What Is Stress?

Everybody experiences both good and bad stress. It can come from mental activity, emotional activity, or physical activity.

The way you interpret stress is unique and personal. For example, what may be relaxing to one person may be stressful to another. Good stress can be healthy and useful. It helps you get to an appointment on time or meet a deadline. But when stress becomes overwhelming, it becomes distress, or bad stress. Bad stress can lead to chronic stress, which can leave you feeling nervous, on-edge, and tense. It also puts you at greater risk for numerous health problems, including heart disease, sleep problems, digestive problems, depression, obesity, memory impairment, and various skin conditions, such as eczema. Learning what causes stress and different ways to cope with it helps you be more balanced and healthy throughout life.

People who are experiencing stress overload may notice:

- anxiety or panic attacks;
- a feeling of being constantly pressured, hassled, and hurried;
- irritability and moodiness;
- physical symptoms, such as stomach problems, headaches, or even chest pain;
- allergic reactions, such as eczema or asthma;
- problems sleeping;
- drinking too much, smoking, overeating, or doing drugs; and;
- sadness or depression.

Everyone experiences stress a little differently. Some people become angry and act out their stress or take it out on others.

Some people internalize it and develop eating disorders or substance abuse problems. And some people who have a chronic illness may find that the symptoms of their illness flare up under an overload of stress.

Stages of Stress

The body reacts to stress in three ways:

Stage 1: Alarm.
Certain hormones are pumped into the bloodstream, which speeds up the heart rate, increases respiration and slows down digestive activity. The body is ready for either fight or flight. Such a situation can lead to stress-related illness such as ulcers, headaches, backaches, palpitations of the heart, rashes and other ailments.

Stage 2: Resistance and Adaptation.
The body tries to repair the damage caused in stage one and bring the body back to a “normal condition.” It is only when stress is not positively dealt with that the third stage occurs.

Stage 3: Exhaustion.
A person’s body cannot be stressed all the time. Release must occur or illness may result.

Having realistic expectations of yourself, shifting your focus to looking at what is really important, and taking care of yourself emotionally and physically will also increase your confidence to deal with stressors. Sometimes, taking a deep breath, meditating, relaxing, or taking time to smell the roses allow you to appreciate the little things so you don’t overreact to the big things.

Throughout the lifespan, you face multiple demands, but stress should not rule your life. Learning what causes stress and different ways you can cope with it is a healthy lifestyle behavior that will reduce pressure and anxiety and influence optimal aging.