

Stress and symptoms of stress

What is stress?

The English word 'stress' literally means pressure or tension. In psychology, the word is used for the tension that occurs when something that is experienced as a threat happens. Stress is the feeling you have in all situations that are threatening, or that you think are threatening. It is therefore a reaction to stressful situations. It's a fast, physical reaction that enables you to take action.

We've always had stress reactions. They are necessary for survival. Our bodies are made ready to fight, flee or freeze, which is very useful if you are standing in front of a scary lion, or if someone is trying to hit you with a club. Or, in our modern times, if you're in danger of being hit by a bus. Everyone needs stress reactions to a certain degree in order to function in life.

What exactly happens in the body in case of stress?

Our body has two stress systems. The 'fast system' (sympathetic nervous system) almost immediately causes the 'fight or flight reaction', which prepares our body for action. Our muscles tighten and our blood pressure and heart rate rise, so that you feel your heart pounding in your chest. The pupils dilate. The blood is drawn from our organs and sent to the muscles. Digestion slows down (which causes the 'butterflies in the stomach' feeling). We start to sweat, so that the body can cool down after explosive action.

This system is set up in such a way that it prefers to go off too often rather than once too little. Suppose you see something long and thin in the grass. It is better to be unnecessarily frightened by a garden hose ten times than not to be frightened once by a real snake. This can have very unpleasant consequences.

After a few minutes, a second system is activated. The stress stimulus eventually reaches the adrenal cortex via the hypothalamus and the pituitary gland. This is where the stress hormone cortisol is produced. Secretion of cortisol into the bloodstream leads to an increase of the blood sugar level and increases the metabolism. This releases energy, making it easier to cope with threatening situations. Finally, cortisol inhibits, through feedback, the cells in the hypothalamus that caused the stress reaction. This hormone first helps to provide your body with extra energy and then ensures that you can calm down as soon as the coast is clear.

When is a stress reaction useful? And when is it not?

Stress reactions are particularly useful because they enable us to act effectively in emergency situations. These reactions also help us to be sharp and alert when it comes to performance. The problem is that our human brain not only activates the stress systems when we meet a

lion, or when a bus is approaching. No, we also respond to 'threats' of a more psychological nature.

Over the past ten thousand years, our world has undergone incredible changes. We are now dealing with many more, very different and also more complex stressors. Here are a few examples:

- You have to go to a party where you don't know anyone but the hostess;
- You need to talk to the neighbour about her five cats that are always in your garden;
- You get criticism from a customer;
- You've forgotten your computer password

During the above moments our body reacts with a stress response, but that doesn't help us at all. In fact, the stress response we get may stand in the way of effective action. In all of the above situations, inner peace and relaxation are more helpful than a stress response. However, our bodies cannot make that distinction. It reacts exactly as if it were a "real" threat. We are therefore saddled with an outdated alarm system that 'starts to squeak at the slightest shrill', as Witte Hoogendijk and Wilma de Rek call it in their very readable book *from Big Bang to Burnout*.

Chronic stress

Once again, stress reactions in themselves are no big deal. It does become a problem if you get into stressful situations too often or for too long. If the stress stimulus persists, and we cannot calm down, then the cortisol level remains high. We continue to eat into our energy reserves without them being sufficiently replenished. If the cortisol level is chronically elevated, our bodies skimp on the maintenance of our immune system. This makes us, in the long run, more vulnerable to disease. In addition, a chronically elevated heart rate and blood pressure can be harmful to the heart and blood vessels.

Stress researcher Robert Sapolsky puts it this way: 'Stress-related illnesses occur mainly because we so often activate a physiological system that has evolved to respond to acute physical emergencies. This system is then used for months on end, when we worry about mortgages, relationships and promotions'.

Ultimately, this can lead to symptoms of overload. Common problems are:

- Inability to sleep well
- Worrying too much and too often
- Concentration problems
- Irritability
- Inability to withstand too much hustle and bustle
- Physical problems such as tense muscles or headaches

These symptoms can be seen as warning signs. They indicate that your body is producing too many stress hormones and that you need to relax. It is therefore important that you build in sufficient relaxation and take time to recover after a period with a lot of stress.

Stress puppy or not?

Some people can handle more stress than others. One person's stress system is, as it were, more acute and sensitive than another person's. This may have to do with genetic predisposition, but also with early childhood experiences. In general, it can be said that children who receive a lot of care and security at an early age are better able to cope with stress at a later age. This is especially true when a child does have to deal with stressful situations, but these are still manageable for them. Keeping children away from stressful situations is, therefore, not necessary, as long as it is not overwhelming for them.

In addition, your resistance to stress also depends on the period you are in. One moment you feel better able to cope with stress than the next. This has a lot to do with the balance between the load you must carry and the strength you have to carry it.

It is therefore possible that your resistance to stress is different from that of your colleague or partner, whether or not temporarily. That's okay. It is good to be aware of this and to take your own limits into account.

What can you do about too much stress?

In any case, it is important to be able to alternate sufficiently between action and relaxation in your daily life. This means not being 'on' all day, but finding moments when your body and mind can calm down. This way, you prevent stress from becoming chronic.

If that is not enough, you can also get professional help. Sometimes just a few conversations are enough to get a grip on the situation.