

What Is This Feeling?

A Guide to Understanding Stress



Ascension EAP
www.ascensionWIEAP.org

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What Is Stress?

Stress is not just in our thoughts and emotions, it's a full body event! We are wired to have stress and strong reactions in order to keep us safe from danger. It's hard to believe, but stress serves an important purpose! The problem, though, is that sometimes our stress system overreacts. This may cause stress, anxiety, and even depression when, in fact, the situations we face may be unpleasant but are not very dangerous. The good news is that everyone can learn how to recognize the stress response in action, and mitigate and minimize its effects on our mind and body through relaxation and de-escalation strategies.

Causes of Stress Reactions

Our brain takes in sensory information through our eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin. Stress happens when the amygdala (the threat detector in the brain) becomes activated by something you see, hear, feel or smell that it perceives as dangerous. For example, witnessing a car accident where you see the collision, hear the loud crash, and smell burning rubber provides a lot of sensory information that would stimulate your amygdala to activate your stress response.

Most of the time our senses take in information from our immediate surroundings and experiences, but we can also have sensory experiences from memories and catastrophic thinking. For example, if you are worried you will get into a car crash, just thinking about that might activate a stress reaction. The amygdala does not know the difference between “real” sensory information and thoughts!

When the amygdala interprets your thoughts or sensory experience as a threat, it activates a biochemical reaction. First your body will release adrenaline and then cortisol. This surge of hormones sets off an array of physiological changes and sensations throughout your entire body. This dynamic process is often referred to as fight, flight or freeze mode.

Stress Response Symptoms

When your fight, flight or freeze mode is activated releasing adrenaline and cortisol into your body, you may experience some or all of the following:

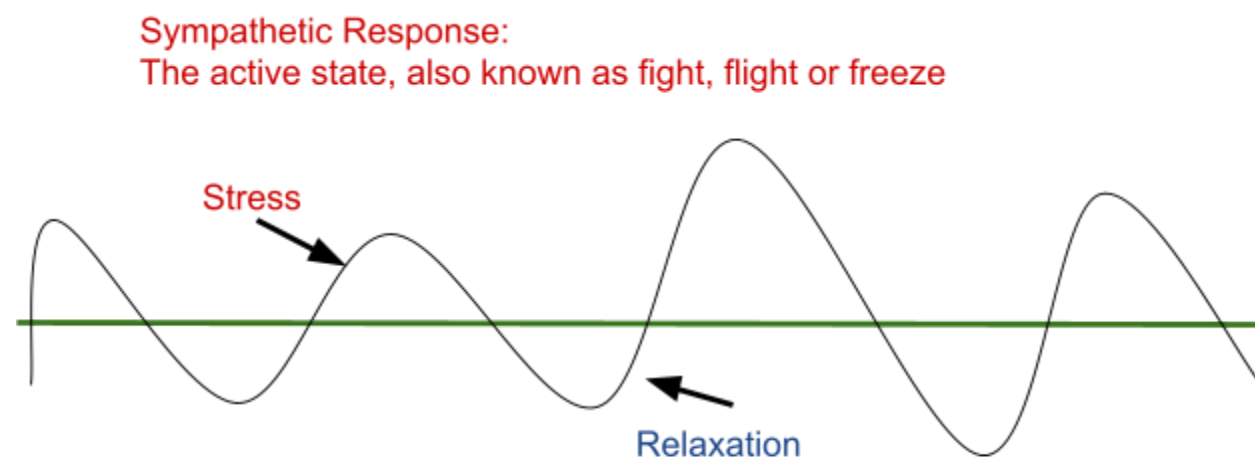
- Heart racing
- Chest tightness
- Sweaty hands
- Blank mind or racing thoughts
- Feeling hot or cold
- Nausea or “butterflies in your stomach”
- Waking up startled (from a dream)
- Tight shoulders, jaw or fists



Yup. That’s the physical reaction to a stress response. If a person stays in that mode for several days or weeks they will begin to develop anxiety.

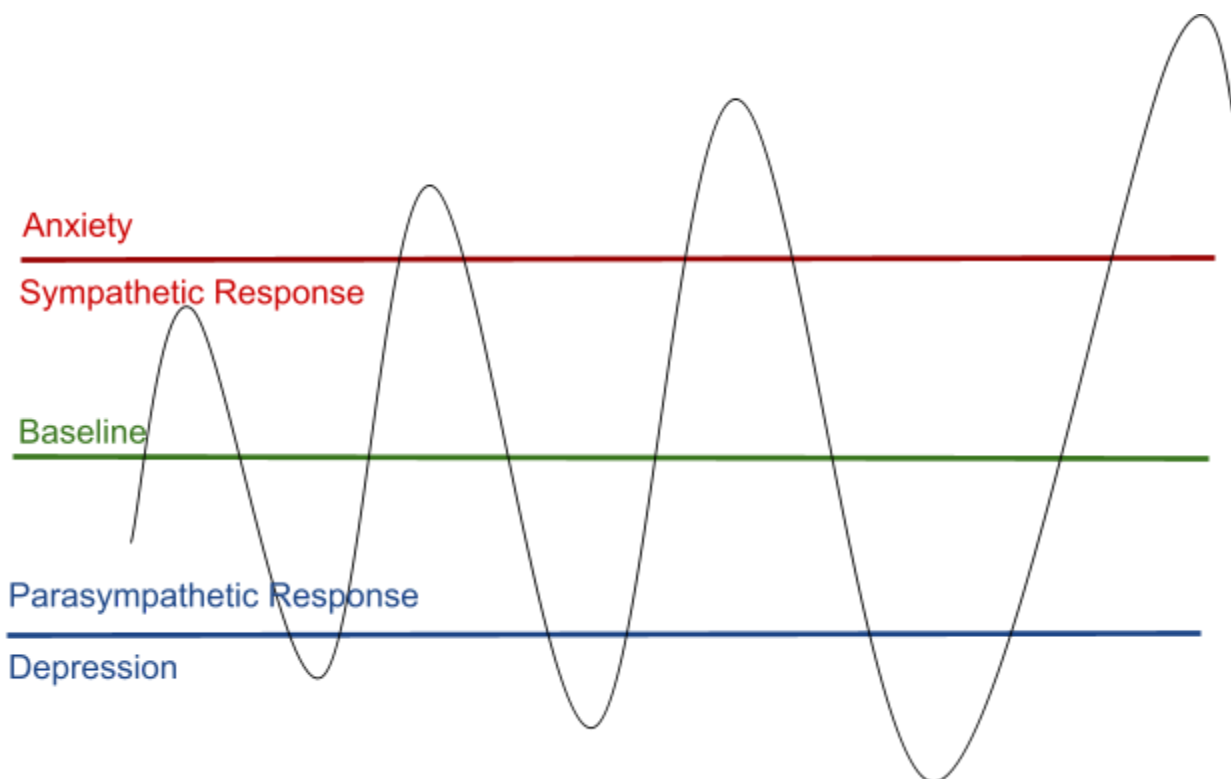
List other symptoms or sensations you experience which indicate that you’re experiencing stress or anxiety: _____

The sympathetic nervous system triggers the body’s activated state (more commonly known as fight, flight or freeze mode). The parasympathetic nervous system creates the body’s relaxed state (also known as rest, digest and rejuvenate mode). A healthy nervous system balances between the relaxed and the active state.



Parasympathetic Response:
The relaxed state, also known as rest, digest and rejuvenate

When a person experiences chronic stress, over time the influx of stress hormones causes the active state to become more intense and prolonged. It begins to feel like anxiety. The rested state becomes fatigue and lethargy--it begins to feel like depression.



Anxiety and depression isn't weakness--it's just your nervous system reacting to sensory experiences. There are many ways to decrease anxiety, improve depression, and rebalance your body.

Stress and Lifestyle

Let's talk about your day. Sometimes stress and anxiety are caused by too much caffeine (or caffeine in general), not enough sleep, too much sugar or not taking enough breaks. Let's take an inventory of your daily practices:

Daily Inventory

How much water do you drink in the day? _____

How much caffeine do you consume? _____

How often do you eat protein? _____

How many minutes a day do you have elevated heart rate (from walking or other forms of exercise)?

How many hours do you sleep at night? _____

Basic Needs

We can't escape from the fact that we are an organism of over 30 trillion cells. There are basic things we need to feed all the various cells that help us function properly.

Water keeps us hydrated.

- Dehydration creates agitation and causes problems with focus.
- Caffeinated drinks (soda, coffee, black tea) cause extra complications. They stimulate an adrenaline release which further agitates the nervous system.

Protein stabilizes our blood sugars.

- Low blood sugars also cause irritability, fatigue and low motivation.
- Processed foods such as sweet and salty treats create an initial spike and then plummets blood sugars.

Elevated heart rate 30 minutes, 3 times a week supports good mental health.

- Elevated heart rate (brisk walk) releases endorphins which decreases the release of stress hormones.
- Inactivity dominos into low motivation, low energy and sluggishness.

Good rest keeps us rational and alert.

- Feeling unrested leads to being overly emotional and less able to problem solve.
- Our devices need to be turned off in order to run efficiently and not burn out. Likewise, our minds need downtime with a regular sleep schedule and mindfulness practices while awake.

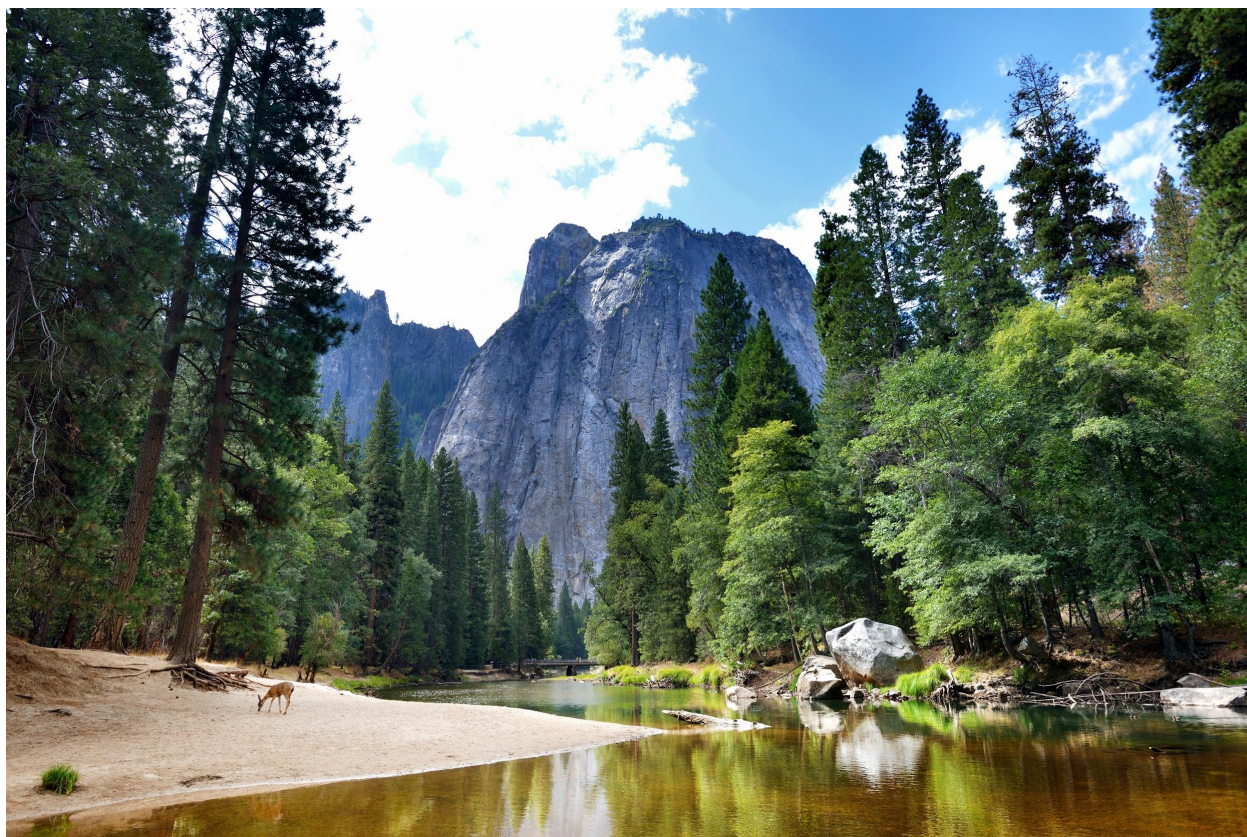
Skills For Reducing Stress Reactions

Since the amygdala and surrounding regions play a role in creating stress reactions and anxiety, it only makes sense to calm the amygdala and use our sensory experience to calm us down. This process is called grounding, and there are many ways to do it. Here are a few:

Grounding

Search the term “grounding” on the web and you will find numerous techniques for engaging the senses to calm the fight, flight or freeze system. Grounding redirects the amygdala's attention towards sensory information that signals safety and security to the brain.

For instance, look at this picture.



Notice the details of the objects and colors in the picture.

Notice the subtler details.

What differences do you notice in your body?

What differences do you notice in your mind?

What impact is this exercise having on your emotional state and sense of well being?

Diaphragmatic breathing

The diaphragm looks like a hammock stretching from the bottom of one side of your ribs to the other. There are no muscles in your lungs, they are like sponges. The diaphragm moves up to squeeze the air out of the lungs, then it drops down into the abdomen so the lungs can expand and fill with air. Diaphragmatic breathing isn't just about getting more oxygen. As the diaphragm drops it compresses part of the vagus nerve which in turn stimulates a cool down phase for the nervous system.

The vagus nerve is an important part of the body to calm stress and anxiety. This nerve regulates the parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous system. It is the longest cranial nerve in the body, reaching from the brain to the feet. Part of the nerve runs between the diaphragm and belly, so we can stimulate this nerve with diaphragmatic breathing. By breathing in deeply and expanding your belly like a balloon, the vagus nerve is compressed, and sends messages to your brain that it should relax your body by releasing endorphins, opening blood vessels for more increased blood flow, slowing the heart rate and decreasing blood pressure. Diaphragmatic breathing is incredibly simple and easy to do, and it can have a tremendous impact on our ability to stabilize our brain, body and emotions.



For a more in-depth description, watch the [Introduction to Grounding and Deep Breathing](#) on Ascension EAP's YouTube channel, or experience grounding and deep breathing through a Guided Practice: [Guided Grounding and Deep Breathing](#).

Soothing Self Talk

What we say to ourselves can induce a stress response. Remember how the amygdala does not distinguish between sensory experiences in our heads or our environment? Being a jerk to ourselves has the same effect as someone else being a jerk to us. The amygdala detects threat and reacts!

Sometimes we take a thought or feeling about a situation and personalize it by making it about our whole being. For instance, instead of saying, "Well I screwed that up!" we instead say, "I'm such a screw up!" The first response helps us take responsibility for our actions. The stress response motivates us to problem solve to create a better outcome next time. The latter response elicits a stronger stress response that paralyzes us with shame. Depersonalizing thoughts and feelings is a critical component of mental wellbeing and stress management.

Soothing self talk is about learning to talk to ourselves the way we would talk to our cherished friends and family members. When your best friend makes a mistake you would probably not tell them that they are a terrible person who sucks at life, so why would you say that to yourself? Instead you would try to encourage them, or point out that everyone makes mistakes and no one is perfect. There are many kind things you would say, which makes you a great friend! For many of us, though, the hard part is applying our own advice to ourselves! It is often easier to be kinder to others than we are to ourselves, but self kindness and self compassion are powerful stress management tools. For more information read Dr Kristen Neff's book, Self Compassion and check out her website at www.self-compassion.org.

Gratitude

Just like stress and anxiety are deeply rooted in the brain's physiology, we also know where gratitude resides in the brain. Through functional MRI (fMRI) technology, Dr. Richard Davidson at the University of Wisconsin demonstrated that the left side of the frontal lobe (known as the left prefrontal cortex) is active when people feel love, compassion, forgiveness and gratitude. In contrast, the right side of the frontal lobe (the right prefrontal cortex) is active when people feel agitated, anxious or sad. In his book, The Emotional Life of Your Brain (2012), Davidson describes the biochemical interaction between the limbic system/stress response and the frontal lobes. Read this short article to learn more about this process at work: [The Role of the Brain in Happiness](#).



Dr. Davidson also found that we can deactivate the left prefrontal cortex (agitation, anxiety, etc.) by engaging the right side (love, forgiveness, gratitude, etc). His research team found that gratitude was the easiest of the emotions to cultivate when feeling anxious and stressed. Focusing on gratitude and cultivating loving kindness are effective practices for rewiring our brains to be more resilient in managing strong emotions and ultimately, being calmer.

Gratitude practices

Most spiritual traditions and religions use gratitude as a central hallmark to their rituals and daily practices, therefore; gratitude practices can be done in many different ways. Research shows that one of the most effective strategies is journaling in detail about three things you were deeply grateful for in the last week. Another gratitude practice involves taking time each night before bed to list 8-10 things you were grateful for that day (without any repeats throughout the week). Either way, you are redirecting your mind to notice blessings throughout your day. Writing about them at night stimulates the right prefrontal cortex, which in turn stimulates a rush of endorphins throughout the nervous system, easing your mind into relaxation and restful sleep.

Let's see which gratitude practice suits you best. Start by taking some deep breaths. Notice your current physical surroundings. (What can you see? What can you hear? What can you smell? What sensations do you feel?)

Daily Practice

List 5 things you are grateful for today (over time you can work up to listing 8-10 things):

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Weekly Practice:

Journal about 3 things that you are grateful for this week, and why:

1.

2.

3.

In time, you can revisit journal entries from difficult days/weeks and notice that even in painful moments, there was still a balance of meaningful interactions and gifts.

Good Stress

There can be some confusion and concern once you start managing your stress and anxiety--some people might worry that they aren't doing it right, or the strategies aren't working. Why? Because we still experience stress and anxiety! Keep in mind that it is virtually impossible to live a completely stress-free life. The upside of anxiety is that it does help us avoid danger, and motivates us to act.



Performance

Anxiety is necessary. A healthy dose of anxiety keeps us performing at a peak level. If we have too little anxiety we become unmotivated and therefore unproductive. Too much anxiety creates the same outcome but for opposite reasons--we become so anxious that we can't think clearly or take action in productive ways--we become paralyzed in our fear. In addition, sometimes we find it easier to ignore or circumvent a task or situation in order to avoid the anxiety it will create. This is obviously not helpful in the long run. Keeping anxiety at a healthy level helps us feel productive, efficient and overall successful.

Describe a recent experience you've had with productive anxiety:

Intuition

Just like the sensation that tells us to move our hand away from a flame, anxiety can do the same thing in the form of intuition. On the unconscious level your brain can register inconsistencies and anomalies in your environment, which signals that something is wrong. For example, have you ever seen through a lie? How did you know the person was lying? Have you been in a situation where you had a bad feeling and decided to leave? What part of your body signalled the need to leave? Can you see how some anxiety can be helpful to our safety and wellbeing?

Trauma

Stress and anxiety can be helpful in keeping us away from danger, but sometimes our body signals that something is wrong when we are actually safe. Experiencing traumatic events can cause your brain to hold acutely stressful or threatening memories in the amygdala. If these memories remain unresolved, your brain and your body will continue to react to them, causing significant stress responses, even when the threat of danger has long since passed.

If you've experienced ongoing trauma reactions, you will be happy to know that trauma treatments are very effective. EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) and Brainspotting are evidence-based techniques with significant success in resolving trauma reactions. Both interventions use bilateral stimulation through sight, sound or touch to activate the amygdala in each hemisphere of the brain. For many people talk therapy is not enough to resolve traumatic memories, and finding a certified EMDR or Brainspotting counselor may be an investment well made.



Other trauma therapists may use techniques such as Narrative Processing or Gradual Exposure. There are many effective ways to treat trauma, and for those who commit to recovery, the prognosis is very good! The important thing is to find an experienced and competent professional who uses interventions that are right for you. For more information, or help finding a therapist, consider calling your Employee Assistance Program. This free and confidential counseling service can offer short-term counseling, as well as make referrals and recommendations for your healing journey.

Tying It All Together

This workbook was aimed at helping individuals understand and cope with their emotions. Special emphasis was placed on understanding how our thoughts and feelings impact our body and reactions. Stress is an experience that no one can escape from, and as we've learned, it's not something we want to escape from. In fact, it serves a very special purpose for us. Unfortunately, at times stress has a faulty alarm system, and the alarm goes off when there's no danger. The more knowledge you have of how your body works, the better equipped you are to manage symptoms associated with stress.

Ascension WI EAP

800-540-3758

eap@ascension.org

AscensionWIEAP.org

Services are free and confidential.

