

Stress

Feeling like there are too many pressures and demands on you? Losing sleep worrying about tests and schoolwork? Eating on the run because your schedule is just too busy? You're not alone. Everyone experiences stress at times - adults, teens, and even kids. But there are things you can do to minimize stress and manage the stress that's unavoidable.

What Is Stress?

Stress is a feeling that's created when we react to particular events. It's the body's way of rising to a challenge and preparing to meet a tough situation with focus, strength, stamina, and heightened alertness.

The events that provoke stress are called **stressors**, and they cover a whole range of situations - everything from outright physical danger to making a class presentation or taking a semester's worth of your toughest subject.

The human body responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The **hypothalamus** signals the **adrenal glands** to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol and release them into the bloodstream. These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to large muscle groups, putting our muscles on alert. Pupils dilate to improve vision. The liver releases some of its stored glucose to increase the body's energy. And sweat is produced to cool the body. All of these physical changes prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment.

This natural reaction is known as the **stress response**. Working properly, the body's stress response enhances a person's ability to perform well under pressure. But the stress response can also cause problems when it overreacts or fails to turn off and reset itself properly.

Good Stress and Bad Stress

The stress response (also called the **fight or flight response**) is critical during emergency situations, such as when a driver has to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. It can also be activated in a milder form at a time when the pressure's on but there's no actual danger - like stepping up to take the foul shot that could win the game, getting ready to go to a big dance, or sitting down for a final exam. A little of this stress can help keep you on your toes, ready to rise to a challenge. And the nervous system quickly returns to its normal state, standing by to respond again when needed.

But stress doesn't always happen in response to things that are immediate or that are over quickly. Ongoing or long-term events, like coping with a divorce or moving to a new neighborhood or school, can cause stress, too. Long-term stressful situations can produce a lasting, low-level stress that's hard on people. The nervous system senses continued pressure and may remain slightly activated and continue to pump out extra stress hormones over an extended period. This can wear out the body's reserves, leave a person feeling depleted or overwhelmed, weaken the body's immune system, and cause other problems.

What Causes Stress Overload?

Although just enough stress can be a good thing, stress overload is a different story - too much stress isn't good for anyone. For example, feeling a little stress about a test that's coming up can motivate you to study hard. But stressing out too much over the test can make it hard to concentrate on the material you need to learn.

Pressures that are too intense or last too long, or troubles that are shouldered alone, can cause people to feel stress overload. Here are some of the things that can overwhelm the body's ability to cope if they continue for a long time:

- being bullied or exposed to violence or injury
- relationship stress, family conflicts, or the heavy emotions that can accompany a broken heart or the death of a loved one
- ongoing problems with schoolwork related to a learning disability or other problems, such as ADHD (usually once the problem is recognized and the person is given the right learning support the stress disappears)
- crammed schedules, not having enough time to rest and relax, and always being on the go

Some stressful situations can be extreme and may require special attention and care.

Posttraumatic stress disorder is a very strong stress reaction that can develop in people who have lived through an extremely traumatic event, such as a serious car accident, a natural disaster like an earthquake, or an assault like rape.

Some people have anxiety problems that can cause them to overreact to stress, making even small difficulties seem like crises. If a person frequently feels tense, upset, worried, or stressed, it may be a sign of anxiety. Anxiety problems usually need attention, and many people turn to professional counselors for help in overcoming them.

Signs of Stress Overload

People who are experiencing stress overload may notice some of the following signs:

- anxiety or panic attacks
- a feeling of being constantly pressured, hassled, and hurried
- irritability and moodiness
- physical symptoms, such as stomach problems, headaches, or even chest pain
- allergic reactions, such as eczema or asthma
- problems sleeping
- drinking too much, smoking, overeating, or doing drugs
- sadness or depression

Everyone experiences stress a little differently. Some people become angry and act out their stress or take it out on others. Some people internalize it and develop eating disorders or substance abuse problems. And some people who have a chronic illness may find that the symptoms of their illness flare up under an overload of stress.

Keep Stress Under Control

What can you do to deal with stress overload or, better yet, to avoid it in the first place? The most helpful method of dealing with stress is learning how to manage the stress that comes along with any new challenge, good or bad. Stress-management skills work best when they're used regularly, not just when the pressure's on. Knowing how to "de-stress" and doing it when things are relatively calm can help you get through challenging circumstances that may arise. Here are some things that can help keep stress under control.

Take a stand against overscheduling. If you're feeling stretched, consider cutting out an activity or two, opting for just the ones that are most important to you.

Be realistic. Don't try to be perfect - no one is. And expecting others to be perfect can add to your stress level, too (not to mention put a lot of pressure on them!). If you need help on something, like schoolwork, ask for it.

Get a good night's sleep. Getting enough sleep helps keep your body and mind in top shape, making you better equipped to deal with any negative stressors. Because the biological "sleep clock" shifts during adolescence, many teens prefer staying up a little later at night and sleeping a little later in the morning. But if you stay up late and still need to get up early for school, you may not get all the hours of sleep you need.

Learn to relax. The body's natural antidote to stress is called the **relaxation response**. It's your body's opposite of stress, and it creates a sense of well-being and calm. The chemical benefits of the relaxation response can be activated simply by relaxing. You can help trigger the relaxation response by learning simple breathing exercises and then using them when you're caught up in stressful situations. (Click on the button to try one.) And ensure you stay relaxed by building time into your schedule for activities that are calming and pleasurable: reading a good book or making time for a hobby, spending time with your pet, or just taking a relaxing bath.

Treat your body well. Experts agree that getting regular exercise helps people manage stress. (Excessive or **compulsive** exercise can contribute to stress, though, so as in all things, use moderation.) And eat well to help your body get the right fuel to function at its best. It's easy when you're stressed out to eat on the run or eat junk food or fast food. But under stressful conditions, the body needs its vitamins and minerals more than ever. Some people may turn to substance abuse as a way to ease tension. Although alcohol or drugs may seem to lift the stress temporarily, relying on them to cope with stress actually promotes more stress because it wears down the body's ability to bounce back.

Watch what you're thinking. Your outlook, attitude, and thoughts influence the way you see things. Is your cup half full or half empty? A healthy dose of optimism can help you make the best of stressful circumstances. Even if you're out of practice, or tend to be a bit of a pessimist, everyone can learn to think more optimistically and reap the benefits.

Solve the little problems. Learning to solve everyday problems can give you a sense of control. But avoiding them can leave you feeling like you have little control and that just adds to stress. Develop skills to calmly look at a problem, figure out options, and take some action toward a solution. Feeling capable of solving little problems builds the inner confidence to move on to life's bigger ones - and it can serve you well in times of stress.

Build Your Resilience

Ever notice that certain people seem to adapt quickly to stressful circumstances and take things in stride? They're cool under pressure and able to handle problems as they come up. Researchers have identified the qualities that make some people seem naturally resilient even

when faced with high levels of stress. If you want to build your resilience, work on developing these attitudes and behaviors:

- Think of change as a challenging and normal part of life.
- See setbacks and problems as temporary and solvable.
- Believe that you will succeed if you keep working toward your goals.
- Take action to solve problems that crop up.
- Build strong relationships and keep commitments to family and friends.
- Have a support system and ask for help.
- Participate regularly in activities for relaxation and fun.

Learn to think of challenges as opportunities and stressors as temporary problems, not disasters. Practice solving problems and asking others for help and guidance rather than complaining and letting stress build. Make goals and keep track of your progress. Make time for relaxation. Be optimistic. Believe in yourself. Be sure to breathe. And let a little stress motivate you into positive action to reach your goals.

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<http://kidshealth.org> → *teens site* → type "stress" in the search window

Stress

We all talk about stress, but we are not always clear about what it is. This is because stress comes from both the good and the bad things that happen to us. If we did not feel any stress, we would not be alive! Stress becomes a problem when we are not sure how to handle an event or a situation. Then worry sets in, and we feel "stressed."

The things that cause stress for you may not be a problem for your neighbour, and things that bring stress to your neighbour's life may not worry you at all. It is how you think about and react to certain events that determine whether you find them stressful or fairly

easy to deal with. Your reaction to stress can affect your mental and physical health; so it is important for you to learn how to deal effectively with stress as it occurs.

Understanding stress

Your feelings about the events in your life are very important. By understanding yourself and your reactions to stressful events, you can learn to handle stress effectively. The best place to start is by figuring out what produces stress in you, such as:

- major events in your life: getting married, changing jobs, moving your home, getting divorced, or coping with the death of a loved one,
- long-term worries: concern about your children's future, financial or economic problems, or an ongoing illness,
- daily hassles: traffic jams, rude people, or machines that just don't work when you want them to.

The stress response

When you find an event stressful, your body undergoes a series of changes, called the stress response. There are three stages to this response. They are:

Stage 1 - Mobilizing Energy

At first, your body releases adrenaline, your heart beats faster, and you start to breathe more quickly. Both good and bad events can start this reaction: the night before your wedding or the day you lose your job.

Stage 2 - Consuming Energy Stores

If, for some reason, you do not escape from the first stage, your body begins to release stored sugars and fats from its resources. At this stage, you will feel driven, pressured and tired. You may drink more coffee, smoke more, and drink more alcohol than is good for you. You may also experience anxiety, memory loss, catch colds or get the flu more often than normal.

Stage 3 - Draining Energy Stores

If you do not resolve your stress problems, the body's need for energy will become greater than its ability to produce it, and you will become chronically stressed. At this stage, you may experience insomnia, errors in judgment, and personality changes. You may also develop a serious sickness, such as heart disease, ulcers or mental illness.

Coping with stress

Because each of us is different, there is no one "correct" way to cope with stress. However, there are a number of different things that can be done, and it is helpful to look at both short and long-term solutions to reducing stress.

- **Identify your problems.** Is your job, your relationship with someone, or money worries causing you stress? Are unimportant, surface problems masking real, deeper ones? Once you are fairly sure you know what the problem is, you can do something about it.
- **Solve your problems.** Start thinking about solutions. What can you do, and what will be the consequences? Should you be looking for a less stressful job? Do you need marriage counselling? Should you talk to a financial expert about money management? What will happen if you do nothing? If you follow this problem-solving strategy, you should be able to make some changes to take the pressure off yourself. This long-term way of reducing stress in your life is something everyone, sooner or later, will need to do.
- **Talk about your problems.** You may find it helpful to talk about your stress. Friends and family members may not realize that you are having a hard time. Once they understand, they may be helpful in two ways: first, by just listening to you vent your feelings and second, by suggesting solutions to your problems. If you need to talk with someone outside your own circle of friends and relatives, your family doctor may be able to refer you to a mental health counsellor.
- **Learn about stress management.** There are many helpful books, films, videos and courses to help you cope with stress. There are also counsellors who specialize in stress; ask your family doctor for a referral to one. There may also be community college courses and stress management workshops available in your community.
- **Reduce tension.** Physical activity can be a great stress reducer. Go for a walk, take up a sport, dig in the garden, clean the house. You may find it helpful to learn some relaxation exercises. These can be as simple as deep breathing - slowing inhale through your nose until you cannot take in any more air, and then exhale through your mouth. Another simple exercise is stretching - stretch and relax each part of your body, starting from your neck and working downward; exhale as you stretch, and inhale as you release the tension. If you make a habit of taking pressure off yourself by getting rid of your tension, you will find yourself less stressed and more able to solve the problems that caused your stress in the first place.
- **Take your mind off your problems.** You may be able to get rid of stressful feelings temporarily by getting busy. If you get involved in hobbies, sports or work, you can give yourself a "mental holiday" from your stress. Not thinking about your problems for a while can give you a little mental distance from them and make them easier to solve later on.

Preventing stress

Once you have lowered your stress level, it is wise to look for ways to prevent excessive stress from building up again. The best way to cope with stress is to prevent it. Some good ways to do this are:

- Make decisions. Not making them causes worry and, therefore, stress.
- Avoid putting things off. Make a weekly schedule, including leisure activities as well as chores.
- Delegate. Get others to do tasks that they can handle so that you are not trying to do everything by yourself.

Remember, it is impossible to have a completely stress-free life. Your goal should be to avoid getting to the third stage of stress where your energy stores are drained. As long as you do not get stuck in the third stage of the stress response, you will avoid becoming chronically stressed.

Do you need more help?

If you or someone you know is feeling too much stress and you need more information about resources in your area, contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, which can help you find additional support.