



The Physical and Emotional Effects of Stress on the Body



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Body Responses to Stress

Emotional Responses to Stress

The Effects of Long-Term Stress

Pain

Wear and Tear

Immune System Disruption

Menstrual Cycle Irregularities

Stress Management

Get Physical

Relaxation Response

Online Therapy

Final Thoughts

We all go through periods of stress. Pressure at work, moving house, relationship breakdowns and many more of life's events can quickly leave us feeling overwhelmed or fraught.

Although stress is a natural part of life, long-term stress can be detrimental to your physical and emotional health. That's why it's important to understand how stress affects the body, and what you can do to manage it.

Stress and Your Health

Stress can occur as a result of isolated situations such as being late due to a traffic jam, or as part of a much larger life event like being made redundant or going through a divorce.



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In small, short-term doses, stress is helpful. Release of stress hormones causes new nerve cell generation in the brain, increasing your focus and cognitive function. Stress can also boost immune responses to prevent you from becoming unwell. This useful function means that you could be less susceptible to coughs or colds prior to an exam or big event.

Conversely, coping with chronic or long-term stress can sadly leave your body in an unhealthy state.

The Biology of Stress



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However, if the pathways are chronically stimulated, the body becomes hyper-aroused. Worryingly, this can lead to wear and tear of our body organs, and unlike acute stress, it can even suppress the function of the immune system. In short, the body does not cope well with extended periods of stress.

What are the Symptoms of Stress?

Stress can affect everyone differently. While some people experience stress as a psychological phenomenon, others may experience it with somatic symptoms. Somatic symptoms are felt physically, and may include nausea or pain. Many people will notice that they encounter a combination of both physical and psychological symptoms.

Body Responses to Stress



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This response prepares you to act in a way that will protect you from harm. In evolutionary terms, this would have allowed you to quickly escape from a perceived threat such as a fire.

As the initial threat subsides, you are left with the longer term effects of managing stress. The physiological effects of stress include:

Headaches

Digestive upsets including diarrhea, constipation, or nausea

Aches and pains, including chest pain

Difficulty sleeping (insomnia)

Low energy

Nervousness or shaking

Dry mouth

Grinding the teeth or clenching the jaw.

Emotional Responses to Stress

The emotional and cognitive effects of stress can sometimes be overlooked or wrongly dismissed as anxiety. However, the emotional response to stress can be just as draining as the physical effects. Responses may include:

Being tearful

Feeling agitated, moody, or frustrated

Feeling overwhelmed or nervous

Low self-esteem

Feeling worthless

Depression



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THE EFFECTS OF LONG TERM STRESS

The long term effects of stress have been studied extensively. Chronic stimulation of the adrenal glands increases the concentration of catecholamines within the body, including epinephrine, dopamine, and norepinephrine.

Pain

Although these hormones are needed for the fight or flight response, they often cause tension-related symptoms such as headaches or aching joints.

Wear and Tear

Catecholamines also increase the wear and tear of arteries, including those that supply the heart. This increases the stress on the blood vessels and causes them to narrow, which can lead to chest pain and heart disease. Furthermore, high levels of catecholamines can increase the concentration of lipids in the blood as well as increasing the blood's clotting potential. These changes increase the risk of cardiac disease including high blood pressure and coronary artery disease.

Immune System Disruption

When the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis is stimulated by stress, it increases the amount of cortisol the body produces. Cortisol is a steroid that prevents biological functions that are not necessary in the acute response to stress. However, long term high levels of cortisol can disrupt a previously strong immune system. A study showed that in the presence of high steroid concentrations, fewer immune cells and antibodies were produced, making it more difficult for the body to attack pathogens such as bacteria and viruses.

This is demonstrated by life stressors increasing the susceptibility to reactivation of latent glandular fever and cold sores. There is therefore certainly some truth in cold sores being more common when you're feeling stressed or run down.

Menstrual Cycle Irregularities



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Recognizing that you are stressed is the first step to managing your mental and physical health. Understanding the correlation between stress and your health is key to preventing disease or long-term distress.

The following techniques may help to manage stress, as well as alleviating physical symptoms and improving cognition.

Get Physical

Movement and physical activity help to loosen up tense muscles and deepen your breathing. Exercise also indisputably benefits both self-esteem and overall wellbeing, while reducing anxiety and depression. Getting active could boost both your physical and emotional health, making periods of stress easier to manage.

Relaxation Response

Learning the techniques of a relaxation response, such as deep abdominal breathing, visualization, and yoga, was found to have some benefit in mitigating chronic stress in patients with high blood pressure. Some patients were even able to omit at least one anti-hypertensive medication as part of the study.

Practicing a relaxation technique could therefore minimize both stress and its consequential medical disorders.

Online Therapy

Online therapy offers an excellent solution to talking through stressful events and feelings in a safe, convenient environment. If your stress is compounded by time pressures or anxiety about leaving the house, booking an appointment at a time to suit you, and from your own home, gives you the space to share your concerns without placing additional demands on yourself.

Talking through a problem can help to make solutions clearer, as well as equipping you with the tools to manage stress in future.

Final Thoughts



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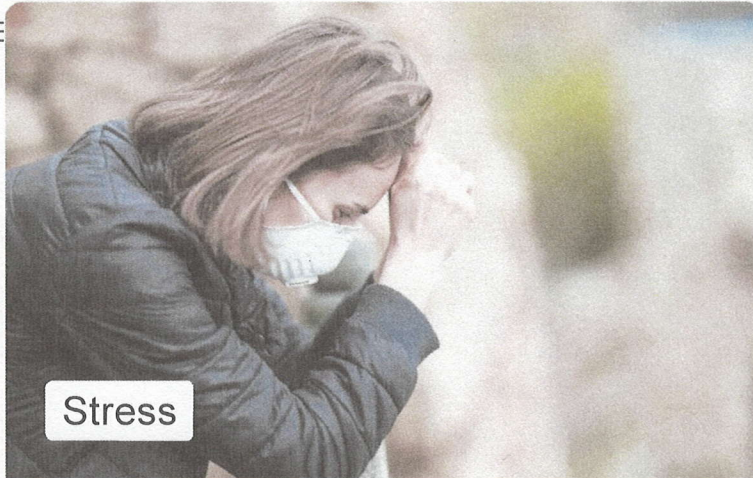
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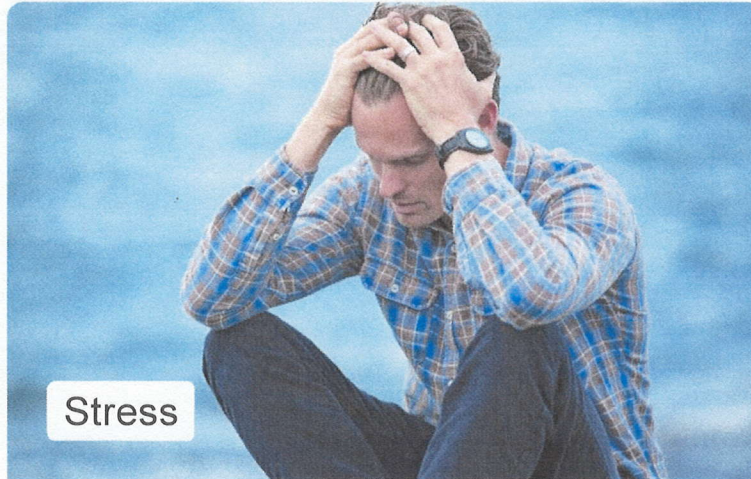
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Manage It?

So, what is stress actually? Stress is your body's way of responding to a challenge or demand. It's



Recognizing the Symptoms of Stress in Men

Stress affects all genders, but does it affect men and women differently? Yes, in some ways, and

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