



# SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

We all know what it's like to feel stressed, but it's not easy to pin down exactly what stress means. When we say things like "this is stressful" or "I'm stressed", we might be talking about:

- Situations or events that put pressure on us – for example, times where we have lots to do and think about, or don't have much control over what happens.
- Our reaction to being placed under pressure – the feelings we get when we have demands placed on us that we find difficult to cope with.

## IS STRESS A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM?

Being under pressure is a normal part of life. It can help you take action, feel more energized and get results. But if you often become overwhelmed by stress, these feelings could start to be a problem for you.

Stress isn't a psychiatric diagnosis, but it's closely linked to your mental health in two important ways:

- Stress can cause mental health problems, and make existing problems worse. For example, if you often struggle to manage feelings of stress, you might develop a mental health problem like anxiety or depression.
- Mental health problems can cause stress. You might find coping with the day-to-day symptoms of your mental health problem, as well as potentially needing to manage medication, health care appointments or treatments, can become extra sources of stress.

This can start to feel like a vicious circle, and it might be hard to see where stress ends and your mental health problem begins.

We all experience stress differently in different situations. Sometimes you might be able to tell right away when you're feeling under stress, but other times you might keep going without recognizing the signs. Stress can affect you both emotionally and physically, and it can affect the way you behave.

### HOW YOU MIGHT FEEL

- Irritable, aggressive, impatient or wound up
- Over-burdened
- Anxious, nervous or afraid
- Like your thoughts are racing and you can't switch off
- Unable to enjoy yourself
- Depressed
- Uninterested in life
- Like you've lost your sense of humour
- A sense of dread
- Worried about your health
- Neglected or lonely

Some people who experience severe stress can sometimes have suicidal feelings.

### HOW YOU MIGHT BEHAVE

- Finding it hard to make decisions
- Constantly worrying
- Avoiding situations that are troubling you
- Snapping at people
- Biting your nails
- Picking at your skin
- Unable to concentrate
- Eating too much or too little

- Smoking or drinking alcohol more than usual
- Restless, like you can't sit still
- Being tearful or crying

## SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

### DECREASED ENERGY AND INSOMNIA

Prolonged stress can cause chronic fatigue and disruptions in sleep, which may result in decreased energy levels. Stress may also disrupt sleep and cause insomnia, which can lead to low energy.

While it's evident that stress can disrupt sleep, not everyone who experiences stress or who is going through a stressful time will deal with insomnia or sleep disturbances.

### CHANGES IN LIBIDO

Many people experience changes in their sex drives during stressful periods. In addition to stress, there are many other potential causes of changes in libido, including:

- Hormonal changes
- Fatigue
- Psychological issues

### DEPRESSION / ANXIETY

Some studies suggest that chronic stress may be associated with depression and depressive episodes.

Besides stress, some potential contributors to depression include:

- Family history
- Age
- Environmental factors
- Even certain medications and illnesses



# PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS ON THE BODY

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## ACNE

Some studies have found that higher levels of stress are associated with increased bouts of acne.

One reason for this may be because when some people feel stressed out, they tend to touch their faces more often. This can spread bacteria and contribute to the development of acne.

In addition to stress, other potential causes of acne include:

- Inflammation
- Hormonal shifts
- Bacteria
- Excess oil production
- Clogged pores

## HEADACHES

Many studies have found that stress can contribute to headaches, a condition characterised by pain in the head, face, or neck region. Other common headache triggers can include lack of sleep, diet, alcohol consumption, hormonal changes, and more.

## CHRONIC PAIN

Aches and pains are a common complaint that can result from increased levels of stress. Some studies have found that chronic pain may be associated with higher levels of stress as well as increased levels of cortisol, which is the body's main stress hormone.

Besides stress, there are many other factors that can contribute to chronic pain, such as:

- Aging.
- Injuries.
- Chronic poor posture.
- Nerve damage.

## FREQUENT SICKNESS

If you feel like you're constantly battling a case of the sniffles or other sickness, stress may be to blame.

Stress may take a toll on your immune system. Studies show that higher stress levels are associated with increased susceptibility to infection.

A chapter in the book "The Impact of Everyday Stress on the Immune System and Health" suggests that psychological stress can affect a range of bodily functions, such as inflammatory responses, wound healing, and the body's ability to fight off infection and disease.

However, stress is just one piece of the puzzle when it comes to immune health. A weakened immune system can also be the result of:

- A low-nutrient diet
- Substance use
- Physical inactivity
- Disorders of the immune system

## DIGESTIVE ISSUES

Some studies have found that stress may be associated with digestive issues, like constipation, heartburn, diarrhoea, as well as digestive disorders.

Stress may especially affect those with digestive disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

Keep in mind that many other factors can cause digestive issues, such as diet, bacteria, infections, certain medications, and more.

## APPETITE CHANGES AND WEIGHT GAIN

Changes in appetite are common during times of stress. When you feel stressed out, you may find yourself with no appetite at all or overeating without noticing.

## RAPID HEARTBEAT

High-stress levels can cause a fast heartbeat or heart rate. Stressful events or tasks may also increase heart rate.

Undergoing a stressful event can cause your body to release adrenaline, which is a hormone that temporarily causes your heart to beat faster and your blood pressure to rise. This is one reason why living with increased stress may create a rapid heartbeat.

## SWEATING

Exposure to stress may also cause excessive sweating.



## TREATMENT OPTIONS

As nice as it would be to have a single pill that could completely eliminate all stress, because there are so many different factors that cause stress, there is no one-size-fits-all way to treat it.

Talking with your doctor or a therapist is a great first step, as they can help you figure out what exactly is causing your stress and suggest ways to manage and treat it. They can also help you figure out if your symptoms are indeed caused by stress or another pre-existing condition.

There are a few lifestyle choices that can also help in managing stress. Some of these include:

- Taking breaks from the news
- Taking breaks from your devices (computer, phone, tv)
- Getting adequate exercise and sleep
- Taking breaks to allow your body to rest
- Increasing nutrient-rich foods in your diet
- Doing deep breathing exercises
- Meditating
- Avoiding excessive substance use
- Talking with friends, a trusted advisor, or a therapist
- Building community through faith-based organisations or activities you enjoy

If you feel overwhelmed from stress and aren't sure what to do, or are having feelings of self-harm, it's important to talk with someone you trust or a therapist.

## HELP IS ALWAYS AVAILABLE.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

Occasional stressful events are a part of everyone's life.

Working through and processing these events — with a support system, if needed — is key to keeping chronic stress at bay. Chronic stress can take a toll on your mental and physical wellness, creating a wide range of symptoms such as low energy levels, headaches, changes in mood, and decreased sex drive.

Fortunately, there are many ways to help relieve stress, such as talking with friends or a therapist, exercising, and meditating.

