

Common Stress Reactions and Effective Coping Strategies

Common Stress Reactions

When you experience stress, your body goes into high-alert. When you experience too much stress, for too long, you are likely to experience some common stress reactions. This table lists some common stress reactions.

Physical reactions	Mental/Emotional reactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Muscle tension (leading to headaches, back pain, and other aches)• Stomachaches and digestive upsets• Getting sick more often/more easily• Sleep disruptions (difficulty falling asleep, or staying asleep, dreams/nightmares)• Fatigue• High blood pressure• Feeling jumpy and “wound up”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty focusing, concentrating, and remembering things• Feeling overwhelmed, and difficulty making decisions or planning ahead• Irritability, anger, and sudden/intense mood swings• Recurrent thoughts about stressful events or issues• Feeling anxious, depressed, or numb/apathetic
Behavior/Relationship reactions	Spirituality/Belief reactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changes in eating, sleep, or sex drive• Increase in use of alcohol or other substances or activities that distract or numb you• Increased conflict in relationships (irritability, anger, blaming)• Avoiding people, even those you love and typically enjoy• Decline in doing things you enjoy, or faith/religious practices• Decline in work performance (such as increase in mistakes, missed deadlines or meetings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling discouraged or disillusioned• Changes in beliefs that are important to you (about the world, yourself, or others)• Doubts about meaning, purpose, faith, and/or religion• Feeling empty or disconnected• Cynicism and blaming• Feeling hopeless/helpless

Warning flags – Increase self-care and seek support

Experiencing stress reactions is a sign that you would benefit from making changes to increase healthy coping activities. Any significant changes in what's "normal" for you can signal that you would benefit from some additional support, especially:

- Feeling chronically exhausted or "stuck"
- Feeling cynical, disengaged, or incompetent
- Avoiding people, even those you love and typically enjoy
- Increased impatience, irritability, anger, and conflict with others
- Difficulty sleeping
- Physical complaints (aches, pains, frequent illnesses)
- Feeling more anxious, fearful, jumpy, or on edge
- Recurrent / unwanted thoughts about distressing content or events

Warning flags – Seek professional support

These stress reactions are a sign that you would benefit from professional support. If you or someone you know experiences any of the following, seek professional support.

- Significant increase in substance use and/or impact on functioning
- Feeling chronically hopeless or that work/efforts are meaningless
- Desire or acting to self-harm
- Recurrent thoughts of your own death or of suicide

Common signs of stress/distress in the workplace

If you are a manager, here are some ways that stress can "show up" in the workplace. If you see any of the following from your team members over time, this is likely a sign that they would benefit from making some changes and receiving additional support.

- Uncharacteristic behavior
- Difficulty focusing / concentrating / remembering
- Appear chronically exhausted, distracted, or depressed
- Overwhelm / decision-paralysis
- Withdrawing or isolating
- Increase in irritability, anger, conflict, blaming others
- Increase in guilt, shame, self-blame, and/or crying
- Talking constantly about certain events or topics
- Decline in performance (e.g., work quality, missing deadlines)

Effective Self-Care and Coping Strategies for Managing Stress

Common stress reactions show up in our bodies, brains, behavior, and beliefs—in other words, stress reactions show up in our physical state of being, thoughts, feelings, emotional reactions, choices, spirituality, and relationships. However, we can also find effective self-care strategies and pathways towards wellbeing and resilience in each of these areas. This table lists some research-supported self-care and coping strategies for managing stress.

Physical <i>Goal: Reduce physiological arousal & relax</i>	Mental/Emotional <i>Goal: Seek mental rest and refreshment</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase exercise and physical movement (including stretching, walking, Yoga, Pilates, dance) • Get sufficient sleep • Eat nutritious food • Stay hydrated • Practice deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure daily screen-free and phone-free time • Spend time doing things you enjoy – that give you energy and are fun • Practice mindfulness meditation • Seek humor • Write about your challenges and problems, discuss them with others, and/or seek counseling
Behavior/Relationship <i>Goals: Connect with trusted others and build healthy habits</i>	Spirituality/Belief <i>Goals: Reflect and make meaning of stressful and disturbing experiences</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit working hours • Spend time/stay connected with friends and family who support you • Nurture one or two additional friendships • Limit consumption of caffeine, alcohol, tobacco, and other substances • Practice kindness – intentionally encourage others, check in with colleagues • Do things that create a sense of progress or control (such as track your progress on work/life tasks and celebrate achievements) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice meaningful rituals • Focus on things that create a sense of perspective • Participate in a community of meaning (such as a faith group) • Practice gratitude • Spend time in nature • Talk about thoughts and challenges with friends and family • Spend time alone