

## Stress Overview



**Definition of Stress:** Stress is a response to challenges and changes in life that your brain interprets as a call to prepare for action. Adrenaline and stress hormones are released that activate your body (“*fight or flight*”), and affect your actions, your thoughts, and your emotions. Stress helps to protect you, but it can be unhealthy if it continues for a long time. Too much stress can also interfere with your performance. Stress-related physical changes include:

- Increased blood pressure and heart rate.
- Rapid breathing.
- Sweating.
- Stomach muscles contracting, causing “butterflies,” cramps, diarrhea.
- Muscle tension.



**Mental Reframing:** Everyone has a stream of private thoughts running through their minds. This is called *self-talk*. These thoughts reflect your beliefs and attitudes about the world, other people, and yourself, and they may be adding to your stress. To interrupt the automatic thought process:

- Become aware—monitor your thoughts and self-talk.
- Recognize that thoughts cause feelings and motivate behavior. There is rarely a direct link between the stressful situation and your response. In fact, it’s usually not the event or situation that leads to a stress reaction; *it’s your interpretation of the event or situation* that causes you to respond in various ways.

The sequence of events that leads to feelings and behaviors in response to stressors is called the “**ABCs**”:

**(A)ctivating event + (B)eliefs = (C)onsequences**

**A** —You experience the *Activating* event.

**B** — Your *Beliefs* about the event lead to an interpretation of the event.

**C** — Your interpretation of the event either increases or decreases the stress you feel—the *Consequences*.

### POTENTIAL LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF CHRONIC STRESS

- Hypertension (high blood pressure).
  - Heart disease.
  - Immune system suppression.
  - Increased risk for infectious disease.
  - Gastrointestinal disorders such as colitis.
    - Asthma.
- Mental health problems.

### QUICK STRESS-REDUCTION TECHNIQUES

When you feel stressed, your breathing becomes fast and shallow and your muscles get tense. You can interrupt the stress response by:

1. Slowing your breathing and taking deep, slow breaths from your belly.
2. Relaxing your muscles (e.g., by tensing and releasing muscles throughout your body).



**Mental Reframing (cont.):** Check your thoughts and self-talk for these stress-promoting thinking patterns:

1. **All-or-nothing thinking:** judging things as being all good or all bad usually based on a single factor.
2. **Exaggeration:** blowing the negative consequences of a situation or event way out of proportion.
3. **Overgeneralization:** drawing conclusions about your whole life based on negative outcome of a single incident.
4. **Mind-reading:** believing you know what another person or group of people is thinking about you (usually bad) when you have no evidence.
  - Challenge your negative thoughts and self-talk by asking yourself whether there is evidence to support the way you are perceiving the situation.
  - Replace negative or stressful self-talk with more positive, useful, and realistic self-talk.

*Example:* While on leave, you decide to take the bus to go visit your family and get stuck in traffic due to road construction. Change **negative self-talk** (“This will take forever. I will never get home. Why does this always happen to me?”) to **positive and useful self-talk** (“I’m glad they are fixing this road. I can take this time to relax and listen to some music I enjoy.”).

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### Controlling the Source of Stress by Solving Problems:

Take action over stressors that you can control (your own habits, behavior, environment, relationships) by using the problem-solving process:

- Step 1:** Define the problem.
- Step 2:** Set a goal (e.g., what would you like to see happen?).
- Step 3:** Brainstorm possible solutions.
- Step 4:** Evaluate the pros and cons of various possible solutions.
- Step 5:** Choose the best solution (weigh the pros and cons).
- Step 6:** Make a plan to implement the solution and try it!
- Step 7:** Assess how well it went.
- Step 8:** If the first solution doesn’t work, try others.

### IF A SOURCE OF STRESS IS BEYOND YOUR CONTROL

Try an activity to distract or soothe yourself:

- Listen to music.
- Get together with a friend.
- Read a good book or watch a movie.
- Engage in physical exercise.
- Consider spiritual activity such as prayer.
- Perform yoga.
- Use humor (jokes or funny movies).
- Meditate.
- Take a nap.
- Write in a journal or diary.
- Take a hot bath or shower.
- Help others in need.
- Express your stress creatively.
- Take a “mental holiday.”

### PLAN FOR FUTURE STRESSFUL EVENTS

**Create** a personalized “Stress Toolkit” by making a list of coping strategies that work for you when you’re stressed, including deep breathing, muscle relaxation and activities that you find soothing.

**Visualize** potential future stressful situations.

**Determine** if you will have some control in the situation.

**Decide** how you will use the problem-solving process to reduce stressors.

**Plan** to use various helpful activities to reduce the stress response.

**Remember** to include friends and family for support.