

What is Stress?

Stress is a normal part of life for everyone and a little stress can actually be good for us, helping us to achieve and succeed in things such as finishing deadlines, assignments and preparing for exams. It helps us during brief periods of pressure, by stimulating us, speeding up our productivity levels and increasing our motivation. This healthy type of stress is called Estress.

Distress, on the other hand, is when the demands made on us are out of balance with our personal resources to deal with those demands and this can cause us harm to our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.



Stress is an emotional issue. It is an emotion that we feel when things get too much for us to biologically* cope with. The stress response sets in motion certain automatic changes in the body that are designed to give it a quick burst of energy in order to deal with the situation. These patterns of changes are what is known as the “fight-or-flight” response, a human response that has evolved from our prehistoric ancestors, who faced daily dangers in their search for food and shelter and had to either flee or enter battle.

Of course, we no longer face such dangers, but our bodies continue to react as if we do. So instead of responding to a saber-tooth tiger lurking behind a tree, the body reacts to daily demands like being reprimanded by a supervisor, or worrying about bills, coursework and exams. Stress is a fear response to not being able to do something OR the perceived consequence of not being able to do something, of losing something or of missing out.

Regardless of what triggers the stress response, the body goes through the following changes, which are explained below:

Physical Responses to Stress:

Your heart beats fast

You can *feel* your heart pounding

You can *hear* your heart pounding

You sweat – hot or cold

Your face feels flush and warm

Your skin feels cool and damp

Your extremities tingle

Your breath is shallow

You hold your breath

Your stomach feels like you are in a lift that is coming to a stop

Your stomach feels nauseous

You have a knot in your stomach

You feel you want to go to the loo

You have the runs

Your mouth is dry

You have a funny taste in your mouth

Your eyes feel dry and/or gritty

You notice goosebumps

The hair on your arms or the back of your neck stands on end

You feel an adrenaline rush

You feel tension in your forehead, neck, shoulders, chest, stomach, jaw

Your legs feel like jelly

When your legs are crossed, you move the tops one up and down

You tap your fingers

You bite your nails or the top of a pen

You grind your teeth

Your toes are clenched

You bite the side of your lip or mouth

Your eyebrows are raised or drawn together

Your thighs or buttocks are tight

Too much stress can also have a detrimental effect on our emotions and mental and physical health because the stress levels that we experience are much higher than the resources we have to balance and manage the stressors. The following shows you typical signs and symptoms of emotion and mental stress overload.

Emotional and Mental Responses to Stress:

Feeling tearful

Feeling tired

Sleeping too much or difficulty sleeping

Feeling overwhelmed

Feeling angry

Feeling low in mood

Feeling anxious

Feeling irritable

Struggling to remember things

Difficulty concentrating

Over eating or under eating

Using alcohol / drugs to feel better

The good news is that because stress is an emotion we can actually do something about it to reduce our stress responses. When we learn how to control our stress we learn that we do not have to feel bad and can help ourselves to reduce levels of stress and decrease the physical, emotional or mental difficulties that we may be experiencing.

This course will give you lots of positive tools in the form of information sheets, worksheets and exercises for you to practice that you can start straight away and feel better.

However, it is important to understand that if you are struggling to handle the emotional aspects of your everyday levels of stress, that you reach out to a college professional or a mental health professional.