

The Physical Effects of Stress

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The status of our mental health plays a large role in managing stress. Stress is the body's fight or flight response to fear, anxiety, irritability, or anger. Stress is more than an emotion, however. When the mind is constantly fixated on something bothersome, the body will begin to feel the negative effects. These consequences can compromise the nervous system, musculoskeletal system, respiratory system, cardiovascular system, and the gastrointestinal system.

Acute feelings of worry may arise if we are late for a meeting or struggling to reach a deadline. For immediate, short-term situations, stress can be beneficial to a person because it may help them increase productivity, or cope with potentially serious situations. When the stress response doesn't stop launching itself, these levels will become chronic and affect a person's behavior and overall well-being.

When a person feels threatened, the nervous system responds by creating a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These physical changes can enhance one's focus, but when the hormones don't stop firing, the level of stress will become chronic. Chronic stress disrupts every system in the body and can increase a person's risk of heart attack, stroke, anxiety, and depression.

Symptoms of stress may be obvious, but some of the most common are:

- Neck ache, back pain, muscle spasms
- Frequent headaches
- Reduced productivity
- Social withdrawal
- Constant fatigue
- Weight gain or weight loss
- General unhappiness

Techniques for Stress Management

Improving your ability to handle stress is not impossible. You may not be able to eliminate stress from your life completely, but through these techniques, you can control how much it affects you.

- **Eat a healthy diet** – Foods that contain carbohydrates and added sugars, such as most junk food, can cause blood sugar to fluctuate. When blood sugar spikes and drops, this can leave a person feeling tired, and irritable. Consuming diet-rich foods such as fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, or omega-3 fatty acids, can help someone better cope with the stressors of life.
- **Get active** – Exercise releases endorphins, a chemical that triggers a positive feeling. Regular exercise can be a distraction from negative thoughts that fuel stress. Whether you decide to walk, run, take yoga, or dance, be sure to exercise mindfully and focus on the physical sensations as you move.
- **Engage your senses** – Becoming mindful of your environment can go a long way in improving one's mood. The key is to engage the sense that works for you. Does listening to music make you calm? Or the smell of fresh coffee in the morning? Appreciating the little things will only be beneficial in combating stress.
- **Connect with others** – Each of us is fighting a battle that someone knows nothing about. A simple act of kindness and taking face-to-face with someone can trigger hormones that alleviate intrusive thoughts and negative emotion. Spend time with those who provide comfort and support to your well-being. Creating a satisfying connection with someone can make your responsibilities and daily tasks seem less overwhelming.