

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES ON UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH STRESS

HOW DOES STRESS FEEL?

Before this pandemic, our bodies were already under stress. Some of it was just part of life, like conflicting demands on our job. Or getting a new supervisor. Or dealing with an injury or disease. These are all instances where we might have felt stressed already. The difference is that the stressors today are often between life and death. Researchers have identified three stress responses: Flight, Fight or Freeze.

WHAT IS THE BODY'S STRESS RESPONSE?

The body's response to danger by fleeing (flight), battling (fighting), or shutting down (freezing) are the mechanisms we have evolved to help make sure our species survives. These automatic brain responses to impending danger cause significant changes to our physiology. Ever get the feeling of butterflies in your stomach? Palms getting sweaty? Muscles tensing up? Stomach aching? Temper getting short? The body's stress response is to move the blood to the brain, heart, lungs, and muscles to help you get out of danger. The heart beat speeds up to move the blood to these areas. Breathing speeds up to get the oxygen to the muscles more quickly. Perspiration increases to stop the body from overheating during the exertion. Epinephrine (adrenaline) gets produced by the adrenal glands when danger is upon us. Once that particular danger has been averted, resting for just 15 minutes can reset your body back to a state of balance (or homeostasis).



WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CHRONIC STRESS ON THE BODY?

The problem with the kind of unrelenting, prolonged, and unending stress that we are under these days is that the body cannot find a time to rest. The stress is constant. Many people have reported that their sleep pattern has been severely disrupted since the COVID-19 crisis began. If the body cannot get the necessary rest, homeostasis cannot occur, and the effects of stress become more difficult for our bodies to absorb.

- The adrenal glands, which help determine how our hormones are released, become highly active and often create adrenal fatigue.
- When heart, pulse, and blood pressure continue to be elevated, our risks of heart and hypertension increase.
- When the blood is diverted away from the digestive track and stress hormones are flooding our bodies, the digestive system goes on shut down.
- Stomach acids increase, which can cause acid reflux, pain, and inflammation.
- Digestive muscles contract causing diarrhea, constipation, or spasms.
- What happens in our gastrointestinal system can have a large impact on our brain (and vice versa).

Each of these symptoms can compromise our immune systems and make us more susceptible to infection.

TIPS AND RESOURCES

- Assess how your body reacts to stress and knows what signs your body uses to warn you. (e.g. shaking, sweaty palms, increased heart rate etc.)
- Regularly assess the tension in your body and where it is being held. Release the tension. Is it in your jaw? Is your tongue on the roof of your mouth? Are your shoulders clenched? Do this exercise many times each day.
- Find ways to release nervous energy such as exercise, stretching or yoga, breathing techniques and meditation.
- Go for a walk and connect to nature.
- Get plenty of sleep. Aids such as sound machines or anxiety blankets can help.

There are a variety of resources that can help, especially during pandemics and disasters. If you are currently seeing a mental health professional, keep up with your appointments as best as you can. If you feel that medications may be of help, discuss the potential effects with your doctor and psychologist.

For Mental Health Emergencies- Call 911

Suicide and Crisis Lifeline- Call 988

Your health insurer may have a mental health program. The phone number should be on the back of your insurance card. For those with the NYS Empire Plan- **1-877-769-7447**

Your employer may have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Contact your EAP Coordinator or Human Resources Department for more information.

If you or someone you love is struggling with an addiction there are local and federal resources:

NYS HOPEline **1-877-846-7369** Text HOPENY **(467369)**

SAMHSA - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Helpline **1-800-985-5990**

For more information and resources visit:

www.cseany.org/safety



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