

Understanding Stress: Why It Happens and How to Respond Effectively

An Evidence-Based Guide to Building Resilience and Managing Life's Challenges

Welcome

Stress is a normal part of being human. It is not a sign of weakness, failure, or poor coping. In the right amount, stress can motivate us, sharpen our focus, and help us adapt to challenges. Problems tend to arise when stress becomes frequent, prolonged, or overwhelming without enough opportunities for recovery. This handout explains what stress is, how it affects your mind and body, and practical evidence-based ways to respond more effectively.

What Is Stress?

Stress is your body's response to demands or challenges. Helpful stress (sometimes called eustress) can help you prepare for an interview, complete a project, or perform well in sport. Distress occurs when the demands placed upon you exceed the resources you feel you have to cope. Acute stress is short-lived. Chronic stress continues over weeks or months and can affect physical health, mood, sleep, concentration, relationships, and overall wellbeing.

How Stress Affects the Brain and Body

When your brain detects a threat, it activates your nervous system. Stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol prepare your body for action. Your heart beats faster, breathing changes, muscles tighten, digestion slows, and attention narrows. These responses are helpful in emergencies but can become exhausting when switched on too often.

How Stress Shows Up

Physical: Headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, digestive changes, sleep difficulties, racing heart.

Emotional: Feeling overwhelmed, irritable, anxious, tearful, frustrated, or emotionally numb.

Thinking: Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, racing thoughts, negative self-talk, catastrophizing.

Behaviour: Avoiding tasks, procrastination, withdrawing, overworking, overeating, increased alcohol or screen use.

Did You Know?

- Not all stress is harmful. Moderate stress can improve learning and performance.
- Recovery is just as important as productivity.
- Chronic stress can affect sleep, immunity, memory, and mood.
- Small daily habits often have a greater impact than occasional large changes.

Evidence-Based Ways to Respond

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) helps people identify unhelpful thinking patterns and develop more balanced ways of responding. Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) teaches mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness skills to manage intense emotions and remain effective under stress.

Reducing vulnerabilities is an important DBT concept. Looking after your physical health, eating regularly, getting adequate sleep, moving your body, attending to medical concerns, and reducing alcohol or other mood-altering substances can make your nervous system more resilient to everyday stress.

Other evidence-based strategies include diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, regular physical activity, time in nature, maintaining supportive relationships, scheduling recovery time, problem-solving, behavioural activation, and practising self-compassion.

Worksheet: Understanding My Stress

What situations are creating the most stress in my life right now?

How does stress show up in my body?

What emotions do I notice when I am stressed?

What thoughts tend to show up when I feel overwhelmed?

What behaviours help me cope? Which behaviours make stress worse?

My Vulnerability Check

Sleep: What is going well? What could I improve?

Nutrition: What is going well? What could I improve?

Movement: What is going well? What could I improve?

Physical health: What is going well? What could I improve?

Alcohol or substance use: What is going well? What could I improve?

Connection with supportive people: What is going well? What could I improve?

Time for rest and recovery: What is going well? What could I improve?

My Personal Stress and Resilience Plan

My early warning signs that stress is building:

Things that are within my control:

Things that are outside my control:

My healthiest coping strategies:

People I can reach out to:

One small step I will take this week:

Key Takeaways

- Stress is a normal human response and not a personal weakness.
- Not all stress is harmful. Recovery is essential.
- Reducing vulnerabilities increases resilience.
- You do not have to wait until stress disappears before taking helpful action.
- Small, consistent changes often lead to meaningful long-term improvements.

KALM Psychology

This educational resource is intended to support learning and self-reflection. It is not a substitute for psychological assessment or treatment. If stress is significantly affecting your health, relationships, work, or daily functioning, consider seeking support from a qualified mental health professional.