**Stress: Causes, types, effects, disorders, and treatments** Written by [therapist.com team](https://therapist.com/author/therapist-com-team/) Last updated: 08/15/2023

**What is stress?**

Stress is both a physical and mental response to change. It’s a normal part of life, and it happens during positive and negative life experiences.

As a short-term reaction, your body’s stress response is healthy and natural. It can help you:

* Stay awake and alert
* Focus your attention
* Stay motivated
* Avoid imminent danger
* Respond to threats
* Prioritize your safety and survival

When these short-term reactions turn into long-term symptoms, however, stress can compromise your mental and physical health.

**What’s the difference between stress and anxiety?**

Stress and anxiety are similar responses, and they often overlap. The key difference is that stress is your response to something external that you see as a threat. It eases once the stressful situation is over. Anxiety, on the other hand, can happen without any external “trigger”—and even if there’s a trigger, anxiety can last long after the initial trigger is over.

**What causes stress?**

You feel stress when an external “stressor”—that is, anything that causes you stress or tension—triggers your body’s stress response, releasing stress [hormones](https://therapist.com/brain-and-body/hormones-mental-health/) like adrenaline and cortisol.

The definition of a stressor varies from person to person: For example, public speaking may be a stressor for some people and a joy for others.

Common types of stressors include:

* **Routine stressors:** Stress is part of our daily lives. Making dinner, sitting in traffic, handling work or school obligations, cleaning the house, taking care of [family](https://therapist.com/family/families/) or friends—these all contribute to a general current of everyday stress.
* **Disruptive stressors:**Disruptive stress interrupts our daily routine and demands our attention. Unexpected illness or injury, a [divorce](https://therapist.com/for-therapists/the-divorce-announcement/) or breakup, bankruptcy, and losing your job all qualify as disruptive stressors. Some disruptive stressors may reach the level of traumatic stress, depending on how we experience them.
* **Traumatic stressors:**[Trauma](https://therapist.com/trauma/trauma/) is an emotional response to a deeply disturbing, stressful, or dangerous event, relationship, or circumstance that threatens or harms our health or safety. Events that cause traumatic stress include war, assault, abuse, natural disasters, terrorism, and severe accidents.

**Types of stress**

It’s useful to think about stress in three ways: how long it lasts, whether it’s physical or psychological, and whether it’s positive or negative. These qualities can determine how stress affects you.

**Acute stress vs. chronic stress**

Everyone experiences acute stress (also called “short-term” stress). You feel it in response to immediate change or danger—when you drop an object and catch it at the last second, for instance. You can also feel acute stress in situations or events that don’t last very long—for example, when you’re studying in the days leading up to a final exam.

On the other side of the spectrum, chronic stress happens in response to long-term or ongoing stressors that last for weeks or months. Financial struggles, divorce, or ongoing health problems can all result in chronic stress.

**Physical stress vs. psychological stress**

Psychological stress comes from the emotional and physical tension you feel in response to a perceived threat. This threat can be physical, mental, or emotional, and it can range from inconvenient to dangerous. For example, struggling to find your keys while you’re running late for work can result in psychological stress.

Physical stress, on the other hand, happens when a stressor physically strains your body. This strain can range from uncomfortable to incapacitating. Working in extreme heat or dealing with [chronic pain](https://therapist.com/pain/chronic-pain/) from an injury are both examples of physical stress.

**Positive stress vs. negative stress**

We can experience stress as positive (“eustress”) or negative (“distress”). Eustress is healthy and can help you achieve your goals: You may feel it when learning a new skill, for example. Distress, on the other hand, is disruptive and can make it harder to achieve your goals.

It’s important to note that “positive stress” and “negative stress” are terms that refer to how you’re able to channel your stressful energy, and not the benefit or harm of the stressor itself. Joyful occasions don’t produce only eustress. Depending on how you manage your stress, you may still feel negative stress in response to [positive](https://therapist.com/self-development/positive-psychology/) life changes.

**Effects of stress**

Stress has both physical and mental effects, and they can differ depending on the type of stress you experience. With acute stress, for example, your body’s responses may include:

* Rapid heart rate
* Difficulty breathing
* Tension headaches
* Stomachache
* Sweating
* Fatigue
* Shaking
* Dry mouth
* Muscle pain

Fortunately, the symptoms of acute stress are temporary: Once the stressor is resolved, the effects go away.

The effects of chronic stress last longer and are and typically more severe. Common physical effects include:

* [Insomnia](https://therapist.com/disorders/insomnia/)
* High blood pressure
* Heart problems
* Diabetes
* Immunodeficiency
* Gastrointestinal (GI) issues
* Chronic muscle tension
* Infertility
* Irregular [periods](https://therapist.com/brain-and-body/menstrual-cycle-mental-health/)
* Erectile dysfunction

Common mental or emotional effects of chronic stress include:

* Irritability
* [Isolation](https://therapist.com/moods-and-emotions/isolation-loneliness/)
* Loss of control
* Loss of sexual desire
* Difficulty concentrating
* Nervousness
* Overwhelming worry
* Feelings of hopelessness

**Can stress make you sick?**

Sometimes stress can lead to feeling physically ill. Symptoms like stomachaches, nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, headaches, or muscle pain can all actually be symptoms of stress. Stress hormones can also decrease how well your immune system works, so when you’re stressed, you’re more likely to get sick. Your primary care doctor can determine whether your symptoms are stress related.

**Stress disorders**

Stress disorders are mental health disorders that may develop after you go through or witness [trauma](https://therapist.com/trauma/trauma/). Common types include:

* **Acute stress disorder (ASD)**, whose symptoms persist for less than a month after the trauma occurred. ASD symptoms include [anxiety](https://therapist.com/disorders/anxiety-symptoms-types-causes/), [dissociation](https://therapist.com/disorders/dissociation/) (feeling disconnected from reality), and avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma.
* [**Posttraumatic stress disorder**](https://therapist.com/disorders/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/)**(PTSD)**, whose symptoms persist for more than a month after the trauma occurred. PTSD symptoms include intrusive memories, thinking and mood changes, and hypervigilance (extreme alertness to threats).

**Disorders related to stress**

Stress can contribute to, worsen, or be symptoms of other mental health disorders, including:

* Anxiety
* [Depression](https://therapist.com/disorders/depression-symptoms-types-causes/)
* [Obsessive-compulsive disorder](https://therapist.com/disorders/obsessive-compulsive-disorder-ocd/)
* Insomnia
* [Addiction](https://therapist.com/behaviors/addiction/)

It’s important to note that this isn’t a complete list. Stress can worsen the effects of just about any mental health condition you can think of.

**Stress treatment options**

Stress is a natural response to change, but when our response to stressors becomes unhealthy or unhelpful, professional treatment is often necessary. There are many different treatment options for stress, including:

* [**Mindfulness-based stress reduction**](https://therapist.com/types-of-therapy/mindfulness-based-stress-reduction-mbsr/)**(MBSR) therapy:**[Specifically designed](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3336928/) for stress management, this meditation therapy uses mindfulness practices to manage stress.1 It can also be helpful for other mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression.
* [**Cognitive behavioral therapy**](https://therapist.com/types-of-therapy/cognitive-behavioral-therapy-cbt/)**(CBT):** A CBT therapist can help you identify unhelpful or negative thought patterns that affect your emotions and behaviors. CBT can help you learn to prevent stress and respond to stress in healthy ways.
* [**Dialectical behavioral therapy**](https://therapist.com/types-of-therapy/dialectical-behavior-therapy-dbt/)**(DBT):**Originally designed to treat borderline personality disorder, DBT has proven effective for stress reduction as well. DBT teaches you self-regulation and [stress management](https://therapist.com/stress/stress-management/).
* [**Acceptance and commitment therapy**](https://therapist.com/types-of-therapy/acceptance-commitment-therapy-act/)**(ACT):**This mindfulness-based behavioral therapy encourages psychological flexibility. Challenging the idea that stress is inherently bad, ACT instead encourages you to accept both the stressors and joys of life, using acceptance as a launchpad for committed change.
* [**Somatic therapy**](https://therapist.com/types-of-therapy/somatic-therapy/)**:** This holistic approach to mental health addresses your mind and your body, and it may be particularly effective for stress.
* [**Stress management**](https://therapist.com/stress/stress-management/)**:**You can learn healthier ways to respond to stress on your own with techniques such as guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, and deep breathing. These tools are most effective when paired with professional therapy.

**Find help now**

Professional therapists can help you learn stress management skills while also treating any mental health disorders that may contribute to your stress. Browse our directory to find a specialist in your area.

If you’re in crisis, help is available now. For free, confidential 24/7 support, please call the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) at **988** or **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**,or text **HOME** to **741741**.