

WHAT IS STRESS

Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response. Stress can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, nervous, or anxious. The **fight-or-flight or stress response** is a physiological reaction that occurs in response to a perceived harmful event, attack, or threat to survival. This response is usually of short duration and your body should relax afterwards. Too much constant stress can have negative effects on your health.

THE STRESS RESPONSE

When you feel threatened, the nervous system releases a flood of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. As a result your heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, muscles tighten, senses and concentration become sharper. These reactions make you ready to face the danger at hand. Short-term stress can be helpful; long-term stress however, can cause major damage to your health, mood, relationships and quality of life.

STRESSORS

Factors that trigger the stress response are called 'stressors'. Stressors include excessive noise, overcrowding, going out on a first date, aggressive behavior, death of a loved one, divorce, hospitalization, injury or illness, being abused or neglected, financial worries, loss of a job, etc.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

- Muscle tension leading to headaches, migraine and neck pain
- Low energy and fatigue
- Nausea
- Rapid breathing, heartbeat and chest pain
- Abdominal pains
- Diarrhea or constipation

Effects of long-term stress (stress overload) on your health:

- Increased risk for heart attack or stroke
- Eating much more or much less than usual
- Development of stomach ulcers
- Development of type 2 diabetes
- Increased vulnerability to infections
- Painful or irregular menstrual periods
- Hypertension
- Skin conditions e.g. psoriasis
- Change in sex drive
- Constant worrying
- Memory problems
- Poor judgment



- Feeling overwhelmed
- Depression
- Problems with concentration
- Insomnia or hypersomnia
- Social isolation
- Anger or irritability
- Alcohol or drugs abuse

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS

- The first step in managing stress is to know the warning signs of stress
- Maintain balance regarding work and relaxation
- Learn to manage your time more effectively; prioritize
- Exercise at least three times a week to improve mood and general health
- Eat a balanced diet (stay away from sugary snacks, skipping meals, mindless munching)
- Maintain a good sleep routine and be mindful of the sleep/wake cycle your body needs
- Limit alcohol and caffeine
- Quit smoking
- Connect to others (spend time with people who care for you)
- Learn relaxation techniques like deep breathing and practice it regularly
- Make time for hobbies
- Reduce the 'noise' of technology
- Learn alternative ways of coping

TREATMENT

- If stress management techniques do not work, consult a doctor. Diagnosis depends on many factors, but a doctor will most likely do a comprehensive, stress-oriented interview and evaluation.
- Treatment includes self-help, certain medications to treat an underlying illness such as depression.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Mental Health Information Centre of Southern Africa (MHIC)
PO Box 241, Cape Town, 8000, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0)21 938-9229

mhic@sun.ac.za

www.mentalhealthsa.org.za

Updated 2018