



Stress Management

Recognizing Stress

What is Stress?

Stress is our internal response to a situation we find hard to manage.

- Stress is not so much the external environment, but our internal response to that environment – how we mentally react to our problems.
- Experts note that the stress we experience is caused by external events 30 percent of the time and by our internal attitude 70 percent of the time.
- Though we often think of stress in terms of tough deadlines, difficult projects, trying bosses and our overly busy lives, these are in fact the causes of stress, not stress itself.
- What we call stress is not the cause, but the effect.
- It's our internal response to difficult situations. It's how we mentally react to our problems, though it often has physical symptoms.
- And though some amount of stress is necessary in our lives, when we overdo it, we need to find ways of coping with stress to maintain good mental and physical health.

Conditions of Stress

1. High demand and low control equal conditions for stress

- When you have many demands placed upon you by either work or family life, coupled with low control over your time and responsibilities, it's a perfect breeding ground for stress.

- Let's look at an example. When Lea is transferred to a new department, her new boss immediately assigns her a number of duties she's never handled before, including production control, budgeting, and scheduling.

Not only that, but she's under the gun because of a pushed-up deadline. Her boss is counting on her, and Lea wants to show that she can accomplish what's expected of her. Like the rest of us, she also has the pressures of her home life: kids in daycare, a husband who also works long hours, a car that needs to go to the shop.

Clearly, Lea's under high demand, with low control over her time and responsibilities.

- These are the conditions of stress. Of course, not everyone finds the same situations stressful. Some people thrive on conditions that others can't tolerate. In Lea's case, if she begins to feel stressed, even when she can't control all the problems in her life, what she can control is the way she deals with the pressure, and her stress.

2. *Type A or Type B?*

- Personality type describes behaviour that also can affect our stress response.
- Type A people, as described by Friedman and Rosenman, are more intense, driven, and impatient than Type B; and Type A people are more likely to suffer health problems as a result.
- Type A people typically find themselves angry in traffic jams, with people they find inefficient or unskilled, with people who can't keep up.
- Type A people often try to do many things at once, and are usually pressing to do even more. Type B people, on the other hand, tend to be more relaxed, are more comfortable working on one assignment or project at a time, and seem better able to avoid the physical problems that come with stress.
- Of course, whether we're Type A or Type B, we can choose to alter our behaviour to reduce stress.

3. *We see obvious stresses, overlook the less obvious*

- We often focus on the obvious stresses and tend to overlook the smaller, more subtle stresses.
- Be aware of all the causes when reducing and managing your stress.
- Most often our eyes are wide open to the big causes of stress – the demanding boss, the illness or lost job – but we often overlook the myriad hidden causes that follow us

through our daily lives: the waiting line at the bank, the late appointments, the traffic jams and bills to pay and shopping to get done. The list goes on and on.

- When we work out ways to reduce the stress in our lives, we need to remember to look at all the causes.

Signs of Stress

Some amount of stress is a normal part of everyday life. We respond to challenge with growth. Most people would find a life without stress boring. When we are dealing with too much stress, though, we exhibit warning signs:

Behaviour Changes

While under stress, you may undergo changes in your appetite, sleep, and normal routine.

Feelings

You may also have certain feelings – e.g. anxiety, depression, uneasiness, an inability to settle down - that indicate you're under stress.

Lifestyle

Some people mask their stress or try to solve it by working harder than ever (e.g. workaholic behaviour), by acting aggressively or defensively, by demonstrating a lack of patience with themselves and others.

Crisis Events

Stress often results from crisis events such as death or illness in our family, problems in our personal relationships, business troubles, and natural disasters.

Physical Symptoms

- The body reacts to the mental stimulation of stress by preparing for action.
- When you're under constant stress, over a period of time, the body begins to wear down. You might sleep poorly, and be subject to exhaustion, headaches, and heartburn.
- You might even suffer from ulcers, hypertension, and heart disease.

Stages of Stress

Rather than impacting us all at once, stress actually develops in stages. By identifying these stages, we're better able to recognize the symptoms, and then deal with the stress appropriately.

1. Alarm Stage

- The alarm stage of stress is a perfectly normal physical and mental response to stress-causing situations.
- Sometimes referred to as “fight or flight,” the body prepares itself for emergencies.
- Under certain situations, we want to be ready for action. It’s a primitive reaction built into our systems from the days we were both hunted and hunter.
- Normally however, we relax as soon as the threat evaporates. It’s when we remain at the alarm stage that we see our selves up for problems with stress.

2. Resistance Stage

- If your stress isn’t resolved in the alarm stage, and you maintain the same mental attitudes as in the alarm stage, you may enter into the resistance stage.
- Jim, for example, refuses to discuss his work situation with his wife. He becomes isolated, emotionally unavailable to others, and as he focuses on his disappointment, he finds himself additional withdrawn form his friends and family.

3. Exhaustion Stage

- In the exhaustion stage of stress our health becomes affected.
- We have trouble sleeping, we’re prone to unusual behaviour and personal problems, and, over time, the physical toll of stress can lead to migraine headaches, depression, ulcers, and hypertension.

4. Burnout

- We sometimes describe the advanced stages of stress, especially when associated with long, difficult projects or work difficulties, as burnout.
- When we have high expectations of ourselves and others, but we feel constrained or stymied by our jobs or bosses, we can find ourselves in a situation that no amount of hard work can overcome.
- We never get caught up, and then grow increasingly exhausted and discouraged. Other symptoms are a loss of appetite, illness, boredom, irritability, and a loss of self-esteem and confidence.