

What Exactly Is Stress, and How Can We Overcome It?

Stress is the internal reaction to outside circumstances. Modern life is stressful, and no two people respond to it the same way—even if they are faced with the same stressors.

We are wonderfully made, and the ability of “choice” is a gift from God. With this gift comes the responsibility to make choices that best take care of our body, mind and spiritual health. However, in order to live a less stressful and more fulfilling life, we must first understand stress: what it means, what it does and how it can present.

Stress is not inherently bad. Everything in life stresses us to a point, but some stress can motivate us and wake up our brain. At the first signs of stress, the immune system, memory and the ability to learn actually all increase.

Without stress in our lives, our minds would become dull and our bodies, weak. Good stressors can be identified as normal responsibilities: a regular schedule, productive work and study, strenuous physical exercise, interaction with others and fighting off normal germs and toxins found in the environment.

However, *chronic* stress can both shorten the length and diminish the quality of your life. Chronic stress from career, family obligations and even good things like ministry or volunteer work can eventually wreak havoc on your overall health. If you drove your car at a high speed every day, all day, it would wear out faster than if you drove it a reasonable amount and speed.

Stress affects the body and mind. The true cause of sickness and disease is not stress, but rather the body’s inability to adapt and recover from stress. When we are stressed, our pulse

rate and blood pressure increases and the adrenal gland dumps cortisol into the bloodstream.

Stress can also create a desire to escape or avoid tasks, because we believe we are out of control—and the more out of control we feel, the more stressed we become. This is what we know about stress and the body: it's not so much the amount of stress, but the amount of time you are in a state of stress.

It is possible to “catch” stress. Recent studies show that when we observe another human under stress, our bodies react empathetically as if it were our own. If people around you are consistently negative, sarcastic, combative, or stressed out, there is a good chance it will cause you to feel distress as well. The autonomic stress response (fight or flight) is triggered by both real and perceived events, so even something as small as a stressful scene in a movie can elevate your cortisol levels. Found in your common morning brew, too much caffeine puts the nervous and hormonal systems into a constant state of ‘fight or flight,’ depleting energy reserves and leading to anxiety, weight gain and insomnia.

You may be stressed and not even know it. Between the bromine in flour, the chlorine and fluoride in drinking water, and the carcinogenic chemicals in personal care products, our bodies are bombarded every single day with toxins that stress the entire system. When you combine an overabundance of toxins with the number of years we are absorbing these toxins unknowingly, we eventually hit the tipping point.

Years of chronic stress wear out the adrenals and immune system, and unbeknownst to us, it can feel quite normal. When our bodies are used to the high stress levels, anything different would alert us to an issue. God made thousands of foods for us to enjoy, and most of them don't even require preparation. Instead of opting for manmade foods, eat a variety of raw, natural, organic foods to nourish your body.

Understanding stress is the first step in identifying it and how it might be infiltrating your mind, body and overall health. To help combat chronic stress, make physical exercise a priority, get adequate sleep, eat a diet that optimizes gut health and learn to slow down—being busy is not synonymous with being successful.

Some stress is good, but too much stress can be harmful. A good rule to remember: Some stress motivates; more stress complicates; and a lot of stress deteriorates.

*An expert on stress, a writer and speaker, **Dr. Pete Sulack** is the author of Fellowshiping with God's Voice. He is the founder of Matthew 10 Ministries and Unhealthy Anonymous—a wellness support program that provides tools for healthier living.*