

Editorial note on psychological stress in adults.

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Commentary

Stress: It's a six-letter word that many of us dread. Whether it's a tense interaction with a boss or pressure from friends and family, we all face stressful situations from time to time. For some of us, these events happen sporadically. For others, daily stress is a regular part of life.

Psychological stress definition

There's a good chance we can all identify negative stress, but did you know that stress can also be positive? Good stress, called eustress, can actually be beneficial to you. Unlike bad stress, or distress, good stress can help with motivation, focus, energy, and performance. For some people, it can also feel exciting. On the other hand, bad stress typically causes anxiety, concern, and a decrease in performance. It also feels uncomfortable, and it can lead to more serious issues if not addressed.

Psychological stress effects

It's no secret that the long-term effects of distress can damage our health. Stress has the ability to negatively impact our lives. It can cause physical conditions, such as headaches, digestive issues, and sleep disturbances. It can also cause psychological and emotional strains, including confusion, anxiety, and depression.

According to the American Psychological Association, untreated chronic stress, or stress that's constant and lasts over an extended period of time, can result in high blood pressure or a weakened immune system.

It can also contribute to the development of obesity.

Psychological stress signs

There's a distinction between a stressor and actual stress. A stressor can be a person, place, or situation that's causing you stress. Stress is the actual response to one or a combination of those stressors.

There are any numbers of situations that can cause stress. Dr. Gary Brown, a licensed psychotherapist, says some of the more common stressors include:

- Relationship conflicts at home
- New or increasing work responsibilities
- Increasing demands
- Financial strain
- Loss of a loved one
- Health problems
- Moving to a new location
- Exposure to one or more traumatic incidents, such as a car accident or a violent crime

Knowing how to spot the signs of stress is the first step in developing ways to manage its adverse effects.

Some of the more common physical, psychological, and emotional signs of chronic stress include:

- Rapid heart rate
- Elevated blood pressure
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Fatigue
- Difficulty sleeping
- Poor problem-solving
- Fear that the stressor won't go away
- Persistent thoughts about one or more stressors
- Changes in behavior, including social withdrawal, feelings of sadness, frustration, loss of emotional control, inability to rest, and self-medication

Ways to manage stress

When it comes to managing stress, making simple changes can go a long way in improving your overall health and reducing stress. Having tools and strategies you can turn to in stressful situations can prevent your stress levels from escalating.

Find a balance

It's important to structure some of your time so that you can be comfortably busy without being overwhelmed, Brown says. "Working hard does not usually equate with working efficiently," he said. In fact, working too much can reduce productivity.

Be kind to yourself

Understanding that you aren't weak because you're feeling stress is important, Brown says. Stress is a very normal reaction to the stressors in your life.

Lean on the people you trust

Before your stress levels escalate, reach out to someone you trust, such as a friend, family member, or coworker. Sharing your feelings or venting your concerns may help to reduce your stress.

Keep a journal

Set aside time to reflect on your day. Write down any thoughts or feelings you're having. This can be a useful tool to help you better understand your stressors and how you react to stress, Brown says.

Eat well-balanced, regular meals

When it comes to managing stress, proper nutrition is your

friend. Skipping meals can lower your blood sugar, which can depress your mood. In some cases, this can also trigger intense feelings of anger and frustration, Brown says.

Exercise regularly

Engaging in regular physical activity can improve your overall health and reduce your stress levels. When you exercise, your body releases endorphins. These feel-good hormones can also ease symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Get plenty of rest

Your ability to manage stress decreases when you're tired. Try to get a recommended seven to nine hours each night. If you have insomnia, aim to get as much sleep as you can, then build in periods of rest during the day.

Practice relaxation exercises

These exercises, which can include deep, slow breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, involve tensing and then relaxing various groups of muscles.

Try to carve out three minutes, three times a day to practice these exercises, says Dr. Russell Morfitt, a psychologist.

Schedule your worry

While it may feel awkward at first, consider scheduling the worry to specific parts of the day, Morfitt says. "When we lean

into our fears by deliberately seeking out our stressors and not avoiding them or escaping them, they often lose their power," he said.

Working with a professional

A therapist or mental health professional can also help you find ways to manage your stress.

Consider working with a mental health professional if your stress is chronic or accompanied by daily headaches, tight jaw, fibromyalgia, or constant fatigue, says Dr. David J. Puder of Loma Linda University Behavioral Medicine Center.

You should also see a mental health professional if you have feelings of depression, suicidal thoughts, and panic attacks.

When looking for a mental health professional, ask friends or family members for referrals. After your first session, Puder says to reflect on the following questions:

- Will you trust the therapist?
- Do you feel heard and understood?
- Do you feel comfortable to speak up if you disagree with them?
- Can you see that they care about you as an individual?

Answering these questions can help you determine if this person is right for you

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