

Why do we get stressed and why is it so damaging?

Stress is designed to help us get out of physical danger. When we feel threatened, a part of our brain called the amygdala sets off an alarm bell which triggers the “fight or flight” response of our nervous system making us ready to respond. Our blood is flooded with adrenaline and cortisol, increasing our heart rate and blood pressure, as well as our respiration. This allows us to transport energy to our muscles quickly so we can 'act fast'. While this heightened state of stress once helped us with the physical threat of, say, a sabre toothed tiger, it does little to help us with today's worries, like when a professor calls on us in class. But the stress response is the same.

Stress stops the normal functioning of our body. The body assumes there's a physical threat at hand so it channels energy into getting out of immediate danger. To do this, it shuts down longer term projects which are taking up energy. Our digestive processes, immune system, growth and reproductive processes are inhibited (no time for eating or playing when we're being chased).

A bit of stress in short doses is useful in improving our memory and enhancing performance. In the short term, we need to keep this fight-or-flight response under control to be effective in our work. However, too much, too regularly, is damaging to our mental and physical well-being. It can lead to stomach ulcers, heart problems, illnesses or lowered energy. Most situations benefit from a calm, rational, controlled and socially sensitive approach.

There are 3 main components of Stress:

Physical Components of Stress

- Increased heart and respiration rate
- Blood flow directed away from the GI system and toward major muscle groups
- Increased muscle tension
- Pupils dilate to see better
- Blood vessels constrict in order to conserve blood in case of injury
- Adrenaline is pumped into the body for more energy

Cognitive (Thoughts) Components of Stress:

- Excessive preoccupation with a threatening situation or person
- Repeatedly obsess about an upsetting event
- Negative thoughts and self-defeating beliefs (“This is horrible”, “I’m not good enough”, “I’m going to fail”, “I’m going to go crazy”)

Emotional Components of Stress

- Being afraid (including to make decisions)
- Feeling anxious (tense, nervous, jumpy, unable to relax)
- Lack of motivation
- Bored, inattentive
- Feeling hostile (anger at minor things, irritable)