



Taming the Tiger

The three stages of acute (short-term) stress:

Stage One

- A mobilizing stage that prepares you to face a stressful event. Fight or flight.

Stage Two

- An energy-consuming stage, in which your body dumps stored fats and sugars into your bloodstream to give you quick energy.

Stage Three

- An energy depletion stage, in which your reserves are exhausted and you are pushed toward physical and psychological collapse.

A saber-toothed tiger is approaching! Your brain goes into survival mode: your heart pounds, your breathing accelerates, you start sweating, digestion slows sharply, causing “butterflies” in your stomach, and your muscles tighten. Your body is preparing you to run for your life or fight to the death, often called the “fight or flight” response.

Now, remove the tiger and substitute a job interview, a family argument, or a giant credit card bill.

Your body’s automatic response to today’s stressful situations is essentially the same as the response your cave-dwelling ancestors had to the approach of a 450-pound carnivore with seven-inch fangs. While this fight-or-flight mode can provide energy and focus for facing a predator or making a public speech, it’s not something we’re designed to endure for long periods of time. It’s like flooring the accelerator of your car. Keep it up long enough, and something is going to break.

RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control:
www.cdc.gov/mental-health

American Heart Association:
www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management

National Alliance on Mental Illness:
www.nami.org/your-journey/individuals-with-mental-illness/managing-stress

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When Stress Becomes Malignant

When you reach the energy-consuming second state of acute stress, you're already beginning to experience negative effects:

- You feel driven and pressured
- Fatigue sets in
- You become anxious
- Your memory becomes less reliable
- Your immune system weakens, rendering you vulnerable to infections like a cold or flu

Stage three marks the onset of chronic stress. Now, your body's defense mechanisms no longer enhance the chances for success in fleeing the tiger or acing the presentation. Instead, they become a second enemy, making you vulnerable to:

- Poor judgment
- Personality changes
- Hostility and anger
- Depression
- Anxiety disorders

Certain stress-hardy individuals seem to thrive (for a time, at least) under pressure. But no one is immune to the long-term hazards of chronic stress. The symptoms include all those from the earlier stages, plus:

- Insomnia
- Ulcers and other stomach problems
- Frequent constipation or diarrhea
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Nervousness, trembling and inappropriate sweating
- Headaches
- Significant unintended weight gain or loss
- Smoking and drinking to excess
- Heart disease

Managing Stress

To deal with the stresses in your life you must first identify them. The most widely recommended approach is maintaining a stress diary, in which you jot down notes on the events that cause you stress – not just the big ones, all of them. Stress is usually cumulative. It's easy to overlook or forget minor stressful events, but they add up. By carefully writing them down, you may discover patterns and vulnerabilities you might otherwise overlook.

Examine all possibilities. Stresses typically fall into four general categories:

1. **Lifestyle:** Changes in eating or sleeping habits, changes in living conditions, over-scheduling, major purchases.
2. **Work:** Trouble with a superior, job promotion or demotion, changing jobs, getting fired or laid off.
3. **Financial pressure:** Decreased income, mortgage foreclosure, collection notices, creditors calling you.
4. **Relational stress:** Beginning or ending a romantic relationship, marriage, divorce, separation, pregnancy, a child leaving home, a death in the family.

Having identified the sources of stress, you can begin reducing them. Even if the stressful situations or events can't be changed, you can change behaviors that worsen their effects.

- **Be decisive.** Hesitancy and procrastination are more stressful than making a decision. The ambiguities and uncertainties that block decision-making are often merely excuses for not taking action.
- **Manage your time.** Nothing is more overwhelming than the perception that there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish all you need to do. This generally isn't the case. You can learn effective time management techniques, and the discipline they impose will make you far more productive. If you are truly overburdened, it may stem from your unwillingness to delegate work and responsibility.
- **Manage your commitments.** Don't promise more than you can reasonably accomplish. But don't duck reasonable commitments that would benefit your job, your family or your sense of self-worth.

- **Communicate effectively.** Say what needs to be said in the way you would want the same information communicated to you. Avoid making others feel hostile, intimidated or ignored. But be assertive enough to make sure your position is understood.

A great deal of stress can arise when there is a disconnect between who you perceive yourself to be and the life you are living.

- **Know what matters.** A clear understanding of your own wants, values and priorities is your best protection from a life adrift.
- **Balance your life.** You have obligations to your family, your work and yourself. Keep those needs and obligations in balance and perspective.
- **Have a sense of purpose.** Life will entail fewer compromises and disappointments if you keep your major goals in constant view.
- **Avoid excess.** Too much of a good thing is bad. Too much of a bad thing is disastrous. Keep your appetites in check and your ambitions in perspective.

There are a number of simple coping strategies you can use to keep the negative effects of stress in check:

- **Sleep better.** Sleep is a healing process for mind and body, but people in this country are notoriously sleep-deprived. Improving the quality and duration of your sleep is a major stress reliever.
- **Exercise.** Physical exercise is a great stress reducer, especially aerobic exercise like walking, swimming, bicycling – any activity that raises your heart rate.
- **Laughing and crying.** Both are natural stress relievers.
- **Talking.** A conversation with a sympathetic and patient listener can be a great tension reliever. Another point of view may suggest unconsidered solutions to what's troubling you.
- **Distraction.** Hobbies, pets, community service – any activity that keeps you from obsessing about your problems – can greatly reduce your stress level.
- **Relaxation techniques.** A variety of body and mind-centered relaxation techniques exist. They include yoga, tai chi, meditation, guided imaging and self-hypnosis. They can be well worth the investment in time and discipline required to learn them.

