

Recognizing Stress and the Effects of Overload

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. But when one is constantly running in emergency mode, as is often the case for a family caregiver, the mind and body pay the price.

The body simply does not distinguish between physical and psychological threats. If you have a lot of responsibilities and worries, your emergency stress response may be “on” most of the time. The more your body’s stress system is activated, the easier it is to trip and the harder it is to shut off.

Long-term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems. Chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in the body. It can:

- Raise blood pressure
- Suppress the immune system
- Increase the risk of heart attack and stroke
- Speed up the aging process

And long-term, stress can even rewire the brain, leaving one more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Take this quick quiz to determine if you are in control of stress or if stress is controlling you:

- Yes No When I feel agitated, do I know how to quickly calm and soothe myself?
- Yes No Can I easily let go of my anger?
- Yes No Can I turn to others to help me calm down and feel better?
- Yes No When I come home at night, do I walk in the door feeling alert and relaxed?
- Yes No Am I seldom distracted or moody?
- Yes No Am I able to recognize upsets that others seem to be experiencing?
- Yes No When my energy is low, do I know how to boost it?

Feeling frazzled and overwhelmed? That is the sign that it is time to take action to bring your nervous system back into balance. You can protect yourself by learning how to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.



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When under pressure, behavior can present as:

- Talking too fast or too loud
- Yawning
- Fiddling and twitching, nail biting, grinding teeth, drumming fingers, pacing, etc.
- Bad moods: irritability, being critical, overly sensitive replies, anger and irrationality when responding to problems and people
- Being unreasonably negative
- Making less realistic judgments
- Inability to concentrate
- Difficulty making decisions
- Being more forgetful
- Making more mistakes
- Being more accident prone
- Disorganization, confusion and worry
- Changing work habits
- Increased absenteeism
- Neglect of personal appearance and personal hygiene

If one is experiencing any of the following, professional help may be needed:

- Persistent symptoms of depression
- Constant anxiety, irritability or anger
- Feelings of detachment, numbness or exhaustion
- Continuous self-criticism
- Withdrawal from usual activities
- Negligence or hatred of caregiving responsibilities
- Trouble at work or in relationships
- Substance abuse

Stress Management

Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. Stress management involves changing the stressful situation when possible, changing reactions to the situation when it cannot be changed, taking care of yourself, and making time for rest and relaxation.

Even if the stress in life is out of your control, you can always control the way you respond and how much it affects you. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the stress response. When practiced regularly, these activities lead to a reduction in everyday stress levels and a boost in feelings of joy and serenity. They also increase the ability to stay calm and collected under pressure.

The greatest protection against stress?

A strong support network is always going to be the greatest protection against stress. With trusted friends and/or family members and/or a caregiving team such as Continuum offers, life's pressures will not seem as overwhelming. This is one part of taking care of yourself: allowing others to help alleviate some of the responsibilities and pressures.

How stress operates on the body:

When a period of stress is prolonged, and especially when it is not followed by some form of physical exertion to “relieve the pressure”, several things happen. Firstly, all forms of stress are cumulative—that is, they add up on one another, building up more and more pressure on the system and requiring more and more “release” to restore balance. As a result, the levels of adrenaline build up in the body, causing chronic, long-term increases in blood pressure, heart rate, and reduced digestion, which are themselves damaging, requiring more and more repairs by the body to put them right.

The result of this is that stores of nutrients, vitamins, minerals, enzymes, balancing hormones and all sorts of other “goodies” are used up (if you drive with your engine at 6000 revs instead of 2500 you use more fuel, more oil, and your engine wears out faster—the body is no different).

This leaves your body in something of a dilemma. It needs to replace the things you have used up, and fast. However, if you are still stressed, your digestive system is all but shut down, so you can't absorb nutrients. However, your body still craves nutrients. This means that those body processes that are not essential to survival get reduced or even shut down completely to conserve energy and nutrients. If this isn't enough, additional nutrients have to be found from any possible source. In extreme cases, this means that your body starts to break down existing structures—muscle, bone, connective tissue etc., to extract the nutrients from them for use elsewhere.

Clearly, this is not a good thing long-term, and its results are as predictable as they are damaging.

Sources: The Language of Emotional Intelligence by Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., eHow, Mind Tools, Help Guide, Natural Health Information Center

