



Cornell Research Program on Self-Injurious Behavior in Adolescents and Young Adults

BY DIANA BALLESTEROS & JANIS WHITLOCK

Coping Stress Management Strategies

Who is this for?

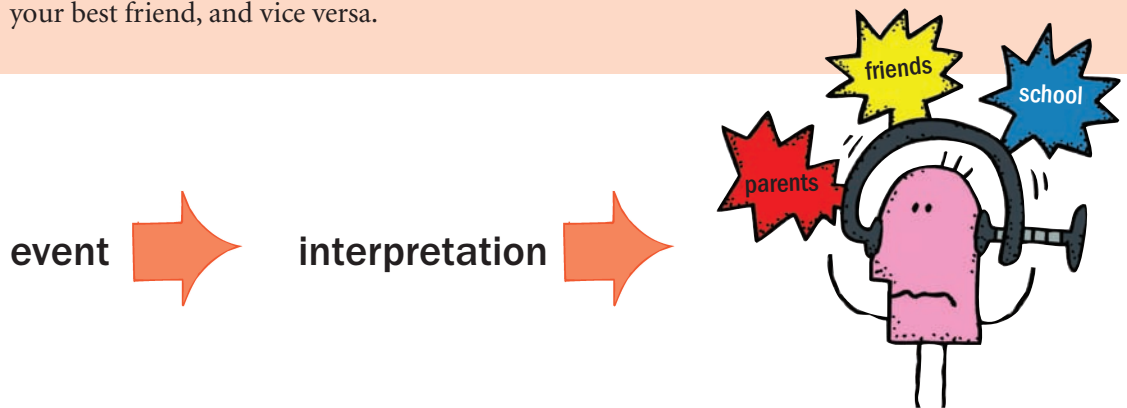
Anyone dealing with stress or helping others to cope with stress.

What is included?

- What is stress?
- Stress vs. distress
- Stress symptoms
- What are stressors?
- Avoiding stress
- How to handle stress

What is Stress?

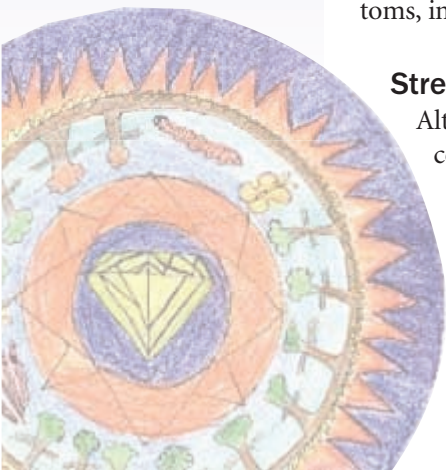
Stress is our natural way of responding to the demands of our ever-changing world.¹ Although we all experience change and demands regularly, the way that we *interpret* these internal and external changes directly affects the degree to which we feel stress. As a result, not all individuals interpret the same events as stressful; what may seem stressful to you may not be the same for your best friend, and vice versa.



Stress can be a result of both positive and negative experiences, and it is a necessary part of our daily lives. From an evolutionary standpoint stress was necessary for survival (i.e., imagine hunting large prey on which one’s entire tribe is dependent) and some stress continues to be a helpful part of our modern lives since it motivates us to accomplish tasks or make needed changes. We all feel the pressure of our environment during times of transition (i.e., at the time of high school graduation) and in preparation for significant life events (i.e., in anticipation of a job interview). Although response to stress is often adaptive (i.e., feeling stress before an exam may be a critical motivator in studying for it), too much stress or an inability to cope with it can cause negative emotional and physical symptoms, including, but not limited to, anxiety, irritability, and increased heart rate.²

Stress versus Distress

Although some stress is a natural and inevitable part of our lives, feeling burdened or unable to cope can be problematic and can seriously affect your mental and physical well-being.³ Constantly being exposed to stressful situations can be over-stimulating and if we are constantly feeling stressed, we may begin to feel unable to manage the problems at hand. In order to avoid situations in which we feel “overloaded,” we must first identify what stresses us, what our threshold for stress is, and how we can most effectively manage stressful situations.



Am I Stressed?

Stress Symptoms

Before being able to identify stressors (the things that make us stressed in the first place), it is important to identify whether or not stress has become a problem in your life. Take note of any emotional and physical changes that you have recently experienced:

- Are you irritable?
- Are you easily upset over small events?
- Are you feeling isolated or withdrawn from your peers and loved ones?
- Are you unhappy with yourself? (i.e., do you have feelings of worthlessness?)

Physically, are you experiencing...⁴

- Sleeplessness?
- Irregular eating?
- Difficulty breathing?
- Low energy?
- Lack of concentration?
- Loss of interest?
- Over-tiredness?



Once you have identified and accepted how you are feeling, it is important to identify what exactly it is that is causing you stress.

What are stressors?

No one event, regardless of how traumatic, can be detrimental to health. Stress becomes problematic when stressors accumulate and/or become recurrent, resulting in distress or feelings of anxiety and hopelessness.

Stressors come in a variety of different forms: tests, finances, job interviews, health problems, achieved goals, praise, family conflicts, romantic relationships, competitions, homework assignments, etc. Remember, stressors can be positive and negative!

Here are some stress signals⁵:

Feelings

- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Fear
- Moodiness
- Embarrassment

Behavioral

- Stuttering or other speech difficulties
- Crying
- Acting impulsively
- Nervous laughter
- Snapping at friends
- Teeth grinding or jaw clenching
- Increased smoking, alcohol or other drug use
- Being prone to more accidents
- Increase or decrease in appetite

Thoughts

- Self-criticism
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Forgetfulness or mental disorganization
- Preoccupation with the future
- Repetitive thoughts
- Fear of failure

Physical

- Tight muscles
- Cold or sweaty hands
- Back or neck problems
- Sleep disturbances
- Stomach distress
- More colds and infections
- Fatigue
- Rapid breathing or pounding heart
- Trembling
- Dry mouth

We have already identified the feeling of stress, and now it is time to identify what is causing it. Take a moment to identify which events in your life may be stressful. What about the event makes you feel stressed?

Here is a list of potential stressors.⁶ Consider what is stressful to you:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> Death of a loved one | <input type="radio"/> Change in health of family member | <input type="radio"/> Change in eating habits |
| <input type="radio"/> Relocation | <input type="radio"/> Failed important course/missed deadlines | <input type="radio"/> Chronic car trouble |
| <input type="radio"/> Divorce of parents | <input type="radio"/> Major personal injury or illness | <input type="radio"/> Pregnancy |
| <input type="radio"/> Encounter with the legal system | <input type="radio"/> Managing learning or other disabilities | <input type="radio"/> Too many missed classes/sick days |
| <input type="radio"/> New school/job | <input type="radio"/> Change in living conditions | <input type="radio"/> Long commute to work/school |
| <input type="radio"/> Marriage | <input type="radio"/> Argument with instructor | <input type="radio"/> Working more than one job |
| <input type="radio"/> Lost job | <input type="radio"/> Outstanding achievement | <input type="radio"/> Impending graduation |
| <input type="radio"/> Elected to leadership position | <input type="radio"/> Change in social life | <input type="radio"/> Argument with family member |
| <input type="radio"/> New romantic relationship | <input type="radio"/> Change in sleeping habits | <input type="radio"/> Sexual concerns |
| <input type="radio"/> Serious argument with close friend | <input type="radio"/> Lower grades than expected | <input type="radio"/> Changes in alcohol and/or drug use |
| <input type="radio"/> Increase in course load or difficulty/increased responsibility at job | <input type="radio"/> Breakup of relationship | <input type="radio"/> Roommate problems |
| | <input type="radio"/> Financial problems | <input type="radio"/> Raising children |

Avoiding Stress:

↳ Relaxation is key –

- Downtime is important: consider taking a walk, playing a video game, or taking a bath (remember to be realistic about how much time you can afford to spend on these activities)

↳ Stay physically healthy!

- Good nutrition will improve your ability to deal with stress
- Aerobic exercise reduces anxiety by 50%
- Sleep is necessary for productivity: 8-9 hours is recommended, but a regular sleep schedule is necessary

↳ Mental health

- Identify your goals
- Prioritize
- Time management and scheduling will help you complete your tasks
- Work at one task at a time
- Do not ignore stress – deal with it!

For more information, see <http://www.uiowa.edu/~ucs/copstress.html>



I'm stressed... what do I do now?

- Consider your coping habits. Make a list of strategies that you have used in the past. Which ones are healthy? Which ones may be contributing to health problems?

HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES⁷

- Exercise
- Down time for self care
- Balancing work and play
- Time management
- Meditation

UNHEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES

- Alcohol/drug use
- Avoidance of event
- Procrastination
- Overeating
- Self-injury

Now that you are aware of your stress, stressors and potential coping styles, recognize that you are in control of the situation. If you have a big project due in a week, rather than procrastinating, consider creating a schedule in advance. By utilizing healthy coping skills such as this one, you will be promoting productivity while avoiding distress.

- Once you understand the cause or causes of your stress, do something about it right away. This can be something small, but it will help you feel in control. If you're stressing about a project that you just can't seem to get started, talk to your boss or professor – if they are the source of stress, reach out to a colleague. After expressing your concerns, consider writing up a schedule for yourself, and follow it. These steps will help you organize your thoughts.

If you're upset about a relationship problem, consider removing yourself from the situation by indulging in some time for yourself (i.e., read a book, have a bubble bath, go for a jog). By allowing yourself to engage in a relaxing situation, you may be able to gain some new perspective on the problem at hand.

“Do something right away, no matter how small.”⁸

- Try not to focus on the negative, “stress building” thoughts, but rather replace them with positive “stress busters.” Here is a helpful resource: <http://www.stressrelease.com>
- Reach out to your family and friends – developing a support network will allow you to consider new ways to cope healthily. It's also a good way to get your worries off your chest.

¹ <http://www.mtstcil.org/skills/stress-definition-1.html>

² http://www.ehealthmd.com/library/stress/STR_what.html

³ <http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/stress/stress.html>

⁴ http://www.samaritans.org/your_emotional_health/managing_stress.aspx

⁵ <http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/stress/stress.html>

⁶ <http://www.utexas.edu/student/cmhc/booklets/stress/stress.html>

⁷ <http://www.uiowa.edu/~ucs/copstress.html>