



## What is stress?

All of us experience stress in our life. This can result from illness, going through a break-up, starting a new career, moving to a new house or living through a community-wide or global event, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Stress helps us to stay alert to avoid dangerous situations and can keep us motivated. But too much stress or too many stressful events happening all at once, an unexpected stressful event or prolonged stress can make us vulnerable and affect our ability to cope and adapt. It can adversely affect our physical and mental health, our ability to function and our relationships, and can even create economic hardship.

According to the Gallup Global Emotions report for 2021, almost 190 million people worldwide experienced significantly higher stress in 2020 than in previous years, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Common signs and symptoms of stress

Stress can cause a lot of different symptoms and may include the following:

### Physical

- headaches or dizziness
- muscle tension or pain
- stomach or digestive problems
- faster heartbeat
- chest pain
- tremors (shaking)
- sweating
- weakness and aches and pains
- high blood pressure
- eating too much, or too little

### Social

- social anxiety, nervousness or feeling agitated
- feeling irritable, angry or impatient with others
- avoiding family or friends
- lack of focus or motivation at work
- reduction in job performance
- inability to take care of responsibilities, such as child or home care

### Psychological

- anxiety
- insomnia
- trouble concentrating
- memory problems
- difficulties in decision-making
- worrying or preoccupation with physical symptoms.

If not managed properly stress, whether acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term), can be a risk factor for major physical or mental problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, depression and/or anxiety disorders.

## What causes stress?

Many things can cause stress in our lives. Stress may be the result of one event, or can build up due to several events. You may be affected by a stressful situation that does not seem to bother another person. This is often because we are not all influenced the same way by the same experience, and because we all have different support systems and levels of coping. Different factors influence how stressed you feel in certain situations, such as:

- how comfortable you are feeling
- what else may be bothering you at the time
- past experiences, and how these affect the way you feel about yourself
- resources available to you, such as time and money
- the amount of support you have from friends or family members.

## Can happy events cause us stress?

Some events that we think of as happy, such as getting married or having a baby, can also be stressful. These events bring big changes, including new or unusual demands on our daily lives. They can often be difficult to deal with.

### Healthy and unhealthy coping styles

Appropriate ways to deal with stress or stressful situations include:

- eating a healthy diet
- exercising regularly
- keeping a regular sleep schedule
- meeting frequently with friends and family
- talking about your stress with a trusted person
- meditating or practising mindfulness
- joining a community group.

Unhealthy ways to handle stress include:

- drinking or smoking
- overuse of prescription medication
- illicit drug use
- overeating or undereating
- consuming an unhealthy diet
- engaging in risky behaviours such as dangerous driving, fighting, etc.
- social isolation.

## When to seek help for stress

If you experience one or more of the signs of stress listed below, talking with a health care professional such as a doctor is a good place to start:

- marked distress that is out of proportion to the severity of the stressor
- feeling physically and emotionally drained on a consistent basis
- experiencing chronic health issues without an apparent cause, such as headaches, upset stomach, etc.
- significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning.

Your doctor can look at your overall health and see if there are any factors that may be contributing to stress, such as psychosocial stressors, improper nutrition, an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism), disturbed blood sugar levels (hypo or hyperglycaemia) or a vitamin deficiency.

In chronic and severe cases, more in-depth treatments may be needed, such as talking to a mental health professional to provide more specialized psychosocial interventions.

## How can you help yourself if you are experiencing stress?

Strategies for preventing stress can help you manage it before it becomes overwhelming. These include:

- restructuring your day so that you're able to make time for yourself
- adjusting your responsibilities, giving yourself more time on a project or not taking on more work than you think you can handle
- creating a daily routine and setting aside time in the day to practise relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises or meditation
- cultivating relationships and social connections by talking or meeting up with friends, family or colleagues on a regular basis
- keeping a diary so that you are more aware of the triggers in your life that cause you stress and reframing your thinking around them
- prioritizing a healthy lifestyle so that when a stress event occurs your body is better equipped to handle it
- avoiding unhealthy behaviours such as drinking, smoking, a sedentary lifestyle, an unhealthy diet or taking drugs.

You can also help yourself immediately by doing any of the following activities to help manage a stressful event:

- **Get active.** Stretching, exercising or just taking a walk can immediately help to reduce stress.
- **Talk to someone.** Having a conversation with someone you trust about a stressful situation or problem you are experiencing can help reduce stress levels.
- **Practise mindfulness.** There are several mindfulness techniques for reducing stress that involve focusing on the present moment, becoming aware of your thoughts and feelings, then accepting them without judgement and, instead of reacting, letting those thoughts and feelings go.
- **Breathing exercises.** Sit in a relaxed position, close your eyes and take a deep breath, slowly expanding your stomach like a balloon; hold it for three seconds, and then exhale slowly for three seconds. Focusing on your breathing for even just a minute can help you feel more relaxed.
- **Progressive muscular relaxation.** When you're stressed, your muscles can become too tight. To help you feel more relaxed, slowly tense and then relax the muscles in your body, starting from your neck, moving to your shoulders and chest and then across to your arms, and then down to your abdomen, legs and feet.
- **Write down your thoughts.** Keeping a journal is an effective way to reframe your thinking by expressing your feelings and thoughts in a constructive manner, in real time.

## How can you help a friend or family member who is experiencing stress?

If you notice that a loved one is experiencing symptoms or signs of stress, there are many ways to help them cope. Most importantly, listen to them. People who are stressed out often don't talk about what's upsetting them. Listening is an effective way to give that person a supportive environment for them to express their feelings. Encouraging them to discuss with you their stressful situation, empathizing with their problems or validating their feelings can help reduce their stress levels.

Encouraging them to seek help from a mental health professional or physician is the next step if their well-being seems to be overly affected by their stress levels.

## Resources

Stress: questions and answers

Self-Help Plus (SH+)

Mental health and psychosocial support

A guide to strengthen basic psychosocial skills and effective communication

Dealing with stress

Doing what matters in times of stress

Stress management course for people living with adversity

Keeping well in adulthood

Yoga for stress relief

Mental health professionals by country

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the Regional Office's website at: <https://www.emro.who.int/mnh/publications/mental-health-disorders.html>.