**How Does Stress Impact Your Health?**

Everyone experiences stress to some degree. The way you respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to your overall well-being. Sometimes, the best way to manage your stress involves changing your situation. At other times, the best strategy involves changing the way you respond to the situation.

Developing a clear understanding of how stress impacts your physical and mental health is important. It's also important to recognize how your mental and physical health affects your stress level.

**How Your Body responds**

Stress can trigger the body's response to a perceived threat or danger, known as the **fight-or-flight response**. During this reaction, certain hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are released. This speeds up the heart rate, slows digestion, shunts blood flow to the major muscle groups, and changes various other autonomic nervous functions, giving the body a burst of energy and strength. Originally named for its ability to enable us to physically fight or run away when faced with danger, it is now activated in situations where neither response is appropriate- like in traffic or during a stressful day at work.

When the perceived threat is gone, systems are designed to return to normal function via the **relaxation response**. But in cases of chronic stress, the relaxation responses don't occur often enough, and being in a near-constant state of fight-or-flight can cause damage to the body.

Stress can also lead to some unhealthy habits that have a negative impact on your health. For example, many people cope with stress by eating too much or by smoking. These unhealthy habits damage the body and create bigger problems in the long-term.

**The Impact on Your Health**

The connection between your mind and body is apparent when you examine the impact stress has on your life. Feeling stressed out over a relationship, money, or your living situation can create physical health issues.

The inverse is also true. Health problems, whether you are dealing with high blood pressure or you have diabetes, can also affect your stress level and your mental health.

When your brain experiences high degrees of stress, your body reacts accordingly. Serious acute stress, like being involved in a natural disaster or getting into a verbal altercation, can trigger heart attacks, arrhythmias, and even sudden death. However, this happens mostly in individuals who already have heart disease.

Chronic stress can have a serious impact on your health, as well. If you experience chronic stress, your autonomic nervous system will be overactive, which is likely to damage your body.

The first symptoms of chronic stress are relatively mild, like chronic headaches and increased susceptibility to colds. With more exposure to chronic stress, however, more serious health problems may develop. They include, but are not limited to:

Diabetes

Hair loss

Heart disease

Hyperthyroidism

Obesity

Sexual dysfunction

Tooth and gum disease

Ulcers

Stress also takes an emotional toll. While some stress may produce feelings of mild anxiety or frustration, prolonged stress can lead to burnout, anxiety disorders, and depression.

**Learning to Manage Stress** –

Although stress is inevitable, it can be manageable. When you understand the toll it takes on you and the steps to combat stress, you can take charge of your health and reduce the impact stress has on your life. Although there is a lot of talk about the importance of managing stress, most people aren't exactly sure how to do it. Incorporating regular self-care activities into your daily life is essential to stress management.

The following items will help you to identify how stress affects you. It will also assist you in identifying the best stress reduction strategies that will work for you and it will assist in preventing burnout:

Recognize the signs of burnout – high levels of stress may place you at a high risk of burnout. Symptoms of this may include exhaustion, cynicism feelings and of reduced professional ability.  Burnout can leave you feeling exhausted and apathetic about your job.  Fortunately, there are steps you can take to prevent burnout if you experience these symptoms.

1.Physical activity has a big impact on your brain and body. Whether you enjoy Tai Chi or you want to begin jogging, exercise reduces stress and improves many symptoms associated with stress. Exercise decreases sensitivity to the body's reaction to anxiety. Exercise has been found to enhance mood, improve energy levels, and promote quality sleep.

2. Meditation is also a great stress reliever. Meditation is a simple technique that, if practiced for as few as 10 minutes each day, can help you control stress, decrease anxiety, improve cardiovascular health, and achieve a greater capacity for relaxation.

3. Be more mindful of what you eat. Try to eat a well-balanced healthy diet. A healthy diet builds a solid, more enduring foundation for your body by reducing oxidation and inflammation and by helping to reduce weight gain." For this reason, building a healthy food prep habit into your daily or weekly routine can greatly improve your overall diet, and eventually lead to reduced stress levels.

4. Some individuals seek professional help in order to assist in identifying the root causes of chronic stress and how to manage/change the causes of stress.


Learn how to manage stress by taking care of your mind, body and spirit and discover how to equip yourself to live your best life.