



Is Your Stress Level Unhealthy?

Worried about a big presentation, mounting bills, a family illness, or an upcoming event? Stress is a universal, normal response to obstacles in life. In some cases it's even beneficial because stress tells our bodies it's time to respond; however, leaving stress unmanaged can be detrimental, leading to negative emotional and physical consequences.

Stress is defined as a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances.

What are some signs of stress?

Clues that you are under stress may include being irritable, having difficulty concentrating, excessive worry or moodiness. Physical symptoms can include headaches, increased heart rate, tension or pain. Stress can lead to negative consequences for physical, social, occupational, recreational and financial health. It can cause people to withdraw from outings, experience prolonged difficulty sleeping, or be unable to cope with emotions after the end of a relationship.

Levels of Stress

Stress can manifest in several ways, each with increasing consequences.

Eustress comprises low to moderate levels of stress, typically viewed as beneficial. We can view eustress as

the "fire" igniting us to take action and motivating us to reach our goals. In this stage of stress, we often feel excited and energetic. The stressor (something that causes the stress) is often short-term, realistic, and attainable. We often view these stressors as challenges that improve our skills and self-efficacy.

Stress can be experienced as negative thoughts, feelings, and/or sensations that may have an obvious beginning and a likely method to fix it. Decreased sleep, restlessness, and low appetite due to a busy lifestyle often indicate physical and behavioral stress.

Usually, there is a specific identified stressor. Some examples may include having to present at a work meeting, long hours at work, a chore list piling up, paying monthly bills, or a sick loved one at home.

Let's look at the example of working long hours more closely. A demanding schedule may leave you feeling exhausted. Your chore list at home may pile up, and you may think, I have so much to get done. You may be grouchy or irritable with your partner or children, which leads to feelings of sadness and guilt. As you can see, stress has a ripple effect on other areas of our lives.

Distress presents as persistent negative thoughts, feelings, and/or sensations that negatively impact well-being and do not respond to attempts to reduce them. Distress may be related to one large stressor or an accumulation of

separate stressors. Distress can be seen as an amorphous cloud looming over you. It can take the form of excessive anxiety, long-term depression, fatigue, sleep deprivation, a drop in grades or work performance, increase in substance use and isolation, and/or change in daily habits (poor hygiene, less engagement with hobbies, strained relationships).

Crisis is a time-sensitive circumstance that will negatively and severely impact your life if no immediate action is taken. This could include harm to yourself or others, or inability to cope at basic levels.

Key Differences Between the Levels

How can you determine if the stress you are experiencing is adversely affecting your health? It comes down to the urgency of the stressor, the duration of the symptoms, and the severity and lasting impacts the stressor or situation creates.

Time: The immediacy and urgency of the stressor, and the duration of the stress symptoms. For example, a crisis would involve an immediate problem with lasting consequences.

Consequences: The severity and lasting impacts that a stressor or situation creates. Here, distress would include significant impairments that are typically long-term, such as difficulty falling asleep for weeks despite several attempts to improve it.

Pervasiveness: The areas of impairment

along with the frequency in which these impairments occur. Using stress for this example, someone could have a mild headache or tension due to an upcoming exam. The symptoms and stress may impact their academic life, but haven't negatively impacted their personal or work life. The symptoms go away after the exam.

Things to Consider

The intensity of our emotions and reactions to stressors are not dictated by the level of stress. Intense emotions (anger, anxiety, or sadness) can be experienced in all levels of stress. Understanding our thoughts and behaviors provides impactful information in navigating stress. How are you thinking about a stressful event?

Using a Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) model, thoughts, feelings, and actions influence each other. With stress, the impact of all three (along with their impact on each other) may prolong stress responses. The following image shows how the cycle of stress could perpetuate itself.





For example, you have a big presentation for work coming up, and there's a lot of preparation to do. You think, I'm not good at presenting. As a result, maybe you stop preparing and give up on yourself. You feel defeated before the presentation and disappointed afterwards when you receive a negative review from your supervisor. The poor performance reinforces the belief, I'm no good at presentations. This cycle only increases the distress someone may face when dealing with presentations in the future. Interrupting this cycle is important or else it will continue to negatively impact your quality of life and potential.

Identifying stressors and understanding our thoughts and reactions to them are important steps in managing stress. When stress moves beyond a healthy level, you may benefit from speaking to a licensed mental health therapist to help recognize, address, and manage reactions to stressors.

Contact HUSK: 800-294-2500