

# Stress

## What is stress?

Everyone experiences stress from time to time. Some people experience stress more often than others and certain periods in life contain more stress. Stress is a normal bodily reaction designed to help you stay alert in situations that require it.

You will now learn what happens in the body during stress and how you can manage it more effectively.

## The fight-or-flight response

When we experience a stressful situation, the body activates the fight-or-flight response. This response exists to help you react and respond to potential threats in your environment. When the fight-or-flight response is activated, several things happen in the body:

- You start breathing faster to supply oxygen to the muscles.
- The heart beats faster to pump more oxygen-rich blood to your muscles, which can cause palpitations. You may experience heart palpitations.
- The muscles tense, preparing you to flee or defend yourself if necessary.
- Digestion slows down. The body prioritises things that are less urgent for your survival at the moment. This can cause you to get a stomach ache, feel sick or need to go to the toilet.

## Perceived threats

The fight-or-flight response is activated in the face of both real and imagined threats. This can become a problem as the brain has difficulty distinguishing between real and perceived threats. You can trigger the fight-or-flight response with your thoughts. The thoughts are interpreted as potential threats and then the body reacts to protect you, without knowing that it is a false alarm. For example, you might remind yourself of a time you were almost hit by a car and experience the same bodily activation as if it were happening again.

## External and internal stressors

Real and perceived threats are described as stressors and they are what cause stress. Stressors can be external and internal. External stressors include demands from work or studies, deadlines, and tasks that need to be completed. Internal stressors include your own performance expectations or thoughts that you have forgotten something. How you react to stressors and how you handle stress when it arises depends on your individual

circumstances. You may also experience stress differently depending on your physical state, such as whether you are well-rested and have eaten, or tired and hungry.

## **Prolonged stress**

Stress in itself is not dangerous. Usually, short periods of stress can be managed if they are followed by adequate time for recovery. Prolonged stress without recovery, on the other hand, can lead to negative symptoms and increase vulnerability to infections and other mental health problems.

During prolonged stress, you can get caught in a negative spiral, reducing your recovery time in an attempt to do more of what is causing your stress. It is common to believe that this is an effective way to catch up on your tasks. Maybe you think you will have more time for rest and recovery soon. However, that is not usually the case. There are always new tasks that demand immediate attention, and the negative spiral continues, leaving less and less time for recovery.

If the body does not get the recovery it needs over a long period, there is a risk of exhaustion. Recovery from exhaustion can take a long time. Therefore, it is important to focus on preventive recovery to avoid long-term fatigue. Short periods of rest, such as holidays, are not enough to compensate for years of stress.

Perhaps you have thought that you will recover when the weekend or a vacation comes? It's common to think that way. Try replacing that sentence with: I'll wait to eat until the weekend comes or I'll wait to eat until the summer when I'm on vacation. That wouldn't work because you need to eat regularly for your body to function. Try to think the same way about recovery: to maintain your energy, you need to rest every day.

## **Symptoms of chronic stress**

Chronic stress increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal problems, diabetes and depression, among other things. Chronic stress can also cause other symptoms, such as:

- difficulty falling asleep
- muscle tension
- dizziness
- problems with concentration and memory
- irritability
- constant fatigue
- increased sensitivity to sound and light.

## **Exhaustion disorder**

Sometimes chronic stress can lead to exhaustion disorder. This happens when the balance between stress and recovery has been off for a long time. It often involves a combination of several heavy burdens, such as a poor work environment, major changes in personal life, and insufficient recovery. For a diagnosis of exhaustion disorder, the symptoms and stressors must have been present for more than six months. The body often signals that stress levels are too high through symptoms of chronic stress, eventually leading to both physical and mental exhaustion. One of the most common symptoms of exhaustion disorder is extreme fatigue that cannot be relieved by rest.

## **What can you do yourself?**

Recovery can be described as activities that replenish your energy levels. Common recovery activities include spending time with others, being in nature, engaging in hobbies, and practising relaxation exercises. Recovery is individual, but some activities have been shown to be effective.

## **Exercise and physical activity**

Exercise and physical activity are important for mental health. Research shows that physical activity helps the body recover from stress. Physical activity also makes the body less sensitive to stress. Physical activity helps the body build resilience, making it easier to cope with a stress response.

## **Sleep**

Sleep often suffers during periods of stress. You may have trouble falling asleep, experience restless sleep, or wake up frequently. It can be difficult to control how tired you feel and to be able to fall asleep in the evening. What you can control, however, is when you get out of bed in the morning. Try to get out of bed at the same time every morning and don't spend too much time in bed when you're not sleeping. Sleep needs vary between individuals, but in general, adults require between six and nine hours of sleep per night.