

What is Stress? By Dr Ed Feraco

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When you sense danger, real or imagined, the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or flight" reaction, or the stress response. The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. Stress can save your life; however, beyond a certain level, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.

What happens to the body (the physical) when the mind (emotional) perceives a threat? The nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. The body is roused for emergency action by these hormones. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus, which prepares you to either "fight" or flee from the danger at hand.

However, since the body does not distinguish between physical and psychological threats, your body reacts just as strongly as if you were facing a life-or-death situation. The more your body's stress system is activated, the harder it becomes to shut it off. Long term exposure to stress can lead to serious health problems as chronic stress disrupts nearly every system in your body. It can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, contribute to infertility, and speed up the aging process. Long term stress can even "rewire the brain", leaving you more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Dr. Jeanne Segal's book, *The Language of Emotional Intelligence* offers several questions to help guide you into discovering if you are in control of stress or if stress is controlling you. Some of these questions are as follows: 1) When I feel agitated, do I know how to quickly calm and soothe myself. 2) Can I easily let go of my anger? 3) Can I turn to others at work to help me calm down and feel better? 4) When I come home at night, do I walk in the door feeling alert and relaxed? 5) Am I seldom distracted or moody? 6) Am I able to recognize upsets that others seem to be experiencing? Self awareness is a powerful tool for managing stress as this affords you the insight to remove yourself from the stressful situation and/or to employ a technique to decrease the stress.

Managing stress is all about taking charge: take charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. 1) First you must take responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining the stress; otherwise, your stress level will remain outside your control. 2) Avoid unnecessary stress. 3) Alter the situation, that is, express your feelings, be willing to compromise, be more assertive,

and manage your time better. 4) Adapt to the stressor: reframe, look at the big picture, adjust, and focus on the positive. 5) Accept the things you can not change. 6) Make time for fun and relaxation. 7) Adopt a healthy lifestyle: exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, reduce sugar and caffeine, avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, and get enough sleep. Managing stress is either as easy as you make it or as difficult as you think it is.

Psychotherapy can teach you stress management techniques and afford you an opportunity to process what ever is seemingly causing increased stress in your life.