Psychologist Connie Lillas uses a driving analogy to describe the three most common ways people respond when they're overwhelmed by stress:

- **Foot on the gas** – An angry or agitated stress response. You're heated, keyed up, overly emotional, and unable to sit still.
- **Foot on the brake** – A withdrawn or depressed stress response. You shut down, space out, and show very little energy or emotion.
- **Foot on both** – A tense and frozen stress response. You "freeze" under pressure and can't do anything. You look paralyzed, but under the surface you're extremely agitated.

## How much stress is too much?

Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's important to know your own limit. But just how much stress is "too much" differs from person to person. Some people roll with the punches, while others crumble at the slightest obstacle or frustration. Some people even seem to thrive on the excitement and challenge of a high-stress lifestyle.

Your ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including the quality of your relationships, your general outlook on life, your emotional intelligence, and genetics.

## Things that influence your stress tolerance level

- **Your support network** – A strong network of supportive friends and family members is an enormous buffer against life's stressors. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the greater your vulnerability to stress.
- **Your sense of control** – If you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, it's easier to take stress in stride. People who are vulnerable to stress tend to feel like things are out of their control.
- **Your attitude and outlook** – Stress-hardy people have an optimistic attitude. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, accept that change is a part of life, and believe in a higher power or purpose.
- **Your ability to deal with your emotions** – You're extremely vulnerable to stress if you don't know how to calm and soothe yourself when you're feeling sad, angry, or afraid. The ability to bring your emotions into balance helps you bounce back from adversity.
- **Your knowledge and preparation** – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

## Am I in control of stress or is stress controlling me?

- When I feel agitated, do I know how to quickly calm and soothe myself?
- Can I easily let go of my anger?
- Can I turn to others at work to help me calm down and feel better?
- When I come home at night, do I walk in the door feeling alert and relaxed?
- Am I seldom distracted or moody?
- Am I able to recognize upsets that others seem to be experiencing?
- Do I easily turn to friends or family members for a calming influence?
- When my energy is low, do I know how to boost it?

## Causes of stress

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as *stressors*. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you or forces you to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

What causes stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. For example, your morning commute may make you anxious and tense because you worry that traffic will make you late. Others, however, may find the trip relaxing because they allow more than enough time and enjoy listening to music while they drive.

### **What's Stressful for You?**

What's stressful for you may be quite different from what's stressful to someone else. For example:

- Karen is terrified of getting up in front of people to perform or speak, while her best friend lives for the spotlight.
- Phil thrives under pressure and performs best when he has a tight deadline, while his co-worker, Matt, shuts down when work demands escalate.
- Anita enjoys helping her elderly parents. Her sister, Constance, helps out as well but finds the demands of caretaking very stressful.
- Richard doesn't hesitate to send food back or complain about bad service when eating out, while his wife, Miranda, finds it much too stressful to complain. [Dealing with stress and its symptoms](#)

While unchecked stress is undeniably damaging, there are many things you can do to reduce its impact and cope with symptoms.

#### Step 1: Learn how to manage stress

You may feel like the stress in your life is out of your control, but you can always control the way you respond. Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. [Stress management](#) involves changing the stressful situation when you can, changing your reaction when you can't, taking care of yourself, and making time for rest and relaxation.

#### Step 2: Learn how to relax

You can't completely eliminate stress from your life, but you can control how much it affects you. [Relaxation techniques](#) such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the stress response. When practiced regularly, these activities lead to a reduction in your everyday stress levels and a boost in your feelings of joy and serenity. They also

increase your ability to stay calm and collected under pressure.

Step 3: Learn about changes you can make in responding to stress

Everybody has the power to reduce the impact of stress as it's happening in that moment. With practice, you can learn to spot stressors and stay in control when the pressure builds. Sensory stress-busting techniques give you a powerful tool for staying clear-headed and in control in the middle of stressful situations. They give you the confidence to face challenges, knowing that you have the ability to rapidly bring yourself back into balance.

Convinced you need to look more closely at stress in yourself and in your couple relationship? Consider the [Online Relationship Academy](#) course on Managing Stress Together.