

Stress Signals: When Your Body Says Help



In moderate doses, stress challenges you to do your best so you keep learning and growing. But too much stress has a negative effect on your work, mood and physical well-being.

"When stress becomes chronic, it turns into distress. It creates a hostile environment in your body," says Susan B. Johnson, Ed.D., with the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research.

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"Every time you face a task or problem that requires special effort," Dr. Johnson says, "your body secretes hormones such as adrenaline. These hormones prompt your body to make other chemicals that send extra power to muscles and help you focus your mind and senses. After your response is over, these chemicals are washed away safely in your blood." When stress continues over time, the level of the chemicals goes up and remains elevated.

Your body says "help". Stress-related symptoms vary from person to person. If you have a health problem or even a family predisposition to a certain condition, that's where the stress-related symptoms are likely to occur.

Common ways your body tells you it's under too much stress:

Chronic colds and flu. If you get a cold every Christmas or before a major presentation at work, added stress could be the reason. With a weakened immune system, your body is more susceptible to cold and flu viruses. Build your immune system by getting lots of rest, drinking plenty of fluids and eating vitamin-rich foods.

Insomnia. If you go to bed with a problem on your mind, your body gives you another shot of adrenaline every time you think about it. Before going to bed, try taking a walk, drinking warm milk or taking a hot bath. Then think about something pleasant as you drift off.

Headaches and sore muscles. The stress reaction—known as "flight or fight"—puts your body in a state of red alert, with your muscles tensed to fight back. Constant tension makes them rigid and sore. Tight neck and shoulder muscles make your head throb. To relieve the symptoms, stretch every couple of hours or do light exercises. Avoid caffeine if it makes you tense.

Stomach problems. Stress prompts secretions of stomach acid that can cause heartburn, stomach cramps or other digestive miseries. Treat the symptoms with an over-the-counter antacid and avoid stomach irritants such as coffee, cigarettes, alcohol, hot peppers and mints. Soothe yourself with deep-breathing exercises and physical activities you enjoy—like bicycling or gardening.

Addictive behavior. Some people try to escape chronic stress by drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, overeating or falling into other addictive behavior patterns. But that only brings on more stress. Avoid unhealthy coping by finding healthful ways to handle stress. If your stress causes you problems at home or work, contact your EAP or another source of help.

Stress-proof yourself. "Physical symptoms of stress often become worse if the stress continues to build," Dr. Johnson says. "Chronic stress also can lead to more serious conditions such as heart disease, depression, substance abuse, and cancer."

You may be keeping your body in a state of chronic stress if you often feel uptight or hostile. Learn how to deal with stress constructively so you can use it to meet life's challenges. Some things that may help with stress are: exercise, entertainment and companionship. Efforts should be made to reduce obvious and modifiable sources of stress; but some sources of stress are not modifiable and need to be worked around.

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