

Stress Awareness and Pain

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Your body responds to any kind of demand by releasing chemicals into the blood. These chemicals give people more energy and strength, which can be a good thing if they are experiencing physical danger. Many different things can be stressors - from physical (such as a fear of something dangerous or dashing to catch a bus) to emotional (such as worry over your family or making plans for a holiday). Identifying what may be a demand is often the first step in learning how to better deal with your stress.



Common Sources of Stress

Survival Stress - You may have heard the phrase 'fight or flight' before. This is a common response to danger in all people and animals. When you're afraid that someone or something may physically hurt you, your body naturally responds with a burst of energy so that you'll be better able to survive the dangerous situation (fight) or escape it all together (flight). This is survival stress.

Internal Stress - Internal stressors can be things you think about or worry about, and it's one of the most important stressors to understand and manage. We often worry about things we can't control or put ourselves in situations we know will put pressure on us to perform. Chronic pain is an internal stressor – often not just the pain itself, but our worries and frustration from the way pain interferes with doing things we enjoy.

Environmental Stress – These can be external factors that cause stress like noise, crowding, and pressure from work or family. Identifying these environmental stressors and learning to avoid them, deal with them, or be mindful and not judge them will help lower your stress levels.

Fatigue and Overwork - This kind of stress response builds up over time. It can be caused by working too much or too hard at your job(s), school, or home. It can also be caused by not knowing how to manage your time well or how to take time out for rest and relaxation. Again, living with chronic or persistent pain can be fatiguing and make taking time out very difficult.

Effects of Short-Term Stress on Your Body

Short-term stress can affect your body in many ways:

Brain

- focusing in on possible threats
- difficulty thinking creatively

Eyes

- loss of peripheral vision (tunnel vision)
- reduced night vision
- reduced depth perception
- poorer close vision

Ears

- noticing only sudden, loud, or unexpected noises

Skin

- blood vessels constrict
- become cool and clammy, pale

Hands

- better grip but less fine motor skills

Heart

- increased heart rate
- increased blood pressure

Lungs

- more lung capacity
- faster breathing

Adrenal gland

- releases adrenalin and noradrenalin

Liver

- breaks glycogen down to release into bloodstream for energy

Spleen

- releases white blood cells and platelets to repair possible injury

Effects of Long-Term Stressors

Stressors that occur over a long time can have adverse effects by:

- Changing your appetite (making you eat either less or more)
- Changing your sleep habits (either causing you to sleep too much or not letting you sleep enough)
- Encouraging 'nervous' behaviour like twitching, fiddling, talking too much, nail biting, teeth grinding, pacing, and other repetitive habits
- Causing you to catch colds or the flu more often and causing other illnesses such as asthma, headaches, stomach problems, skin problems, and other aches and pains
- Affecting your sex life and performance
- Making you feel constantly tired and worn out.

Exposure to stressors for a long time can also affect your mental health and wellbeing. You might find you have difficulty thinking clearly, dealing with problems, or even handling day-to-day situations as simple as shaving, picking up clothes, or arriving somewhere on time.

Some mental signs of long-term stress include:

- Worrying and feeling anxious (which can sometimes lead to anxiety disorders and panic attacks)
- Feeling out of control, overwhelmed, confused, and/or unable to make decisions
- Experiencing mood changes such as depression, frustration, anger, helplessness, irritability, defensiveness, irrationality, overreaction, or

- impatience and restlessness
- Increasing dependence on food, cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs
 - Neglecting important things in life such as work, school, and personal appearance
 - Developing irrational fears of things such as physical illnesses, natural disasters like thunderstorms and earthquakes, and being terrified of ordinary situations like heights or small spaces.

Chronic or persistent pain is a long-term stressor. Not only is the pain itself a stressor, so are many of the things that happen as a result of living with ongoing pain – like difficulty working, keeping good relationships going, having to attend appointments, and poor sleep.

What You Can Do About Stressors

Where it's possible, working out ways to reduce, eliminate, or problem-solve through a stressful situation is helpful. There are some situations, however, where the stressor can't be eliminated or removed. Living with persistent or chronic pain is one of these situations. Learning to be aware of your responses to stressors and being mindful of them (not judging your thoughts or responses, just noticing them), as well as developing effective relaxation skills can be very useful.