



## Stress

Stress occurs in situations that we perceive as taxing or exceeding our resources. We also experience stress in situations that are different from what we believe *should* happen or what we want. Stress is a natural and inevitable part of life. Some of these stressors – such as swatting a fly away – are trivial, however, other stressors are much more significant.

Think about the experience of stress as an attempt to mobilize our resources in response to a stressful event. For example, if we are walking down a dark street and someone jumps out and attacks us, our body helps us respond to the attack. The problem is that our body can either respond to and prevent an attack (helpfully) or freeze (unhelpfully).

We are more likely to experience stress in response to things that we value than those we do not. For example, college students who value their education are more likely to experience stress about their grades than those who are in school only as a way of postponing getting a job.

We experience stress in response to both negative and positive events. For example, we might be stressed losing a job, but it can be very confusing to feel stressed in response to the holidays, getting married, or giving birth. In addition, our friends and family may not understand such feelings, leaving us feeling isolated and misunderstood during these periods.

The daily hassles we experience (e.g., spilling orange juice at breakfast, losing your keys, getting a parking ticket) can be a better predictor of stress than just the things we typically see as stressors, perhaps because they signal that we are not handling things as well as we'd like. The

more stressors and hassles we experience, the more likely we will feel stress – the cycle of stress can increase due to triggers combined with our reaction.

### Signs of Stress

We experience somatic, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral changes when stressed. Not everyone experiences all of these changes, nor does a single person react to all stressors in the same way. While responses can be problematic, they can also be helpful in responding to the stressor and solving the problem.

1. **Somatic symptoms.** Somatic symptoms can include headaches, backaches, aches and pains, or other muscular tension; nausea and stomach aches; fatigue; elevated heart rate and blood pressure; shortness of breath; and insomnia.
2. **Emotional changes.** People can experience both positive and negative emotions when stressed (for example, when getting married). On the one hand, they may feel energized and excited. On the other hand, or in other situations, they may feel distressed, anxious, worried, sad, or afraid. Some people become more irritable or moody when stressed.
3. **Cognitive changes.** People report a variety of cognitive changes when stressed, some of which they find helpful (e.g., increased focus, increased awareness of their surroundings, improved problem solving). Other cognitive changes can interfere with problem solving and can cause problems of their own (e.g., catastrophizing, ruminating, anticipating negative outcomes, or focusing narrowly on more pessimistic outcomes).
4. **Behavioral responses.** People respond to stressors in a variety of ways, some positive, which help them cope with the stressor, but people also can respond more negatively and in ways that cause additional problems. These negative responses may include withdrawing from the situation or other people, sleeping more (or less), eating more (or less), crying more frequently, or self-injuring.

### Coping More Effectively with Stress

The way that we respond to stressors – physically, emotionally, cognitively, or behaviorally — can help us solve problems or create additional ones.

There are a number of things that we can do to cope more effectively with a stressor. We can change the way we look at the situation; develop or access resources that will help us respond

to the situation more effectively; obtain social support; and learn how to manage emotions well.

**1. Challenge your perceptions of the stressor.** People tend to engage in more negative thought patterns when stressed. When you notice yourself engaging in extreme thought patterns, take a breath and ask yourself whether there are other, more helpful ways of perceiving the stressor – as it is difficult to solve problems and persist in attacking a stressor when feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. "Is this *really* the end of the world?" "What really matters?" "Is it true that there's no way out?"

**2. Build and access resources.** You likely already have some resources that can help you handle a stressor well. These might include your problem-solving skills, empathy, patience, curiosity, leadership skills, or study habits. Use resources you already have and find places to build the resources you need.

For example, if you are having difficulty at work, which of your strengths or other resources might help you handle the problem more effectively? What skills do you need (e.g., better computer skills)? How can you build them?

**3. Gather social support.** Social support is among the most important resources for managing stress. Supports include your partner, friends, family, coworkers, church or temple, and your Higher Power. They may help you brainstorm responses to the stressor; remind you that you have people who believe in you; or help you handle a situation.

**4. Learn how to manage emotions well.** Managing your emotions well can also be an important way of reducing your stress. When people are stressed, they tend to breathe rapidly or hold their breath. Try breathing more slowly when you are stressed. Remain present in the moment rather than avoiding the situation. Find ways to reduce muscle tension – many people find activities like running or doing yoga are helpful. Listen to calming music. Talk to people who can help calm you down and feel more hopeful rather than create further worry, anxiety, or pessimism.

Cope more by proactively by eating well, sleeping, and exercising regularly; maintaining a good support system; and, preventing problems when possible. Consider engaging in a regular spiritual practice (e.g., attending church, praying, meditating, doing yoga, or walking in the woods). Slowing down and reflecting can build your psychological resources and help you respond more effectively when you do experience a stressor.

While many people have a go-to coping strategy – talking to friends, running, cleaning, listening to music – most people need a variety of coping strategies that are well-suited for particular situations; for example, cleaning when they need to organize their surroundings and mind. Solving problems – when they can be solved – is often the most effective way of handling stress.

### **Building Resilience to Stress**

Everyone faces trials and tribulations in their everyday life. There are those events or situations that may be small and seemingly insignificant, but that still require us to contend with and take care of. Then there are those highly stressful events that demand that we take action and make major adjustments in how we live our life. These stressors can range from serious illness, financial blows, or other unexpected traumas such as natural disasters, the loss of a loved one, or being a victim in an unexpected tragic situation.

The term "resilience" has been coined to refer to those qualities and skills that allow a person to effectively deal with all the stressful situations that life may bring one's way. And it is not just coping ability that makes one resilient. Just as important is the ability to bounce back from adversity and disappointments, as well as knowing when to ask for help and where to find those resources.

Resilience is a set of skills that most everyone can learn and develop. Resilience is a lifelong learning process that continually allows us to not avoid problems or stressful situations, but to effectively handle them.

How does a person build their resilient qualities? The American Psychological Association has compiled a list of ways to accomplish this:

- **Make connections.** Encourage and nurture good relationships with family and friends. Know who, where, and how to ask for help. Keep yourself involved. Help others. Be a mentor.

- **Try to view stressors as opportunities to grow.** There is much to be gained from how you interpret what happens in your life; how you perceive may alter how you respond to these challenges.
- **Accept that change is part of living.** Always focus on what can be changed, and what is in your control, rather than bemoan what you cannot or may not have power over.
- **Move toward your goals.** Keep your goals realistic and attainable. Work at them, make necessary adjustments, and do not let difficulty persuade you to give up.
- **Take decisive action.** Take direct action when you can. Do not withdraw; do not put your head in the sand. Ask for help when you feel you cannot do it alone.
- **Look for opportunities for self-discovery.** Once again, it is about how you interpret what has happened in your life. See challenges and crises as chances to learn about yourself, and about your abilities. Knowing that you have dealt with crises in the past lets you know that you have grown and changed regardless of what roadblocks and hardships you have encountered.
- **Nurture a positive view of yourself.** Give yourself a break. Everyone faces stress, and everyone struggles with difficult situations. Having hardships and stressful times can work to build confidence in yourself and in your ability to manage life. Even when things have not worked out well, we always learn for the next time.
- **Keep things in perspective.** Do not magnify the negative impact of difficulties, no matter how stressful. Keep your perspective. Know what you have accomplished and know who and what resources are there for you.
- **Maintain a hopeful outlook.** Do not ever lose sight of a better future. Optimism is not ignoring misfortune or difficulty. True optimism is about a positive outlook, and hopefulness. It is about finding ways to continually learn and grow, and to appreciate who we are, despite all we have been faced with.
- **Take care of yourself.** Find ways to nurture yourself physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Not only will you feel better daily as a result, but you will also be better prepared to successfully manage the next stress that comes along in life's journey.

For more information, please visit: <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress>

If you or someone you know could benefit from talking to someone about stress and would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our [Psychologist Locator](#).