

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING SERIES

Stress

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Stress is a term often used to describe life's daily hassles. We all experience stress throughout our lifetime, and there are many different types of stress. Moreover, the places where we experience stress can vary based on our age, where we live, our job, family, and income. To help us manage our stress, it is important to recognize the types of stress and how stress can affect our bodies.

Types of stress

Eustress

The first type of stress is called eustress, which is known as “good stress.” Experts call eustress stress because it activates our survival system, but eustress has a positive reward or gain associated with it. For example, you may work and save to buy a new house. The overall process of working, saving, and buying the new house causes stress, however, the reward is that you now have a new home. Another example can include a job promotion. You may work hard and obtain more training and education to get the promotion which involved stress. However, the gain from the stress may now include more vacation days or higher pay. The positive gain of eustress offsets the effects of stress on the body. In contrast to eustress is distress.

Distress

Distress is stress that does not have a positive gain and describes situations that are uncomfortable because of an unwanted event or outcome. When we experience distress, it is usually acute and short-



lived. For example, you might get laid off from your job or have to pay for expensive car repairs. A job loss, money for repairs, or time without your vehicle cause distress. However, we can recover from distress with the proper resources, information, and support. We may also figure out ways to prevent future distressful situations by planning and gathering resources. The act of planning and gathering resources gives us some sense of control and helps reset our survival system. For some people though, ongoing distress may be a sign of chronic (toxic) stress.

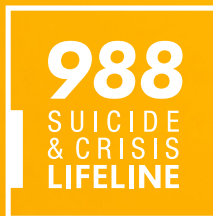
Chronic (toxic) stress

Chronic (toxic) stress is the recurrence of distress over months or years in the absence of acceptable self-care, resources, and support. The lack of self-care, resources, and support makes it hard to shut down the survival system's response to stress. Further, chronic (toxic) stress is constant, and people usually have no control over the event, circumstance, or outcome that causes the stress. When uncontrollable events happen, we may experience trauma from the stressful event. In fact, exposure to trauma is a predisposing factor for developing chronic stress. The occurrence of a stressful event, especially if associated with trauma, may become a reservoir for stress. In other words, your brain stores the emotions and memory of the stressful event in its amygdala. The amygdala is connected to the survival system and oversees processing of fearful or threatening situations. When the stressful event is stored in the brain, sometimes situations not normally connected to the

original event can trigger the emotions associated with the event. Thus, seemingly unrelated situations may call forth past trauma or stress and start the survival system. Some examples of chronic (toxic) stress might include job and home loss, inflation and low commodity market prices, long-term illness or death of a family member, ongoing farm stress, and unpredictable weather patterns or natural disasters.

Stress and the survival system

The survival system is a term used to describe the parts and processes of the brain and nervous system connected with survival. The main part of our nervous system responsible for survival is the sympathetic nervous system. It's what leads us to fight, flee, or freeze. Our response to stress begins when our body feels emotional or physical discomfort, pain, or sees a situation as difficult or threatening. The structures of our brain responsible for starting the survival system are the amygdala and



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hypothalamus, which are in the central portion of the brain. The amygdala oversees emotional memory while the hypothalamus is like a switch that signals the nervous system through a set of chemicals called hormones and neurotransmitters. When our survival system activates, the brain releases a series of hormones and chemicals, particularly adrenaline and cortisol. The release of adrenaline dulls our ability to feel pain and increases heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure. Cortisol signals the body that it is in survival mode and reduces unnecessary survival functions like digestion and higher-level brain functions associated with thinking and reasoning. Essentially, the body is prepped to fight or flee.

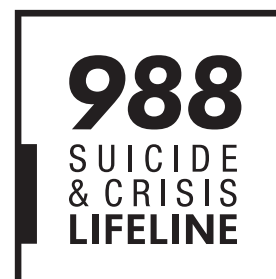
During acute stress, our survival system can help by giving us the ability to overcome situations that include eustress and distress. In general, we can cope and reset without any long-term effects. However, chronic (toxic) stress leads to ongoing activation of the survival system and can lead to unwanted outcomes like the development of anxiety, depression, diabetes, heart disease, or dementia.

Signs of stress

The signs of stress may be easy to see, while other symptoms may be difficult to pinpoint. Some acute symptoms of stress can include headaches, muscle tension, loss of sleep, or not getting good sleep. More long-term, chronic signs of stress can include chronic joint and muscle pain, migraines, or feeling overwhelmed. Other chronic symptoms of stress may involve problems making decisions, trouble focusing, or

forgetfulness. A person experiencing chronic stress may also isolate themselves from friends or family or avoid certain stressful situations. Symptoms of anxiety, depression, or the development of a chronic health condition like high blood pressure can mean your stress is worsening or unmanageable. If you feel like your stress is unmanageable, then reach out to a health professional like your primary care provider.

If you believe you are in a crisis, then you can call or text 988 to speak with a crisis counselor.



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