



Stress Management Strategies¹

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WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress! What does it mean to you? Traffic jams, deadlines, eating on the run, bills to pay, job changes, endless chores and errands, and demands, demands, demands.

Stress is the body's response to any demand or pressure. These demands are called stressors. Stressors include major life events, such as a divorce or the birth of a child. They also include chronic strains that last over a period of time, such as living on unemployment. And stressors include daily or occasional strains, like taking care of a sick child.

Whatever the stressor is, it requires the body to make physical and chemical adjustments in order to maintain the necessary physiological balance for survival. A racing heart, a burst of energy, and muscle tension are the body's physical responses to demands. When faced with danger, some of the first stress reactions are a rise in blood pressure, quicker breathing and heart beat, and dilated pupils. Sight and hearing become more alert.

This reaction is an instinctive response that protects us from threats to survival. Physiological changes are part of the "fight or flight" response, which prepares and energizes a person to confront or flee from danger. After the threat has passed or a change takes place, the "alarm" signs disappear. The body is still aroused but is

adapting to the change. However, if high levels of stress continue, the energy to adapt runs out. Exhaustion occurs, causing damage to the person's physical and emotional well-being. Entire families may experience distress from tensions and pressures on the family to change.

Surprising as it seems, some stress has positive outcomes. "Good stress" can give an athlete the energy to excel in physical competition. It can stimulate a scientist's thinking or a composer's creative energy. It can give many people the energy to solve problems and to finish hard work.

Often, however, our lives are filled with many demands that continue over a long period of time. Demands such as work overload may result in negative stress, which is called distress.

Unrelieved stress can take an emotional as well as physical toll, in the form of anxiety or depression, or high blood pressure and heart disease. If unattended, stress can seriously damage physical health; psychological well-being; and relationships with friends, family, and coworkers.

1. This document, Fact Sheet HE-2089, was published 11/91, Florida Cooperative Extension Service. For more information, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office.
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AM I UNDER STRESS?

Major problems can be avoided if symptoms of stress are identified early. Some of the signs of serious problems with stress are: persistent, intense depression; chronic sleeping and eating; inability to concentrate; outbursts of violence; persistent family conflict; and excessive drinking or drug use.

Simple checklists (See Table 1) will give you a clue as to whether or not you are under stress. You probably know some of the symptoms of stress from experience--headache, tense muscles, knotted stomach, sweaty palms. Symptoms may also be psychological and interpersonal, such as feelings of insecurity, or arguments with a spouse or child.

Think about a stressor you have experienced in the last week or so. Take a look at the chart below and check off how you usually react to stressors.

Look over the stress symptoms you've checked. Circle those that occur frequently. Which of these concern you the most? What ideas do you have about how to stop these stress symptoms from happening?

Once you know some of your symptoms of stress and are aware of when stress occurs, you can begin to use stress management strategies to deal with stress. In fact, many stress experts believe that how a person deals with stress may be more important than the number or type of demands he or she faces. Ideas for ways to prevent and to cope with stress are found in the fact sheets titled, Preventing Stress Through a Healthy Lifestyle (HE-2090) and Stress and Communication (HE-2091).

Table 1. Stress Checklist

PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	MENTAL	SOCIAL
Headaches	Anxiety	Forgetfulness	Isolation
Teeth grinding	Frustration	Poor concentration	Loneliness
Fatigue	Nervousness	Low productivity	Lashing out
Insomnia	Depression	Negative attitude	Clamming up
Back aches	Worrying	Confusion	Lowered sex drive
Stomach problems	Tension	No new ideas	Nagging
Colds	Mood swings	Lethargy	Fewer contacts with friends
Neck aches	Easily discouraged	Boredom	Using people
Shoulder pains	Crying spells		
Increased use of drugs	Irritability		