



# Stress: Dealing with the Inevitable

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The fast paced lifestyle of American living produces stress and tension that many find unbearable. Some seek quick relief through excessive use of alcohol, use of illegal drugs or abuse of prescription drugs, and excessive eating. Much has also been written about stress in scientific journals, books, and on the Internet. This fact sheet provides a review of the scientific literature on stress, and provides ideas for coping with stress.

## Stress and research

Hans Selye (1936, 1956) was the first to conceptualize stress as understood today. Selye defined stress as the response to real or imagined demands made on the body. Individuals experience stress, which produces positive and negative results. Stress causes a "wear and tear" on the body because of the continuous physical, psychological, or social challenges made on the body.

## What exactly causes stress?

Stress is caused by what psychologists call stressors. Stressors are real or imagined situations or things that require the body to cope or adapt. Stressors can be physical, emotional, or social. Examples include:

### Physical stressors:

- Pathogens or germs (viruses, bacteria, parasites)
- Illnesses (chronic, as well as acute infections, tumors, or cancer)
- Extreme temperatures (excess cold or heat)
- Disasters (natural or human violence)
- Hunger

### Social and psychological stressors

- Relationships - general
- Children/spouses, extended families
- Bosses and co-workers
- Demanding clients or customers
- Money- too little, too much
- New employment, loss of employment
- Marriage
- Divorce, death of a loved one or the birth of a child

## Is all stress bad?

Not all stress is bad. Stress can either produce positive or negative results. Some stress can compel individuals to action that leads to new awareness, achievements, or success in life. This type of stress is called **eustress** or good stress.

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Some stress can cause illnesses, failure in achieving desired goals, distrust, rejection, anger, and depression. This type of stress is called **distress** or bad stress.

## Common signs and symptoms of increased levels of stress:

- Constant grinding of the teeth
- Migraine or tension-induced headaches
- Insomnia (inability to sleep) and nightmares
- Anxiety
- Shoulder, neck, or back pain
- Sexual dysfunction
- Chronic fatigue
- Irregular pulse rate (racing pulse)
- Gastric irritations, skin eruptions, and dryness
- Spontaneous sweating
- Poor concentration
- Frequent flu or colds
- Lack of physical coordination
- Impulsive, irrational behavior
- Speech problems

## Effects of bad stress or distress:

- Headache
- Upset stomach and ulcers
- Weakened immune system and proneness to infections
- Irritability
- Anxiety, hypertension
- Heart attack and reproductive disorders

## Does knowledge about self and the stress concept affect stress outcome?

Stress is a part of human existence. Knowledge of one-self, the stress concept, and appropriately adapting to human experiences significantly affect stress outcomes for individuals. Since response to stress usually affects multiple systems of the body (general adaptation syndrome), below are critical questions and steps to take in dealing with specific stressful events or phenomena:

### A. Reacting to physical, social, and emotional stress.

- Do you recognize distresses and accept them without distortion or glossing over them?
- Are you able to determine what is exactly distressing you and identify what the event means?
- Can you remember how the body has previously responded to the event? Did you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?

*Answering “yes” to the above questions, or most of them, indicates that you are doing well in reacting to the physical, emotional, and social stressors.*

### B. Determining what you can change about a stressful event.

- Can you change the stressor by avoiding or eliminating it completely?
- Can you reduce their intensity over a period of time, rather than immediately?
- Can you shorten exposure to the stress by taking a break or leaving the physical premises?
- Can you devote the time and energy necessary to set goals, effectively manage time, and delay gratification in what you need to do?

*Answering “yes” to the above questions or most of them, indicates that you are doing well in changing the situation to improve the outcome of the stressful event.*

### C. Determine the intensity of emotional reactions to a stressful event.

- Is the stress reaction triggered by perception rather than reality of danger?
- Are you exaggerating the stressor?
- Are you expecting to please everyone?
- Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent?
- Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?

*Answering “no” to the above questions or most of them indicates that you are doing well in emotionally determining the positive outcome of the stressful event.*

- Are you adopting more moderate views; trying to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you?
- Are you putting the stressor in perspective?
- Do you look at the positive side of things?

*Answering “yes” to the above questions or most of them, indicates that you are doing well in emotionally determining the positive outcome of the stressful event.*

## D. Determine how to physically adapt to stressors.

- Are you deep-breathing to bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal?
- Are you relaxed, using relaxation techniques or electronic devices to reduce muscle tension, gain voluntary control to reduce heart rate and blood pressure?
- Are you taking medicines prescribed by a physician to help moderate your physical reactions? Remember, medications are only helpful in crisis situations or on a short-term basis. Medicines need to be integrated with behavior modification or psychotherapy to achieve long-term benefits.

*Answering “yes” to the above questions or most of them, indicates that you are working on maintaining your physical adaptation to a stress situation.*

## E. Maintain physical reserves to deal with stressors.

- Do you exercise for cardiovascular fitness such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging, for 20 minutes or more per session, for three to four times a week?
- Do you eat well-balanced and nutritious meals?
- Do you maintain an ideal weight?
- Do you avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants?
- Do you mix leisure with work, take breaks, and get away when you can?
- Do you get enough sleep?
- Do you maintain a consistent sleep schedule?

*Answering “yes” to the above questions or most of them, indicates that you are working on maintaining your physical reserve to deal with stressors.*

## F. Maintain emotional reserves to deal with stressors.

- Do you develop mutually supportive friendships/relationships?
- Do you pursue realistic goals which are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share?
- Do you expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows in life?
- Are you always kind and gentle to yourself, and are you a friend to yourself?

Answering “yes” to the above questions or most of them, indicates that are working on maintaining your emotional reserve to deal with stressors.

## Is it possible to eliminate stress from an individual’s life?

The answer is “no”. The goal in life is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and understand the following key concepts about stress:

- Adequate stress adds excitement to life. Individuals can thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, confrontations, and even frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives.
- Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may lead to feelings of boredom, dejection, or even sickness.
- Excessive stress may lead to feelings of helplessness or becoming physically sick. What individuals need to do is to find the optimal level of stress which will motivate but not overwhelm them.

## Is there a right stress level for individuals?

- Because of differences in individual genetic make-up and experiences, there is no single level of stress that is optimal for all. What is distressing to one may cause joy to another.

## What are healthy ways to manage stress?

There are no “magical solutions” to the stress problems in life, but below are strategies that individuals and families can use to minimize the stresses in life:

- Understand that stress is “a way of life.”
- Stay physically healthy, eat nutritious foods, exercise regularly, and avoid the use of drugs or alcohol to escape from stressful situation or events.
- Like yourself, recognize your needs and forgive errors.
- Learn to relax and accept or adapt to things or situations that cannot be changed.
- Learn to acknowledge reality or see things as they are.
- Involve all parties in addressing a problem that concerns them and in decisions that will affect them.
- Be honest in expressing fears and worries.
- Avoid self-blame or blaming others as this never solves problems.
- Learn to manage time effectively.
- Work on only one project at a time, or limit the number of projects to work on: set priorities, being careful not to set expectations too high.
- Talk about troubles or concerns to special friends or trained professionals; another person may help you to see your problem in a new light.
- Learn how to relax: take time to do something you really enjoy or learn the art of loafing.
- Work off tensions: try a physical activity like walking, playing a game of tennis, gardening, or playing your favorite musical instrument.
- Treat yourself to sufficient sleep: know how many hours you need. Sufficient sleep will help to give you a refreshed, energetic outlook on life.

- Know that it is okay to accept help and ask for it if needed. Learn to politely say “no” when you have to.

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## Internet Sources

- <http://www.stresstips.com/index.htm>. Provides educational resources for stress and overworked people
- <http://www.stress.org/> American stress Institute, this site is dedicated to advancing the knowledge of stress in health and disease
- <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresman.html> This site is maintained by the national institute of Occupational Health and Safety and provides educational information for work-site stress, safety and health
- <http://helping.apa.org> This is the American Psychological Association Consumer Help Center; provides information about common challenges to psychological health
- <http://www..adaa.org>. This site provides information and resources related to stress and, including listings of support groups.



## The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

### *Bringing the University to You!*

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.
- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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