

Stress

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help us perform under pressure and motivate us to do our best. But when we're constantly running in emergency mode, our mind and body pay the price.

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make us feel threatened or that upset our balance in some way. In fact, for many people, any amount of change at all can trigger stress, especially if it's perceived to be unwanted change. When we sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—our body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the “fight-or-flight-or-freeze” reaction, or the *'stress response.'*

The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. The stress response also helps you rise to meet challenges. When you perceive a threat, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones rouse the body for emergency action. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper. These physical changes increase your strength and stamina, speed your reaction time, and enhance your focus.

In today's fast paced and ever changing business climate, the most dangerous thing about stress is how easily it can creep up on us. We get used to it. It starts to feel familiar, even normal. We don't notice how much it's affecting us, even as it takes a heavy toll.

Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's important to know your own limit. But just how much stress is "too much" differs from person to person. We're all different. Some people are able to roll with the punches, while others seem to crumble in the face of far smaller obstacles or frustrations. Some people even seem to thrive on the excitement and challenge of a high-stress lifestyle.

Our ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including the quality of our relationships, our general outlook on life, our emotional intelligence, and genetics. Our stress tolerance level can be influenced by things such as how good our support network is, our sense of control, our general attitude and life-outlook, our awareness of and ability to deal with our emotions, our knowledge and preparation when going into a stressful situation, and our knowledge base of the effects of stress on our mental, emotional, behavioral and social capacity, just to name a few.

The stress hormones, most notably adrenaline and cortisol, erode higher-brain networks, inhibiting us from succeeding fully at life. Chronic stress means the stress response system is turned on nearly full-time, releasing toxic hormones into our system, and shutting down the 'creative and executive' parts of our brain. Stress hormones, when continuously in our system can even shrink our higher brain networks responsible for creativity and decision-making. Stress hormones eventually expand the lower brain networks that switch the emotional set point to negative. They can impair the immune system, ruin the cardiovascular system, and damage chromosomes producing cancer cells and cause premature aging. Stress hormones, if allowed to run rampant and continuous, can even kill brain cells, and can eventually kill you, if you ignore the stress responsible for triggering the hormones.

The signs and symptoms of stress overload can be almost anything. Stress affects the mind, body, and behavior in many ways, and everyone experiences stress differently. Not only can overwhelming stress lead to serious mental and physical health problems, it can also take a toll on our relationships at home and at work. At work, stress dampens performance, thwarts teamwork, leads people to make bad decisions, and accounts for nearly half of turnover.

In today's organizations, when a company hires an employee, they are essentially hiring that person's brain and hoping it's a smart brain that will grow even smarter with experience. But place that person in a high pressure work environment without the tools to transcend stress, and the likelihood is that he or she will lose brain capacity. In reality, stress can drain organizational brain power.

Brain scans from the Mayo Clinic show the impact of stress on brain function. While one scan indicates a brain beleaguered by stress, the other shows a brain functioning at optimum, lit up and pulsing with activity. The scan of optimal brain function looks like the massive network of lights you see when flying on a dark night over a metropolis like Toronto, while the stressed brain looks like the dim lights you see scattered here and there as you fly over north mid-west farmland. The difference between the two brain scans is a good representation of the brain power that is lost due to the continuous emotion of 'stress' at work.