

What is Stress?

Stress is a normal human experience that affects all of us. A small amount of stress, giving a presentation at work, for example, can be good and can motivate us to do well. But too much stress can have harmful effects on the mind and body.

Our brain has its own alarm system that's constantly on alert for our protection.

"One of its major purposes is for us to scan the environment and detect stress."

When the brain senses a threat or source of stress, it sends signals to your body, releasing hormones that increase heart rate and blood pressure.

"Those responses are designed to allow you to perform better in that situation. So, if it's a test or if it's public speaking...the stress response is mobilizing resources so that you can perform at your best level."

Stress can have positive or negative effects. Positive effects can make you feel motivated or excited. Once the stress is gone, your body settles back to normal. Stress can also have a negative effect on you. You might have trouble sleeping, feel irritable, or feel like you can't cope with the situation.

"The effects of stress on people can result in anxiety, frustration, irritability, people might say grouchiness, downright anger, snapping at people."

Stress is also defined by how long it lasts. Acute Stress only lasts as long as the stressful event is occurring.

"Let's say you're hanging a picture on the wall and you bang your thumb with the hammer. That's probably acute stress."

Chronic Stress, on the other hand, is when a person has high levels of stress over a longer period of time. People with chronic stress often feel run-down, exhausted, or overwhelmed.

Anything that causes you to worry a lot can cause chronic stress. This could include: problems with your job or finances, issues with your spouse or family, or serious health problems.

"We start out with the same kinds of things that are going on in acute stress. Changes in blood pressure. Changes in heart rate. Changes in brain focus and attention and activity. In chronic stress, these body responses are prolonged. They are responses that are pretty taxing on the body and on the brain."

The impact of chronic stress on your body and your brain can include: Anxiety, Trouble sleeping, Pain, such as headaches or muscle tension, High blood pressure, An increased risk of heart disease, Stomach problems, Depression, and Obesity. Fire department Lieutenant Zach Zimmer knows stress firsthand. As a first responder, he deals with stressful situations on a daily basis.

"We are responding to incidents where people potentially are having the worst day of their life. Something is going wrong every time that we're responding to a call. Either the person is sick or they're losing their property to a fire. They've had a car accident. And that can build up over time."

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Having an outlet for that stress is important. Zach leans on his colleagues at the firehouse.

"We have a great family atmosphere here. So, we can talk to one another and everyone can kind of relate to it because they were with you or they've probably been in a similar situation."

Another issue that's linked to chronic stress is that it can lead people to make dangerous choices in order to try to relieve their stress.

"Drinking, overeating, gambling, drug use, People turn to these as a coping mechanism but they're not effective coping mechanisms. They may take their mind off of their issues or their stressors for a while, but they don't identify the causes."

It's important to find positive solutions to your stress, such as exercise, meditation or doing hobbies you enjoy. If you feel so stressed that it's affecting your daily life and it just won't go away, this is a sign that you may need to talk to a mental health professional.