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7
Signs You're
Too Stressed

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3





7 Unexpected Signs You're Too Stressed

Are you under more stress than you realize?
Your body might be trying to tell you there's a problem.

Leah Lambart has suffered from migraines for as long as she can remember. But five years ago, soon after she left her full-time job to stay home with her 2-and-a-half-year-old son and 4-month-old daughter, her headaches became debilitating, kicking off a cascade of stress-related health problems.

By Christa
Melnyk
Hines

"I wasn't taking great care of myself," Lambart says. "My husband was working seven days a week, and he was out of the house all of the time. I felt emotionally supported, but there was no one to help with the kids on a regular basis. Since I wasn't working, we didn't think we could afford any kind of babysitting regularly."

The crippling, shooting pains marching through Lambart's head caused disorienting motion sickness and made it difficult to drive or be around other people. On the worst days, she could barely move from her couch, much less play or engage with her youngsters.

Increasingly isolated and spiraling into depression and anxiety, she turned to a

counselor and began learning strategies to better manage her stress and headaches.

What is stress?

Stress in and of itself isn't a bad thing. When we slam on the brakes to avoid a collision or scramble to meet a looming deadline, stress hormones (including adrenaline, norepinephrine, and cortisol) flood the body in a fight-or-flight survival response. We hyper-focus, our pupils dilate, blood vessels pump blood to the large muscle groups, and the heart works harder, increasing blood pressure. When the threat has passed, our bodies return to normal functioning.

Problems arise when the body is under chronic stress, leading to long-term health conditions, such as autoimmune diseases, gastrointestinal issues, cardiac problems, and depression. And since stress is contagious, it can also affect your family's well-being.

"We all have a unique relationship with stress," says Heidi Hanna, Ph.D., executive director of the American Institute of Stress and author of *Stressaholic: 5 Steps to Transform Your Relationship with Stress*. "If we want to learn how to navigate it effectively, we need to understand our own dynamics."

Here are seven signs that your stress levels may be getting out of whack:

1. Feeling edgy or unsettled

Do you get the sense that you're constantly racing toward an ever-shifting finish line? Then you're probably under too much stress.

"It's very subtle, and we assume that it's just part of life," Hanna says. "But that constant pressure we feel to hurry is also activating a chronic stress state that's been shown to cause more wear and tear on our body and mind."

When we rush, we make careless mistakes, become forgetful, and have trouble concentrating. Overwhelming to-do lists and the pressure to keep up is a formula for irritability, resentment, and burnout.

"I used to be the type of person who would say yes to everything because I was a perfectionistic people pleaser, and I didn't want to let people down," says Kelly Hill, 39, who was diagnosed with Hashimoto's thyroiditis, an autoimmune disease that can be worsened by chronic stress. "I was so exhausted and tired all the time that I couldn't function."

Although the mom of two says she now manages her stress through a whole-foods diet and moderate exercise, she has also become more discerning about the projects she takes on.

"Now, I'm finally saying no to things, and it is so freeing," Hill says.

2. Hair loss

Chronic stress can literally cause your hair to fall out. In extreme cases, people can experience a syndrome called trichotillomania, in which they can't control the urge to pull hair from their scalp, eyebrows, and other areas of the body.

A traumatic event or severe stress can also cause hair loss, including alopecia areata, a condition in which the body's immune system attacks the hair follicles.

Contact your doctor if you are experiencing significant hair loss.

3. Sore jaw and headaches

Stress can cause you to grind your teeth or clench your jaw while you sleep. Upon waking, your jaw may feel sore. Your dentist might prescribe a dental guard to protect your teeth while you sleep.

Constant muscle tightness in the head, neck, and shoulders can also contribute to neck and back pain, as well as tension headaches, which feel like a tight band around the head or throbbing pain in the back of the head or behind the eyes.

Lambart manages her headaches by getting regular massages, incorporating daily relaxation practices, and going to physical therapy. She also found relief by switching to a mostly plant-based and gluten-free diet.

4. Spiraling negative thoughts

Stress can kick off negative thought patterns, which further exacerbate stress. Perhaps you zero in on the negatives in any given situation. Maybe you anticipate the worst outcomes. Or you find yourself stuck in a web of self-criticism and obsess over disappointments and past mistakes.

"Music is one of the quickest ways to shift energy and attention in the brain," Hanna says. "Having a recharge playlist is a simple but powerful technique to shift the brain and body into a healthier state."

To reprogram your outlook to be more optimistic, try writing in a gratitude journal, looking for the humor in situations, and connecting with an optimistic friend.

A Frazzled Population

According to the American Psychological Association's 2017 Stress in America survey, 75 percent of respondents reported experiencing at least one symptom of acute stress in the past month.

5. Aggravated allergies

According to researchers at Ohio State University, stress can lengthen and worsen your allergy symptoms.

Under stress, your body releases a chemical called histamine into the bloodstream. Histamine causes allergy symptoms in the body, including a runny nose and itchy eyes, mouth, and skin. These symptoms can make it harder to get a good night's sleep, which can further impact your body's ability to defend itself from viral and bacterial infections. Shortness of breath associated with stress can also trigger asthma attacks.

When allergies flare up, try rest and relaxation techniques, and continue with your allergy medication.

SIMPLE WAYS TO MANAGE STRESS

Stay hydrated.

Soak in a warm bath.

Aim for at least seven hours
of sleep each night.

Take breaks from social media
and electronics.

Listen to soothing music.

Exercise regularly.

Breathe deeply.

Say a prayer.

Laugh.

Get outside.

Make time to play.

Plan nutritious meals ahead of time.

Spend time with good friends.

6. Feeling too wired to sleep

"Feeling tired and wired at the end of the night is a surefire way to know that stress hormones are hijacked," Hanna says.

The more anxious you feel, the harder it is to fall asleep. Adrenaline coursing through the body can cause you to feel fidgety, making it even more difficult to relax.

"Even just one night of disturbed sleep can raise your nighttime cortisol, which in turn blocks the production of the sleep hormone melatonin, creating a vicious cycle that makes it harder to fall and stay asleep and harder to wake up easily in the morning," writes Aviva Romm, M.D., author of *The Adrenal Thyroid Revolution*.

Without a good night's sleep, you'll have more trouble focusing on tasks, become more forgetful, experience increased moodiness, and are more likely to depend on caffeine to get you through the day.

Reset for rest by journaling your worries, completing exercise at least three hours before bed, and avoiding alcohol and caffeine.

7. Inability to lose weight

Is the siren song of ice cream or potato chips testing your willpower? Anxiety and lack of sleep can increase cravings for high-fat comfort foods. Metabolism slows, and the body begins storing "visceral fat" deep in the belly, which can lead to conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

On top of that, a hectic, on-the-go lifestyle can make it harder to make healthy food choices, causing issues such as heartburn and acid reflux.

A plan of action can help with weight loss. Schedule regular exercise, and plan out your week's meals and snacks. VI

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