

The Stress Response: Physiological, emotional, and cognitive SOS

Much like activating a complex computer program, your body's response to stress sets multiple functions into motion. You might smell your deodorant kicking in as you start to sweat; your voice and hands may start to shake; your stomach may get that unpleasant butterfly feeling as your thoughts begin to race. All of these sensations are a result of not one, not two, but three overarching stress responses in your body. These include your **physiological** response, **emotional** response, and **cognitive** response. So if you feel like a mess when under stress, there are three highly complex reasons why!

Physiological Signs of Stress

Physiologically, your body goes through a multitude of reflexes and reactions, many of which you may not be conscious of because they tend to happen all at once.

- ❖ Your muscles feel tense. Outwardly, this may appear as a clenched jaw, teeth grinding, shaking hands, or nervous ticks.
- ❖ You start to develop aches and pains, including headaches, neck or back pain, stomach aches, or muscle spasms.



- ❖ You experience respiratory issues like shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, or a choking/ smothering sensation
- ❖ You experience digestive issues, like heartburn, indigestion, nausea, gas, constipation or diarrhea, increased or decreased appetite, and unintended weight gain or weight loss.
- ❖ Your cardiovascular system goes into high alert, resulting in light-headedness, fainting, chest pain, palpitations, or a racing heart rate.



- ❖ Your senses go awry, leading to tinnitus or impaired hearing, blurred vision, impaired coordination or balance issues.
- ❖ Your temperature control goes haywire, making you blush uncontrollably, sweat, or shiver.
- ❖ Your immune system becomes compromised, causing rashes, hives, or other sensations of itchiness, unexplained or frequent allergy attacks, colds or cold sores, or other types of infections.
- ❖ You become exhausted, making you feel weak, low on energy, and constantly tired.
- ❖ And despite your fatigue, you still experience sleep disturbances, like insomnia, hypersomnia (sleeping too much), broken sleep (frequent waking, sleep that is not restful), and nightmares.

Emotional Signs of Stress

When stress is at its peak, you are likely to go through a multitude of emotions, hence the perfectly coined term “emotional roller-coaster.” Aside from feeling overwhelmed or overburdened, here are other signs that your stress level has reached unhealthy proportions.

- ❖ You feel angry, which can include emotional outbursts, mood swings, overreacting to minor annoyances, and irritability.
- ❖ You feel scared, which could consist of a fear of losing control or that you’re going crazy, excessive anxiety, a sense of impending doom, or sudden panic attacks.
- ❖ You feel sad, which could result in feeling blue, crying spells, or even suicidal thoughts.
- ❖ You begin to struggle with self-esteem issues, like negative self-talk (“I can’t do anything right. I won’t be able to get through this.”), feelings of worthlessness or loneliness, self-doubt, and rumination.

Cognitive Signs of Stress

On a physiological level, stress can lead to a host of medical problems and negatively affect multiple organs and bodily functions. The same applies to your cognitive functions. At this level, stress’ pervasive reach can have an effect on everything from memory to concentration, and even your ability to speak.



- ❖ You lose focus, which can result in racing, scattered, or confused thoughts.
- ❖ Your brain goes into overdrive, making it difficult to relax and unwind because you're always thinking about one problem or another, to fall asleep because you lie awake ruminating.
- ❖ You struggle with memory issues, like absentmindedness, forgetfulness, and trouble learning and processing new information.
- ❖ Your ability to reason things out becomes disrupted because you can't think straight, you're preoccupied with pessimistic thoughts or exclusively focused on negative events/situations, and you over-analyze every little issue and detail.

Behavioral Signs of Stress

When stress is at its peak, you are likely to go through a multitude of emotions, hence the perfectly coined term "emotional roller coaster." We all have behavioral patterns that make us unique; even if you consider yourself a spontaneous person who flies by the seat of your pants, this in and of itself is a behavioral blueprint of who you are. The only time we step out of this pattern is when something in our life changes, for better (marriage, birth of a child, promotion) or for worse (debt, job loss, death in the family). Aside from feeling overwhelmed or overburdened, here are other signs that your stress level has reached unhealthy proportions.

Behavioral signs of stress include the following:

- ❖ A change in demeanor, which can consist of visible agitation or restlessness, little interest in one's appearance, nervous habits like fidgeting, foot-tapping, or nail biting, obsessive and/or compulsive behavior (a cleaning spree, redoing a task over and over until it's "just right"), and fatigue or lack of energy.
- ❖ Performance issues at work, like tardiness, procrastination, disorganization, missing deadlines or meetings, messy work, neglecting clients or projects, reduced efficiency and productivity, lack motivation, and an increased number of minor or major accidents.
- ❖ Difficulties with social interaction, like frequent arguments, becoming easily impatient or frustrated with people, being judgmental or overly critical, lack of self-monitoring (saying whatever comes to mind even if it is offensive), defensiveness, suspicion or distrust of others, lack of compassion, lack of a sense of humor, self-pity, constant complaining, and social withdrawal or isolation.
- ❖ Problem behaviors, such as excessive gambling, buying things on impulse, or increased smoking, drinking, or drug use.
- ❖ Lifestyle changes, like sleeping too much or too little, eating too much or too little, weight gain or weight loss, lack of sexual desire or "poor performance," and neglecting household chores.



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