**Signs and symptoms of stress overload**

The following table lists some of the common warning signs and symptoms of chronic stress. The more signs and symptoms you notice in yourself, the closer you may be to stress overload.

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| **Cognitive Symptoms** |
| * Memory problems * Inability to concentrate * Poor judgment * Seeing only the negative * Anxious or racing thoughts * Constant worrying |
| **Emotional Symptoms** |
| * Moodiness * Irritability or short temper * Agitation, inability to relax * Feeling overwhelmed * Sense of loneliness and isolation * Depression or general unhappiness |
| **Physical Symptoms** |
| * Aches and pains * Diarrhea or constipation * Nausea, dizziness * Chest pain, rapid heartbeat * Loss of sex drive * Frequent colds |

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| **Behavioral Symptoms** |
| * Eating more or less * Sleeping too much or too little * Isolating yourself from others * Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities * Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax * Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing) |

Keep in mind that the signs and symptoms of stress overload can also be caused by other psychological or medical problems. If you’re experiencing any of the warning signs of stress, it’s important to see a doctor to help determine if your symptoms are stress-related.

**The causes of stress**

**Isolation and stress**

Since social engagement appears to be our best defense against stress, isolation or a lack of positive, consistent human interaction can be both a stressor in itself and exacerbate other causes of stress.

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you or forces you to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be self-generated, for example, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

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| **Common external causes of stress** |
| * Major life changes * Work or school * Relationship difficulties * Financial problems * Being too busy * Children and family |
| **Common internal causes of stress** |
| * Chronic worry * Pessimism * Negative self-talk * Unrealistic expectations/Perfectionism * Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility * All-or-nothing attitude |

What causes excessive stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. For example, your morning commute may make you anxious and tense because you worry that traffic will make you late. Others, however, may find the trip relaxing because they allow more than enough time and enjoy listening to music while they drive.

**What determines your ability to manage stress?**

We're all different. Some people seem to be able to roll with life’s punches, while others tend 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.

Your ability to tolerate stress depends on many factors, including the quality of your relationships and support network, your life experiences, your emotional intelligence, and genetics.

**Factors that influence your stress tolerance**

* **Your support network** – Social engagement is the body’s most evolved strategy for responding to stress so it’s no surprise that people with a strong network of supportive friends and family members are better able to cope with life’s stressors. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated you are, the less opportunity you have to utilize social engagement and the greater your vulnerability to stress.
* **Your exercise levels**. Your physical and mental health are intrinsically linked, so the better you take care of your body, the greater resilience you’ll have against the symptoms of stress. [Exercising regularly](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/exercise-fitness/emotional-benefits-of-exercise.htm) (for 30 minutes or more on most days) can lift your mood and help relieve stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration. It can also serve as a distraction to your worries, allowing you to find some quiet time and break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress and anxiety.
* **Your diet**. The food you eat can also have a profound effect on your mood and how well you cope with life’s stressors. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience food, refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks can worsen symptoms of stress while eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and [healthy fats](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm), especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with life’s ups and downs.
* **Your sense of control** – It may be easier to take stress in your stride if you have confidence in yourself and your ability to influence events and persevere through challenges. If you feel like things are out of your control, you’re likely to have less tolerance for stress.
* **Your attitude and outlook** – Optimistic people are often more stress-hardy. They tend to embrace challenges, have a strong sense of humor, and accept that change is a part of life.
* **Your ability to deal with your emotions** – You’re extremely vulnerable to stress if you don’t know how to calm and soothe yourself when you’re feeling sad, angry, or overwhelmed by a situation. The ability to bring your [emotions into balance](http://www.helpguide.org/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/) helps you bounce back from adversity and is a skill that can be learned at any age.
* **Your knowledge and preparation** – The more you know about a stressful situation, including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if you go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be less traumatic than if you were expecting to bounce back immediately.

**Dealing with stress and its symptoms**

While unchecked stress is undeniably damaging, you have more control than you might think. Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that only compound the problem. They drink too much to unwind at the end of a stressful day, fill up on comfort food, zone out in front of the TV or computer for hours, use pills to relax, or lash out at other people. However, there are many healthier ways to cope with stress and its symptoms.

**Learn how to manage stress**

You may feel like the stress in your life is out of your control, but you can always control the way you respond. [**Stress management**](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-causes-and-effects.htm) can teach you healthier ways to cope with stress, help you reduce its harmful effects, and prevent stress from spiraling out of control again in the future.

* **Engage socially.**The simple act of talking face to face with another human being can release hormones that reduce stress even if you’re still unable to alter the stressful situation. Opening up to someone is not a sign of weakness and it won’t make you a burden to others. In fact, most friends will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your bond.
* **Get moving.** Physical activity plays a key role in managing stress. Activities that require moving both your arms and your legs are particularly effective. Walking, running, swimming, dancing, and aerobic classes are good choices, especially if you exercise mindfully (focusing your attention on the physical sensations you experience as you move). Focused movement helps to get your nervous system back into balance. If you’ve been traumatized or experienced the immobilization stress response, getting active can help you to become "unstuck."

**Lifestyle changes to deal with the symptoms of stress**

You can also better cope with the symptoms of stress by strengthening your physical health.

* **Set aside relaxation time**. [Relaxation techniques](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body’s relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the fight or flight stress response.
* **Eat a healthy diet**. Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress. Start your day with a healthy breakfast, reduce your caffeine and sugar intake, add plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, and cut back on alcohol and nicotine.
* **Get plenty of sleep**. Feeling tired can increase stress by causing you to think irrationally. Keep your cool in stressful situations by [getting a good night’s sleep](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/sleep/how-to-sleep-better.htm).