

Stress and Self Care



Learn about stress and how it impacts the body and the mind. This lesson will cover stress warning signs, causes and easy to implement solutions on how to reduce or eliminate stress in your life. This lesson describes what self-care is and how to cultivate it in your life using nature, relaxation techniques and technology. A short and easy to do guided imagery exercise is included and explained.

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Stress and Self-Care

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Lesson Goal: Participants will identify causes of stress, how stress affects the body and the mind, and easy ways to reduce stress. There is a short-guided imagery exercise that can be done at the end of the lesson.

Introductory Questions:

- 1. What causes stress?**
- 2. How does stress affect the systems of our bodies and minds?**
- 3. How can I reduce stress and take better care of myself?**

What is stress? Stress is simply your body's way of protecting you. Stress is how your body responds to threats or demands, real or imagined. This is also known as the flight or fight response; when you sense a threat, your nervous system responds by flooding your body with stress hormones, cortisol and adrenaline. These hormones help your body prepare for action-fight or flight. They cause changes in your body including: pounding heart, tight muscles, blood pressure rises, breath quickens and the senses become sharper. These changes in our bodies increase our strength, speed up our reaction time and enhance our focus-again preparing our bodies for fight or flight.

Good stress and bad stress. Good stress is also called eustress and it serves to protect us. It does so by providing extra strength, keeping us focused and sharpening our concentration-think studying for an exam or playing sports. Bad stress is called distress and it's what happens when our body does not know how to turn off the stress response. This causes damage to our health, our mood, our productivity, our relationships and overall quality of life.

The problem with stress is that the brain does not distinguish running from a bear or taking a test and produces the stress hormones in response to both. The longer we are under stress, the harder it becomes for our brains to shut off the emergency stress system, which leads to a constant state of stress in the body. Stress disrupts and affects every system in the body.

What causes stress?

Internal Causes

Pessimism.
 Inability to accept uncertainty.
 Rigid thinking.
 Negative self-talk.
 Perfectionism.
 All or nothing attitude.

External Causes

Major life changes.
 Work or school.
 Relationship difficulties.
 Financial problems.
 Being too busy.
 Children and family.

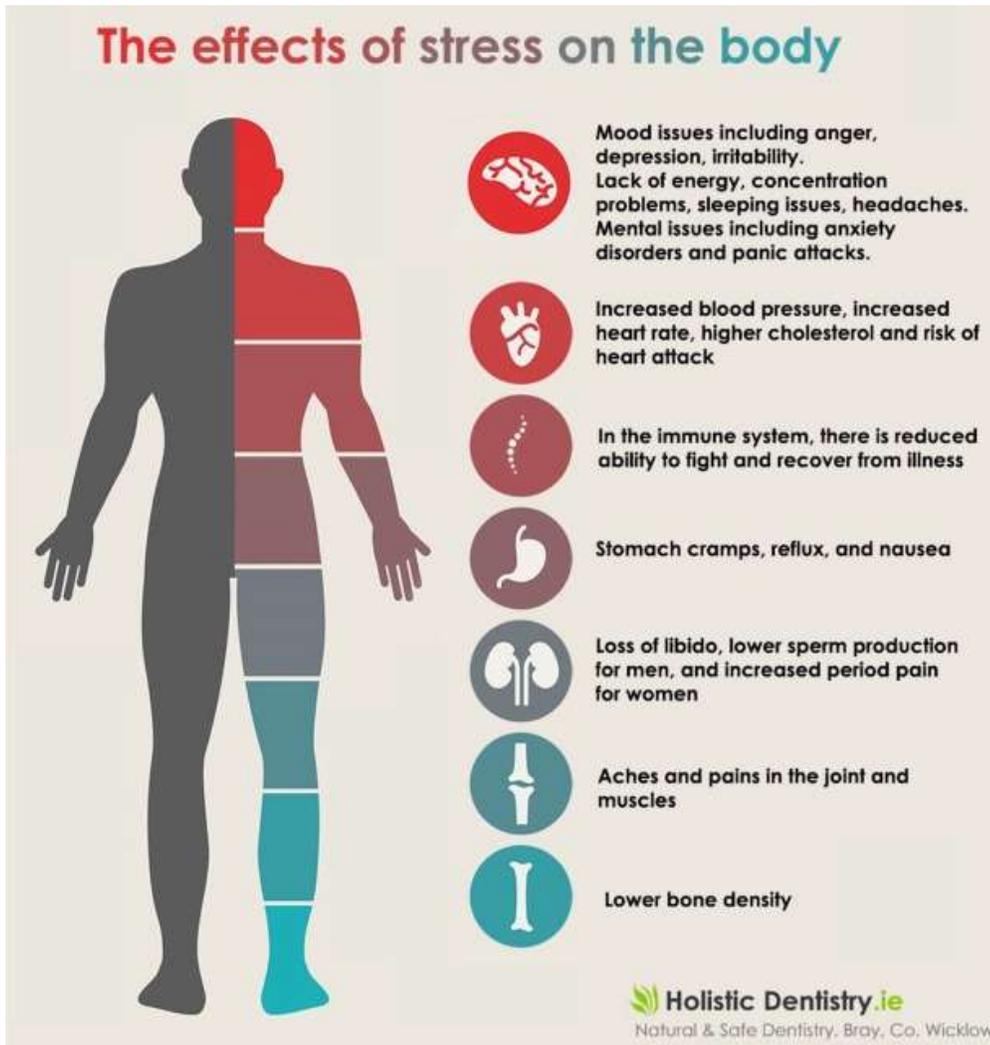
Perception- Can cause stress. What might be very stressful for one person could be exciting to another; public speaking, driving on the interstate, international travel. Some people are better at rolling with the punches and even thrive on a high-stress lifestyle while others can't handle small obstacles or frustrations. **KNOW YOUR LIMITS!!!**

Factors that affect stress tolerance.

- **Support network**-friends and family can be a good buffer against stress, on the other side loneliness and isolation can increase stress.
- **Sense of control**-confidence in yourself and your abilities to handle challenges and persevere can affect how you experience stress. However if you believe you have little control/that you're at the mercy of your environment/circumstances, stress will hit you harder.
- **Attitude and outlook**-if you are hopeful and optimistic, you will be less vulnerable to stress. Stress-hardy people embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, believe in a higher purpose and accept change as a natural and inevitable part of life.
- **Ability to deal with emotions**-learn how to soothe yourself and deal with anger, sadness, and troubles. Identify and deal with your emotions. This can help you overcome stress and bounce back from hard times.
- **Knowledge and perception**-the more you know about a situation (how long it might last and what to expect) will help you deal with stress. Think of the example of surgery and recovery time. If you know what to expect afterwards, you can readjust your ideas and be realistic with your emotions and recovery time.

How does stress affect the body?

- **Depression/Anxiety**-stress overload can cause feelings of depression and lead to increased anxiety.
- **Pain**-increased stress levels can change our perception of pain, causing us to feel more intense pain than we normally would and also prolonging pain/causing chronic pain. This is due to higher levels of cortisol and adrenaline, in addition to being constantly tense from flight or fight mode.
- **Sleep**-stress can disrupt our sleep patterns, causing insomnia or intense fatigue.
- **Autoimmune diseases**-this occurs when the body's immune system attacks itself. The body perceives something like the skin or the joints as foreign so it attacks them. Examples include psoriasis and type 1 diabetes.
- **Digestion**-stress increases the acids in our stomachs and can lead to heartburn and upset stomach.
- **Skin conditions**-stress can make existing skin conditions worse (psoriasis, acne) and can actually cause hives and rashes to develop.
- **Heart disease**-stress is directly related to high blood pressure, cholesterol levels and anxiety. How we deal with stress can cause heart problems as well. Coping mechanism such as smoking and drinking or overeating/eating poorly all make our heart work harder.
- **Weight problems**-the stress hormone cortisol rises during times of stress and it signals to us that we need to eat. The body thinks it's used calories due to feeling stress even though it hasn't. Cortisol continues to flood the system and trigger the urge to eat.
- **Reproductive issues**-both cortisol and adrenaline affect progesterone and testosterone.
- **Thinking and memory**-memory loss, brain fog, anxiety and worry! Stress changes chemicals in the brain, hormones affect our brains-everything is connected with the mind and the body.



Warning Signs

- **Cognitive symptoms**-memory problems, inability to concentrate, poor judgement, seeing only the negative, anxious or racing thoughts, constant worrying.
- **Emotional symptoms**-depression or general unhappiness, anxiety/agitation, moodiness/irritability/anger, feeling overwhelmed, loneliness and isolation.
- **Physical symptoms**-aches and pains, diarrhea/constipation, nausea/dizziness, chest pain/rapid heart rate, loss of sex drive, frequent colds or flu.
- **Behavioral symptoms**-eating more/eating less, sleeping too much or too little, withdrawing from others, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol/cigarettes/drugs to relax, nervous habits (nail biting, pacing).

Self-Care Solutions



Self-care is any activity that we do deliberately to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health. It's not something that we force ourselves to do. We must enjoy it! Self-care isn't selfish, it's key to a balanced life:

- ***Stick to the basics:*** Start with an activity you enjoy, you can add to it or refine it as time goes on.
- ***Plan your self-care:*** Make it an active choice, announce your intentions to increase your commitment to the activity of your choice, and add the activity to your calendar.
- ***Keep a conscious mind:*** Be aware of what you do for self-care. How does it feel? Why are you doing it? And keep in mind what the outcomes are. If you don't see something as self-care, then it won't work that way for you. Forcing yourself to participate in activities that you don't want to do is not self-care!
- ***Get moving!*** Exercise or move your body in a way that you connect with and relate to; hiking, swimming, bowling dancing, running, you name it! Movement gets our endorphins flowing-endorphins are the feel good chemicals in the brain. Exercise can take our minds off of our troubles and help relax our tense muscles.
- ***Connect to others:*** Spend time with family or friends, even brief exchanges with a stranger can help calm our nervous system. If you don't have relationships make doing so a priority.
- ***Engage your senses:*** Find sensory input that works for you; sight/sound/taste/smell/touch/movement, experiment to find what works for you.
- ***Learn how to relax:*** Try a guided meditation or yoga, deep breathing, quiet time, rest your mind and your body. Do what works for you.
- ***Eat a healthy diet:*** The food you eat can affect how your body deals with stress. Processed and convenience foods/fast foods and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress while eating fruits and veggies with protein will help support your body as it deals with stress. Take care of your body by putting good foods into it!
- ***Get rest:*** Lack of sleep can cause us to think irrationally. Being stressed out can make it difficult to get to sleep. This can become a vicious cycle. Make your bedroom a peaceful, calm place where you can relax.

How to do Self Care



- **Create a “no” list**-we make to do lists all of the time but consider making a list of things you can say “no” to without feeling guilty and that allows you to free up some time for yourself and the things you love to do.
- **Eat a healthy diet.**
- **Get enough sleep.**
- **Exercise.**
- **Follow up with medical care.**
- **Use relaxation and meditation techniques (see below).**
- **Spend time with people you love.**
- **Do one relaxing activity every day.**
- **Do something fun every day!**
- **Laugh**-watch a funny movie or spend time with people who make you laugh, laughter has many healing properties. It’s very difficult to laugh and feel anger or pain at the same time.
- **Get out in nature**-natural settings can reduce anger, fear and stress in addition to reducing blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension and stress hormones.
- **Use technology to help you relax.** Here are some suggestions for you:
 - If you have a smart phone there are several apps you can download for free or low cost that help with relaxation.
 - Anxiety Free-guided recordings for relaxation.
 - Acupressure-this app teaches you how to do self-acupressure points.
 - Nature sounds-help relax you while you go to sleep.
 - The Worry Box-personal diary where you input your worries, the box then helps you decide if the worry is important or not. The app will also give you techniques to help you manage your worries.
 - Gratitude apps-these help you list out what you are grateful for. Studies show that remembering the good things in your life help improve your mood and lead to a more positive focus.

Guided Meditation Lesson Plan

- Close your eyes. Notice your breathing. Is it fast? Is it slow?
- Put your hand on your stomach. Notice how your stomach goes in when you breathe in, and out when you breathe out.
- Take a long, deep breath in through your nose, and breathe out through your mouth, fully and completely. Breathe like this a couple more times.
- Now imagine your body. Notice parts that are hurt, or are tight or tense. Notice parts that feel comfortable and loose.
- Use your breath. When you find a part of your body that is tight or hurts, send your breath there. Breathe out. Your breath can make that part of your body relaxed, loose; soft.
- Feel your head, your face, your shoulders, your back, your arms and your hands. Notice your stomach, your legs, your knees and your feet.
- Notice the sounds in the room. The people moving, the building. Not thinking, just noticing and listening. Breathe slowly and easily, in and out.
- Feel the chair under you where your body touches it. Feel your muscles relax as you breathe. Keep watching your breathing in and out, easy and peaceful.
- When you are ready, take a long, slow, deep breath in. Then breathe out completely and gently open your eyes.

Have one person dim the lights and guide the others through this short meditation exercise by slowly reading through it and giving time for people to notice their breath and the sensations in their bodies. Discuss how you feel after this! Are you more relaxed? Was this difficult for you to do? If so-why?

**Created by Lisa Gimbel, Managing Stress to Improve Learning*
<https://nelrc.org/managingstress/tools.html>