

The 5 Stages of Stress (It's Important to Know Which One You're In)

Stress.

In a sense, stress is a double-edged sword. Sometimes, it is the very thing that motivates us to take action and move swiftly. Other times, it is the boulder that makes us feel helpless, causing all movement to stop abruptly.

So, when you're feeling stressed, it's important to know which stage you're in, why, and what you can do about it so that you can continue moving forward effectively.

Stage 1: Fight or Flight

The moment you first feel stressed, your body lets you know. It sounds the alarm and activity in the thyroid and adrenal glands is increased. This is what happens when you hear about entrepreneurs "burning out." Their adrenal glands go into overload because the fire alarm is going off, and yet they're still sitting there in their office working.

When you don't pay attention to these alarms, other things within your body start happening. There is an increase in stress hormones, heart rate, blood pressure, and even a decrease in short-term memory and feelings of stress, fear, anxiety and depression.

Now, the flip-side to all this is that in the alarm stage, your mental focus also tends to increase. Not for long, but initially.

This stage is intended to solve an immediate problem and then return levels to normal.

So, use this to your advantage, but always remember to bring it back.

Stage 2: Damage Control

When your body feels stressed, it knows it.

What happens, then, is it does its best to keep things as normal as possible while your body works overtime. Anti-inflammatory hormones (cortisol) are secreted in order to control the inflammation that's happening. But this is not a long-term solution. It's a quick fix to keep things moving while issues are sorted out.

Again, entrepreneurs are notorious for knowing these alarms are going off but pushing through regardless. In fact, we praise the behavior.

Just remember, you're playing with fire. Every train crashes eventually.

Stage 3: Recovery

At some point, hopefully you've acknowledged that you've been running a marathon at a sprint pace and decided it's time to take a step back.

When you begin recovery, your body does its best to return your internal systems to their original and healthy levels.

In order to recover, though, you have to rest, sleep, and reduce overall output-- something that's incredibly difficult for entrepreneurs.

This is why it's imperative that, as busy as you are, you literally schedule "time to rest" into your daily and/or weekly schedule. Make time to do nothing.

Stage 4: Adaption

Now, let's say you didn't listen to your body and you decided not to make time to recover.

You've chosen to "adapt" instead.

Essentially, what you're telling your body is that this level of stress isn't going to go away anytime soon. So, what does it do? It begins to settle into the feeling of constant stress, and adapts accordingly.

Except, that doesn't necessarily mean it adapts in a good way.

What you'll start to feel then is everything from lower energy levels to a demolished self-esteem. You won't sleep as well, you might gain (or lose) unhealthy amounts of weight, and be far less likely to manage your emotions.

Take this a step further (think "workaholic") and you can count on every pillar in your life beginning to wobble--until it eventually falls over.

Adaption is not a "solution." It's an unfortunate result, and one you should do your best to avoid at all costs.

Stage 5: Burnout

And finally, should you ignore the first four stages of warning, you will eventually find yourself completely and utterly "burned out."

This could mean everything from full-fledged depression to actually being hospitalized.

It's amazing that in the entrepreneurship community, things such as lack of sleep and non-stop grinding are celebrated as accolades that prove your devotion to the journey. I, myself, talk a lot about the work required in order to be successful. But I also know that if it isn't kept in balance, then the short-term gain will end up becoming a loss in the long run.

You are your most important asset. If you don't keep yourself balanced, you will suffer (mentally, physically, emotionally).

Don't let yourself reach burnout. You'll end up spending a lot more time getting yourself back to a healthy state than just doing a little bit each day to prevent that from ever happening in the first place.

Work-related stress

Work-related stress is a growing problem around the world that affects not only the health and well-being of employees, but also the productivity of organisations. Work-related stress arises where work demands of various types and combinations exceed the person's capacity and capability to cope. Work-related stress is the second most common compensated illness/injury in Australia, after musculoskeletal disorders.

Work-related stress can be caused by various events. For example, a person might feel under pressure if the demands of their job (such as hours or responsibilities) are greater than they can comfortably manage. Other sources of work-related stress include conflict with co-workers or bosses, constant change, and threats to job security, such as potential redundancy.

In Australia, more than \$133.9 million was paid in benefits to workers who had made claims related to workplace stress during the 2004/2005 tax year. According to the National Health and Safety Commission, work-related stress accounts for the longest stretches of absenteeism.

What one person may perceive as stressful, however, another may view as challenging. Whether a person experiences work-related stress depends on the job, the person's psychological make-up, and other factors (such as personal life and general health).

Symptoms of work-related stress

The signs or symptoms of work-related stress can be physical, psychological and behavioural.

Physical symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Muscular tension
- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Sleeping difficulties, such as insomnia
- Gastrointestinal upsets, such as diarrhoea or constipation
- Dermatological disorders.

Psychological symptoms include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Discouragement
- Irritability
- Pessimism
- Feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to cope
- Cognitive difficulties, such as a reduced ability to concentrate or make decisions.

Behavioural symptoms include:

- An increase in sick days or absenteeism
- Aggression
- Diminished creativity and initiative

- A drop in work performance
- Problems with interpersonal relationships
- Mood swings and irritability
- Lower tolerance of frustration and impatience
- Disinterest
- Isolation.

What are the main work-related stressors?

All the following issues have been identified as potential stressors at workplaces. A risk management approach will identify which ones exist in your own workplace and what causes them. They include:

- Organisation culture
- Bad management practices
- Job content and demands
- Physical work environment
- Relationships at work
- Change management
- Lack of support
- Role conflict
- Trauma.

Causes of work-related stress

Some of the factors that commonly cause work-related stress include:

- Long hours
- Heavy workload
- Changes within the organisation
- Tight deadlines
- Changes to duties
- Job insecurity
- Lack of autonomy
- Boring work
- Insufficient skills for the job
- Over-supervision
- Inadequate working environment
- Lack of proper resources
- Lack of equipment
- Few promotional opportunities

- Harassment
- Discrimination
- Poor relationships with colleagues or bosses
- Crisis incidents, such as an armed hold-up or workplace death.

Self-help for the individual

A person suffering from work-related stress can help themselves in a number of ways, including:

- Think about the changes you need to make at work in order to reduce your stress levels and then take action. Some changes you can manage yourself, while others will need the cooperation of others.
- Talk over your concerns with your employer or human resources manager.
- Make sure you are well organised. List your tasks in order of priority. Schedule the most difficult tasks of each day for times when you are fresh, such as first thing in the morning.
- Take care of yourself. Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly.
- Consider the benefits of regular relaxation. You could try meditation or yoga.
- Make sure you have enough free time to yourself every week.
- Don't take out your stress on loved ones. Instead, tell them about your work problems and ask for their support and suggestions.
- Drugs, such as alcohol and tobacco, won't alleviate stress and can cause additional health problems. Avoid excessive drinking and smoking.
- Seek professional counselling from a psychologist.
- If work-related stress continues to be a problem, despite your efforts, you may need to consider another job or a career change. Seek advice from a career counsellor or psychologist.

Benefits of preventing stress in the workplace

- Reduced symptoms of poor mental and physical health
- Fewer injuries, less illness and lost time
- Reduced sick leave usage, absences and staff turnover
- Increased productivity
- Greater job satisfaction
- Increased work engagement
- Reduced costs to the employer
- Improved employee health and community wellbeing.

Work-related stress is a management issue

It is important for employers to recognise work-related stress as a significant health and safety issue. A company can and should take steps to ensure that employees are not subjected to unnecessary stress, including:

- Ensure a safe working environment.
- Make sure that everyone is properly trained for their job.
- De-stigmatise work-related stress by openly recognising it as a genuine problem.
- Discuss issues and grievances with employees, and take appropriate action when possible.
- Devise a stress management policy in consultation with the employees.
- Encourage an environment where employees have more say over their duties, promotional prospects and safety.
- Organise to have a human resources manager.
- Cut down on the need for overtime by reorganising duties or employing extra staff.
- Take into account the personal lives of employees and recognise that the demands of home will sometimes clash with the demands of work.
- Seek advice from health professionals, if necessary.

GOOD STRESS VS BAD STRESS

It's official: Americans are among the most stressed-out people in the world, according to new 2018 data from Gallup. Stress rates are only increasing, especially for women — but not all stress has to be bad. When approached correctly, it's possible for stress to actually be a positive force in our lives.

What is a good stress?

The American Institute of Stress defines “good stress,” or eustress, as “stress in daily life that has positive connotations such as: marriage, promotion, babies, winning money, new friends, and graduation.” During important life moments such as these, our physical, physiological and biochemical responses are in a heightened state, not dissimilar to the responses our bodies produce when we experience negative stressors.

Think about the last time you were intensely excited about something, or about how you would feel if you were to, say, meet your favorite band or win a job you've been pining for. Would your heart rate increase? Perhaps you would feel a little manic and have trouble staying still, or maybe your stomach would feel nauseous. Despite the fact that something objectively positive

has happened to you, your body is thrown from its typical homeostasis, and the result is a state of stress that can be felt mentally, emotionally, and physically. And yet, it isn't a form of stress that you should wish to be rid of, like the more negative types (including [chronic stress](#)) [indicated by Gallup's data. Good stress is instead a sign that you are having meaningful experiences, putting you on track for a well-lived life.](#)

What are the positive [effects of stress?](#)

Good stress or eustress is, objectively, a positive thing. But even traditionally “bad stress” can yield positive outcomes if viewed the right way. Take acute stress, for example. The American Institute of Stress defines acute stress as the body's [“fight or flight” state, which is triggered by an influx of the body's stress hormone, cortisol. It can take the body about 90 minutes to metabolically restabilize once the acute stressor is removed.](#) [Firdaus Dhabhar, a professor of psychology at University of Miami Health System, said he's seen this type of stress carry with it multiple positive benefits.](#)

“Acute or short-term stress can have protective and beneficial effects,” he told Stanford Medicine. “We have shown that when short-term stress is coupled with immune activation — for example, during surgery or vaccination — the immune response is enhanced. The beneficial effects of short-term stress make sense because the fight-or-flight stress response is nature's fundamental survival system.”

Beyond physiologically protective elements, stress has also been linked to positive cognitive benefits, from sharper focus to enhanced memory retention.

“Some amounts of stress are good to push you just to the level of optimal alertness, behavioral and cognitive performance,” Daniela Kaufer, associate professor of integrative biology at the University of California, Berkeley, told Berkeley News. In order to prove this, she and her team conducted studies on rats and found that significant but brief stressful events caused stem cells in the rats' brains to multiply into new cells that, when tested later, showed improved mental performance.

“I think intermittent stressful events are probably what keeps the brain more alert, and you perform better when you are alert,” she said.

Now that we've looked at the positive effects stress can have, what are some additional situations that can lead to each kind of stress, both good and bad?

Examples of good stress:

- Traveling to a new country where your language isn't spoken

- Falling in love
- Moving to a different city
- Getting over a fear
- Speaking up about something you believe in
- Learning a new hobby
- Riding a rollercoaster

Examples of bad stress:

- Working hard to meet an [unreasonable deadline](#)
- Breaking up with a significant other
- Sustaining an injury
- Losing a job
- Taking an exam you feel you'll fail
- Having an argument with a close friend
- Dealing with a poor financial decision

The difference between good stress and [bad stress](#)?

Psychologists typically lump stress into two camps to denote its positive and negative iterations. Eustress, as mentioned earlier, is good stress that ultimately inspires, motivates, and enhances your life. Significantly, this type of stress is usually the product of a choice — like getting engaged or going skydiving for the first time — and thus, the stress that is involved tends to feel more worthwhile and even empowering. In contrast, bad stress, or distress, elicits feelings of powerlessness. It's the type of stress that wears you down, tires you out, and wreaks lastingly negative havoc on your health, like weakened immune systems and impaired memory.

One of the biggest differences separating these two camps of stress is the length of time a stressor is experienced. Even good stress can shift over into bad stress if it's extended — for example, a rollercoaster may feel thrilling for a few minutes, but to ride one without pause for hours would likely have a negative impact on your nerves, as well as your overall sense of physical well-being. Acute stress, with its beneficial impact on memory and cognition, is defined as a brief interlude of heightened responses, followed by a readjustment period generally not exceeding 90 minutes in which your body returns to normal. When the sensation of acute stress continues past the point of “brief,” though, that's when stress can become chronic. And not only does chronic stress take a toll on your physical health, it can also lead to a [whole host](#)

of other problems like disrupted sleep patterns, increased irritability, lower performance at work, negative thought patterns, and depression.

How to turn bad stress into good

But just as good stress can become bad stress, the opposite also holds true. What ultimately defines an experience of stress as either good or bad is how the stressor feels about it. Much of this has to do with our thought patterns, and consciously promoting any patterns that are optimistic while stymying those that are pessimistic means you'll have more eustress in your life than the alternative. Reminding yourself of the potential benefits of a situation you're inclined to feel hostile toward is a great place to start. For instance, losing a job is something most people would objectively classify as a negative experience, and as such, the type of stress it begets becomes negative. But what if losing that job is actually freeing you from some component of your life you were dissatisfied with? What new opportunities are being unlocked that you may not have considered had your employment status remained the same?

After all, the body's response to stress is based largely on what is perceived as a threat. By making a conscious effort to shift your perception from threat- to opportunity-oriented, you'll gain greater control over the type of stress you experience as a result.