

What stress does to the body and how to beat it

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From daily struggles like work pressure to traumatic events like the death of a loved one, everyone has felt some form of stress. People also are experiencing new stressors caused by a global pandemic. Although stress can feel like a minor inconvenience, it can have long-term health effects and should not be shrugged off, health experts say.

Emotional and mental strain can wreak havoc on our minds and bodies. It can leave us more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, [heart disease](#), [high blood pressure](#), gastrointestinal trouble and other problems.

"The impact of stress on the [body](#) can be acute or chronic, and it can happen suddenly or be exerted in a low-grade fashion over time," said Dr. Ernesto Schiffrin, physician-in-chief in the department of medicine at Jewish General Hospital in Montreal. "It can contribute over time to increase in blood pressure, [coronary artery disease](#), heart attacks and eventually heart failure."

Schiffrin described stress in general terms as "aggression against the body," which could be coming from within—like a disease or ailment—or from your environment. When the body feels attacked, it activates the "fight-or-flight" reaction, releasing adrenaline and increasing cortisol levels. Excess exposure to these hormones can affect just about every system in the body.

"After an acute stressor ends, the levels usually return to normal," said Dr. Sherita Hill Golden, professor of medicine and epidemiology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. But if they remain elevated, the body can become more resistant to insulin, leading to heart disease and diabetes. "Insulin resistance also can make the body more prone to inflammation and lead to damaged blood vessels," she said.

"Extreme events can lead to general anxiety and other acute distress disorders that have been linked to several health conditions," Schiffrin said. According to a 2018 study, people with stress-related disorders were more likely to be diagnosed with autoimmune diseases than those without stress disorders.

A study from 2019 showed that during 27 years of follow-up, the incidence of cardiovascular [disease](#) among those with stress disorders

was higher than in those without them.

While the effects of stress can manifest over time, they can also come on quickly. The sudden onset of intense stress can cause broken heart syndrome, also called stress-induced cardiomyopathy or takotsubo cardiomyopathy. This is when part of the heart enlarges and doesn't pump as effectively. It could be brought on by the death of a loved one or a divorce, breakup or betrayal, and its symptoms are similar to those of a [heart](#) attack.

Even minor everyday stressors can affect our bodies. A 2018 nationwide study found lingering negative feelings caused by daily stressors were associated with more chronic conditions 10 years later. The study stressed the importance of effectively recovering from stress.

Fortunately, there are multiple ways to manage stress, even with new restrictions and life changes brought on by the coronavirus. These include:

Exercise

Being active creates a natural high and can help combat negative feelings. Regular physical activity has been shown to relieve stress, tension, anxiety and depression. This can tackle stress from two angles—by releasing endorphins in the body to produce a feel-good effect, and by avoiding unhealthy behaviors caused by stressful feelings.

Maintain social connections

Connect with others and talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you're feeling. While social distancing, people can make time to [video chat](#), talk on the phone or take part in online communities to talk

through the sources of stress.

Make time to unwind

Take part in activities that bring you joy and explore new hobbies.

Limit news intake

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends taking breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories that address issues about the pandemic. Too much exposure can be upsetting.

Get plenty of sleep

Given the change in schedules and routines, people may find they're experiencing sleep disruptions. But since sufficient sleep is important for stress management, it can be helpful to establish a new bedtime routine and stay as close to it as you can on a daily basis.

There are certain types of [stress](#) that cannot be managed without professional help. "If it becomes debilitating or turns into extreme anxiety or depression ... it's worth talking to your doctor to see if you could benefit from counseling and medications to treat it," Golden said. "Stress really does adversely impact health. The mind-body connection is very important."

Provided by American Heart Association

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