

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

What Is Stress?

Stress is a word we hear—or even use—everyday. What does it really mean? Perhaps through understanding, we can actually prevent, reduce or better cope with it.

Technically, stress is a physical or emotional reaction to a demanding event or situation. When something happens, we automatically evaluate it to determine how it makes us feel—annoyed, overwhelmed, upset, excited or threatened—and what we can do about it. If we decide that the demands of a situation outweigh our coping skills, we are likely to unconsciously label it "stressful" and react with the classic stress response.

Stress can be a healthy way of enhancing performance, or an unhealthy drain on physical and mental resources. The bottom line is that stress is normal, inevitable and depending on your awareness of what triggers the stress response in you and how you handle it, manageable.

Here are some great tips to help you understand stress and the effects it can have:

The Stress Response

The body's first reaction to stress is often called the "fight or flight" response. This is the body mobilizing its energy stores for "fight or flight" with a rush of adrenaline. If there is no relief from the stressors that caused the initial "fight or flight" response, your body will start releasing stored sugars and fats. If the situation continues without resolution, your body's energy reserves can become depleted. Physical reactions include muscle tension, insomnia, a racing pulse and a knot in the stomach. Stress levels may also contribute to heart disease and stroke.

Many people also have emotional and behavioral responses layered on top of the physical. These can include overeating, drinking excessively, withdrawal and depression.

Different Stressors for Different Folks

What one finds stressful depends on the kind of person they are and what kind of coping skills they have. Stress-provoking situations can range from minor daily hassles to major life events—and not all of them are negative.

Traffic jams, deadlines and disagreements create stress, and losing a job or dealing with the death of a loved one are among the greatest stressors we can face. But getting married or receiving a promotion are wonderful experiences that are also stressful.

Knowing You're Under Stress

It's important to recognize unhealthy responses to stress that signal that it's time to do something about it. Each of us has different warning signs and symptoms, which can include the following symptoms:

- Irritability
- Frequent complaining, blaming or criticizing
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Headaches, back pain, upset stomach, frequent colds or flu

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- Difficulty concentrating
- Lack of motivation

Dealing with Stress

There is no single, "right way" of coping with stress. You need to figure out what works best for you, given your personality, temperament and your work and family situation. Here are some steps to take to do just that:

- Learn to recognize your own stress symptoms.
- Look at your lifestyle and see what, if anything can be changed.
- If change is possible—do it! But also learn to accept and manage what cannot be changed.
- Reflect on whether life could be simplified. Do your children really need to be at activities every night? Cut back to your favorite pursuits. Enjoy some "down time" at home with your family.
- Recognize that you can't do everything. Learn to say "No."
- Prioritize tasks that must be done. Divide each task into manageable stages.
- Delegate or eliminate tasks that aren't essential.

Follow a Healthy Lifestyle

Physical health and emotional health go hand in hand. Here are some tips to help you heal stresses with mind and body:

- Use relaxation techniques to help reduce the effects of stress. Try yoga, meditation or deep breathing.
- Exercise is one of the most effective stress remedies. Try developing a light exercise routine a few times a week.
- Eat a healthy diet and get plenty of rest. Make time for yourself in your schedule.
- Have fun with family and friends. It's a great way to regenerate the energy you need for life's challenges.

Understanding what stress is and what triggers your stress response are the first steps to combating its effects on your life.