

Well-being this Week

FOR EDUCATORS • BY EDUCATORS

How is stress affecting you?

by Lisa Sanetti, PhD

Stress gets a bad rap. In truth, stress, in small doses, is good for you. It's there to help us survive. It keeps us from being hit by a car when crossing the street just as it helped our ancestors from being eaten by a tiger.

The problem is, most of us are experiencing more than *small* doses of *episodic* stress. We experience a **constant onslaught** of social and psychological stressors stemming from work, school, relationships, finances, etc.

Just like so many things in life, too much of a good thing is bad for you. When we experience on-going stress, our bodies are constantly in "fight-or-flight" mode and don't have a chance to recuperate. As a result, your body's organ systems are overused and begin to weaken, which puts you vulnerable to all sorts of physical and mental health problems.

Stress affects everyone differently.

Stress Symptom

Principal Phillip has chronic headaches.

Cause

The chemicals released during fight-or-flight are causing blood vessels in Phillip's brain to swell.

Principal Paula has clogged pores and pimples like she is a teenager.

The chemicals released during fight-or-flight cause the sebaceous glands on Paula's skin to make more oil.

092 Candidate Carol has an awful cold every December and June.

Chronic stress suppresses Carol's immune system. The end of each semester results in illness.

Understanding how stress affects you will help you identify and reduce it more efficiently.

On the next few pages you will identify how stress may show up in your feelings, emotions, body, mind, & behavior. Then you will learn why each of these symptoms may be related to stress

*For each checklist, put an X next to any symptom you have had
OVER THE PAST MONTH.*

Total the experienced symptoms in the box at the bottom.

How is stress affecting your...

...FEELINGS & EMOTIONS?

- Crying spells
- A short temper
- Trouble relaxing
- Feeling agitated
- Feeling keyed up or on edge
- Anxiety
- Feeling insecure
- Depression
- Unhappiness
- A sense of loneliness
- Being easily startled
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Worrying
- Feeling socially isolated

SUM

How is stress affecting your...

...BODY?

- Cut
- Bruise
- Bloody nose
- Pimples
- Painful joints
- Muscle strain
- Eye strain
- Painful urination
- Headache
- Earache
- Toothache
- Chest pain
- Back pain
- Athlete's foot
- Nausea or vomiting
- Skin rash
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Indigestion
- Dizziness
- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Fatigue/tiredness during the day
- Loss of sex drive
- Running nose
- Hoarse voice
- Sinus infection
- Asthma
- Shortness of breath



SUM

How is stress affecting your...

...MIND?

- 
- Forgetfulness
 - Trouble remembering familiar things (your child's name, objects)
 - Trouble concentrating at work
 - Letting minor things "get to you"
 - Constant worrying
 - Thoughts of death
 - Trouble making decisions (even easy ones)
 - Feeling hopeless
 - Feeling like your day should be more productive
 - Feeling distracted
 - Constantly thinking the worse (jumping to conclusions)
 - Feeling helpless
 - Blowing things out of proportion
 - Trouble looking at the "bright side" of things
 - Becoming preoccupied with your problems
 - Feeling rejected
 - Trouble being able to laugh
 - Worrying about having too much free time
 - Feeling like you can't talk to others about your problems
 - Feeling like you are always under pressure
 - Feeling like you haven't accomplished enough
 - Trouble being patient with others
 - Feeling like other people are always wrong
 - Feeling reluctant to take a vacation
 - Dreading the weekends

SUM

How is stress affecting your...

...BEHAVIOR?

- Smoking
- Increased alcohol use
- Increased drug use
- Overeating
- Excessive gambling or impulse buying
- Pulling all-nighters (or close)
- Over-preparing
- Trouble finding time to enjoy yourself
- Burnout (feeling totally overwhelmed and exhausted)
- Anger and hostility
- Extreme competitiveness
- Being sarcastic to others
- Relationship conflicts
- Destroying property when angry
- Not wanting to socialize
- Spending too much time talking about your problem
- Fast driving
- Engaging in other risky behaviors
- Having a lot of accidents
- Eating too little
- Reduced interest in sex
- Having trouble sitting or standing still
- Reduced work productivity
- Talking fast, sometimes leading to stuttering
- Trouble sleeping
- Excessive nail biting or skin picking
- Pulling hairs from your head or other parts of your body
- Pacing, foot tapping, nervous laughter



SUM

Reflecting & learning about your stress symptoms

Review your checkmarks and totals. Do you see any themes?
Look below for why these symptoms may be related to stress:

Feelings & Emotions

- **Core beliefs:** Stress influences your emotions and feelings by influencing how you think. How you feel depends on your basic assumptions, or “core beliefs” about yourself, other people, and the world around you. Like voices in your mind, core beliefs help you make sense of the world. You develop a set of rules for how you should feel about certain situations. People who have problems with stress tend to have maladaptive core beliefs, which trigger negative feelings and emotions. Check out the table below. Do any of these seem familiar?

Feeling/Emotion	Core Belief	Examples
Depression	Incompetent	I'm a failure, I'm not good enough, I'm stupid
Depression	Unlovable	I'm worthless, I don't matter
Guilt	Demanding of self	I should be perfect, I must please others
Anger	Demanding of others	People should behave the right way, others must follow the rules
Anxiety	Helpless	I am weak, I can't cope, People are out to get me
Anger/Anxiety	Perfectionistic	I must have control over things
Anger/Anxiety	Awfulizing/ Catastrophizing	It's horrible when things don't go the way I want them to

Body

- **Effects on Immune System:** The chance of getting sick increases when you are stressed, and the degree of your stress is related to length and severity of illness. Why? Stress increases cortisol levels, which causes your immune system to stop functioning properly.
- **Stress & Pain:** People who have higher levels of stress have more problems with headaches, lower back pain, as well as pain in the neck, shoulder, face, jaw, & joints. Why? Stress causes muscle tension, and when your muscles are tense for a long time, they become tired and fatigued.
- **Cardiovascular problems:** The stress response makes your heart work overtime, putting it under intense strain. Stress can also lead to unhealthy behaviors (e.g., smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, poor eating habits), which also have harmful effects on your heart.
- **Stress and Asthma:** Although stress does not cause you to have asthma in the first place, it does affect how often you have attacks and how severe they are. How? Stress weakens the immune systems, and as a result, irritants and infections (e.g., pollen, mold, pet dander) have a clearer path to your lungs, where they cause irritation that leads to an asthma attack.

Mind

- **Alertness & Attention:** Stress activates your flight-or-fight response, which releases adrenaline and cortisol and has certain parts of your brain automatically spring to action. This leads to an increase in alertness and attention, but not the good kind of alertness and attention. Instead, your mind automatically gets locked into thinking about the source of stress and you become preoccupied. Others may say that you seem like you're lost in thought, distant, or not paying attention; but the fact is you are paying attention - very close attention - but only to what stressed you out. Your mind has limited resources, however, so after too much of this, it becomes fatigued resulting in the symptoms on the checklist.

Behavior

- **Quick fixes:** Maladaptive quick fixes such as drinking and smoking artificially produce a mindset of relaxation and pleasure. They create a diversion from healthy coping and hinder your ability to address the real problem; so when their effects wear off, you're right back where you started.

- **Pushing yourself too hard:** Behaviors related to pushing yourself too hard, such as over-preparing, result from rigid core beliefs such as “anything less than perfection isn't good enough.” Thoughts like this can lead you to push yourself to the limit. This can lead to burnout, and result in your performance suffering and winding up right back where you started.
- **Aggressive / Antisocial:** Stress triggers the fight-or-flight response; so aggressive and antisocial behaviors are not uncommon. The fight reaction may manifest as aggressive, hostile, or competitive behaviors, whereas the flight reaction may manifest as retreating, isolating, or perseverating.
- **Poor judgment:** Stress impairs your ability to make thoughtful decisions. As such, you might be more likely to engage in risky behaviors, put yourself or someone else in harm's way, rush through things, and generally be less careful.
- **Direct effects:** Stress leads to general increase in physical arousal. If you can't actually fight or flee from your stressors, the nervous energy created by the stress response may manifest itself in nervous habits. Further, hormones imbalances from stress may decrease hunger and sex drive.

Select content adapted from Abramowitz, J. S. (2012). *The stress less workbook*. Guilford Press.

Why does this matter for my well-being?

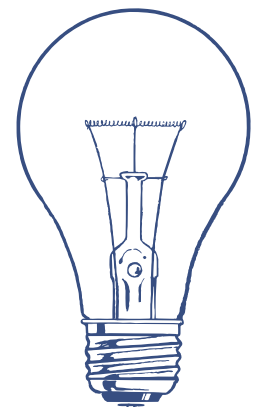
- In the last *Well-being this Week*, you learned if you are experiencing a low, moderate, or high level of stress.
- After this week's edition, you have information about how your stress might be affecting you and your physical and mental health.
- Next, you'll identify what is causing your stress, and how situations, thoughts, and actions work together to result in stress...or not.

Well-being this Week Take-Aways

Everyone's experience of stress is different.

Knowing how your stress shows up is an important step toward being able to reduce it.

Stress and physical health are intertwined. You can improve your physical health by reducing your stress.



Well-being work isn't selfish. It's necessary.

If you have suggestions for future columns, please email Dr. Sanetti at wellbeingthisweek@gmail.com