

## Stress and anxiety

### Definition

Stress can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, or anxious. What is stressful to one person is not necessarily stressful to another.

Anxiety is a feeling of apprehension or fear. The source of this uneasiness is not always known or recognized, which can add to the distress you feel.

### Alternative Names

Anxiety; Feeling uptight; Stress; Tension; Jitters; Apprehension

### Considerations

Stress is a normal part of life. In small quantities, stress is good -- it can motivate you and help you be more productive. However, too much stress, or a strong response to stress, is harmful. It can set you up for general poor health as well as specific physical or psychological illnesses like infection, heart disease, or depression. Persistent and unrelenting stress often leads to anxiety and unhealthy behaviors like overeating and abuse of alcohol or drugs.

Emotional states like grief or depression and health conditions like an overactive thyroid, low blood sugar, or heart attack can also cause stress.

Anxiety is often accompanied by physical symptoms, including:

- Twitching or trembling
- Muscle tension, headaches
- Sweating
- Dry mouth, difficulty swallowing
- Abdominal pain (may be the only symptom of stress, especially in a child)

Sometimes other symptoms accompany anxiety:

- Dizziness
- Rapid or irregular heart rate
- Rapid breathing
- Diarrhea or frequent need to urinate
- Fatigue
- Irritability, including loss of your temper
- Sleeping difficulties and nightmares
- Decreased concentration
- Sexual problems

Anxiety disorders are a group of psychiatric conditions that involve excessive anxiety. They include generalized anxiety disorder, specific phobias, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and social phobia.

## Causes

Certain drugs, both recreational and medicinal, can lead to symptoms of anxiety due to either side effects or withdrawal from the drug. Such drugs include:

- ADHD medications
- Alcohol
- Amphetamines
- Bronchodilators for asthma
- Caffeine
- Cocaine
- Cold remedies
- Decongestants
- Diet pills
- Nicotine
- Thyroid medications
- Tricyclic antidepressants

A poor diet -- for example, low levels of vitamin B12 -- can also contribute to stress or anxiety. Performance anxiety is related to specific situations, like taking a test or making a presentation in public. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops after a traumatic event like war, physical or sexual assault, or a natural disaster. People with generalized anxiety disorder experience almost constant worry or anxiety about many things on more than half of all days for 6 months. Panic disorder or panic attacks involve sudden and unexplained fear, rapid breathing, and increased heartbeat.

In very rare cases, a tumor of the adrenal gland (pheochromocytoma) may be the cause of anxiety. The symptoms are caused by an overproduction of hormones responsible for the feelings of anxiety.

## Home Care

The most effective solution is to find and address the source of your stress or anxiety. Unfortunately, this is not always possible. A first step is to take an inventory of what you think might be making you "stress out":

- What do you worry about most?
- Is something constantly on your mind?
- Does anything in particular make you sad or depressed?
- Keep a diary of the experiences and thoughts that seem to be related to your anxiety. Are your thoughts adding to your anxiety in these situations?

Then, find someone you trust (friend, family member, neighbor, clergy) who will listen to you. Often, just talking to a friend or loved one is all that is needed to relieve anxiety. Most communities also have support groups and hotlines that can help. Social workers, psychologists, and other mental health professionals may be needed for therapy and medication.

Also, find healthy ways to cope with stress. For example:

- Eat a well-balanced, healthy diet. Don't overeat.
- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol.
- Don't use nicotine, cocaine, or other recreational drugs.
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques like guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, tai chi, or meditation. Try biofeedback, using a certified professional to get you started.
- Take breaks from work. Make sure to balance fun activities with your responsibilities. Spend time with people you enjoy.
- Find self-help books at your local library or bookstore.

### **When to Contact a Medical Professional**

Your doctor can help you determine if your anxiety would be best evaluated and treated by a mental health care professional.

Call 911 if:

- You have crushing chest pain, especially with shortness of breath, dizziness, or sweating. A heart attack can cause feelings of anxiety.
- You have thoughts of suicide.
- You have dizziness, rapid breathing, or racing heartbeat for the first time or it is worse than usual.

Call your health care provider if:

- You are unable to work or function properly at home because of anxiety.
- You do not know the source or cause of your anxiety.
- You have a sudden feeling of panic.
- You have an uncontrollable fear -- for example, of getting infected and sick if you are out, or a fear of heights.
- You repeat an action over and over again, like constantly washing your hands.
- You have an intolerance to heat, weight loss despite a good appetite, lump or swelling in the front of your neck, or protruding eyes. Your thyroid may be overactive.
- Your anxiety is elicited by the memory of a traumatic event.
- You have tried self care for several weeks without success or you feel that your anxiety will not resolve without professional help.

Ask your pharmacist or health care provider if any prescription or over-the-counter drugs you are taking can cause anxiety as a side effect. Do not stop taking any prescribed medicines without your provider's instructions.

## **What to Expect at Your Office Visit**

Your doctor will take a medical history and perform a physical examination, paying close attention to your pulse, blood pressure, and respiratory rate.

To help better understand your anxiety, stress, or tension, your doctor may ask the following:

- When did your feelings of stress, tension, or anxiety begin? Do you attribute the feelings to anything in particular like an event in your life or a circumstance that scares you?
- Do you have physical symptoms along with your feelings of anxiety? What are they?
- Does anything make your anxiety better?
- Does anything make your anxiety worse?
- What medications are you taking?

Diagnostic tests may include blood tests (CBC, thyroid function tests) as well as an electrocardiogram (ECG).

If the anxiety is not accompanied by any worrisome physical signs and symptoms, a referral to a mental health care professional may be recommended for appropriate treatment.

Psychotherapy such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to significantly decrease anxiety. In some cases, medications such as benzodiazepines or antidepressants may be appropriate.

## Stress in childhood

### Definition

Childhood stress can be caused by any situation that requires a person to adapt or change. The situation often produces anxiety. Stress may be caused by positive changes, such as starting a new activity, but it is most commonly linked with negative changes such as illness or death in the family.

### Alternative Names

Fear in children; Anxiety in children; Childhood stress

### Information

Stress is a response to any situation or factor that creates a negative emotional or physical change or both. People of all ages can experience stress. In small quantities, stress is good -- it can motivate you and help you be more productive. However, excessive stress can interfere with life, activities, and health. Stress can affect the way people think, act, and feel.

Children learn how to respond to stress by what they have seen and experienced in the past. Most stresses experienced by children may seem insignificant to adults, but because children have few previous experiences from which to learn, even situations that require small changes can have enormous impacts on a child's feelings of safety and security.

Pain, injury, and illness are major stressors for children. Medical treatments produce even greater stress. Recognition of parental stress (such as that seen in divorce or financial crisis) is a severe stressor for children, as is death or loss of a loved one.

### SIGNS OF UNRESOLVED STRESS IN CHILDREN

Children may not recognize that they are stressed. Parents may suspect that the child is excessively stressed if the child has experienced a potentially stressful situation and begins to have symptoms such as:

- Physical symptoms
  - Decreased appetite, other changes in eating habits
  - Headache
  - New or recurrent bedwetting
  - Nightmares
  - Sleep disturbances
  - Stuttering
  - Upset stomach or vague stomach pain
  - Other physical symptoms with no physical illness
- Emotional or behavioral symptoms
  - Anxiety
  - Worries
  - Inability to relax

- New or recurring fears (fear of the dark, fear of being alone, fear of strangers)
- Clinging, unwilling to let you out of sight
- Questioning (may or may not ask questions)
- Anger
- Crying
- Whining
- Inability to control emotions
- Aggressive behavior
- Stubborn behavior
- Regression to behaviors that are typical of an earlier developmental stage
- Unwillingness to participate in family or school activities

#### HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

Parents can help children respond to stress in healthy ways. Following are some tips:

- Provide a safe, secure, familiar, consistent, and dependable home.
- Be selective in the television programs that young children watch (including news broadcasts), which can produce fears and anxiety.
- Spend calm, relaxed time with your children.
- Encourage your child to ask questions.
- Encourage expression of concerns, worries, or fears.
- Listen to your child without being critical.
- Build your child's feelings of self-worth. Use encouragement and affection. Try to involve your child in situations where he or she can succeed.
- Try to use positive encouragement and reward instead of punishment.
- Allow the child opportunities to make choices and have some control in his or her life. This is particularly important, because research shows that the more people feel they have control over a situation, the better their response to stress will be.
- Encourage physical activity.
- Develop awareness of situations and events that are stressful for children. These include new experiences, fear of unpredictable outcomes, unpleasant sensations, unmet needs or desires, and loss.
- Recognize signs of unresolved stress in your child.
- Keep your child informed of necessary and anticipated changes such as changes in jobs or moving
- Seek professional help or advice when signs of stress do not decrease or disappear.

## WHAT CHILDREN CAN DO TO RELIEVE STRESS

An open, accepting flow of communication in families helps to reduce anxiety and depression in children. Encourage your children to discuss their emotions and help them discuss simple ways to change the stressful situation or their response to it.

Below are some tips that children can follow themselves to help reduce stress:

- Talk about your problems. If you cannot communicate with your parents, try someone else that you can trust.
- Try to relax. Listen to calm music. Take a warm bath. Close your eyes and take slow deep breaths. Take some time for yourself. If you have a hobby or favorite activity, give yourself time to enjoy it.
- Exercise. Physical activity reduces stress.
- Set realistic expectations. Do your best, and remember that nobody is perfect.
- Learn to love yourself and respect yourself. Respect others. Be with people who accept and respect you.
- Remember that drugs and alcohol never solve problems.
- Ask for help if you are having problems managing your stress.

## **Stress management**

### **Definition**

Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension.

### **Information**

Emotional stress usually occurs when people consider situations difficult or unable to manage. Different people consider different situations as stressful.

Physical stress refers to a physical reaction of the body to various triggers. The pain experienced after surgery is an example of physical stress. Physical stress often leads to emotional stress, and emotional stress often occurs as physical discomfort (e.g., stomach cramps).

Stress management involves controlling and reducing the tension that occurs in stressful situations by making emotional and physical changes. The degree of stress and the desire to make the changes will determine how much change takes place.

### **ASSESSING STRESS**

**Attitude:** A person's attitude can influence whether or not a situation or emotion is stressful. A person with a negative attitude will often report more stress than would someone with a positive attitude.

**Physical well-being:** A poor diet puts the body in a state of physical stress and weakens the immune system. As a result, the person can be more likely to get infections. A poor diet can mean unhealthy food choices, not eating enough, or not eating on a normal schedule. This can cause a person to not get enough nutrients.

This form of physical stress also decreases the ability to deal with emotional stress, because not getting the right nutrition may affect the way the brain processes information.

**Physical activity:** Not getting enough physical activity can put the body in a stressful state. Physical activity has many benefits. A regular physical activity program can help decrease depression, if it exists. It also improves the feeling of well-being.

**Support systems:** Most everyone needs someone in their life they can rely on when they are having a hard time. Having little or no support makes stressful situations even more difficult to deal with.

**Relaxation:** People with no outside interests, hobbies, or ways to relax may be unable to handle stressful situations because they have no outlet for their stress.

### **AN INDIVIDUAL STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM**

- Make an effort to stop negative thoughts.
- Plan some fun.
- Refocus the negative into the positive.
- Take a break.
- Think positively.



Physical activity:

- Start a physical activity program. Most experts recommend doing 20 minutes of aerobic activity three times per week.
- Decide on a specific time, type, amount, and level of physical activity. Fit this time into your schedule so it can be part of your routine.
- Find a buddy to exercise with -- it is more fun and it will encourage you to stick with your routine.
- You do not have to join a gym -- 20 minutes of brisk walking outdoors will do the trick.

Nutrition:

- Plan to eat foods that improve your health and well-being. For example, increase the amount of fruits and vegetables you eat.
- Use the food guide pyramid to help you make healthy food choices.
- Eat the right amount of food on a regular schedule.

Social support:

- Make an effort to interact socially with people. Even though you feel stressed, you will be glad to meet your friends, if only to get your mind off of things.
- Nurture yourself and others.
- Reach out to other people.

Relaxation:

- Learn about and try using one or more of the many relaxation techniques, such as guided imagery, listening to music, or practicing yoga or meditation. One or more of these techniques should work for you.
- Listen to your body.
- Take a mini retreat.
- Take time for personal interests and hobbies.